

Direct Action, Individualism and Democracy

Paper for presentation at the Alternative Futures and Popular Protest Conference, 15-17th
April 2009, Manchester Metropolitan University

Kevin Gillan

Lecturer in Sociology, University of Manchester
kevin.gillan@manchester.ac.uk

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Abstract:

Direct action (DA) is often considered to be a tactical approach to protest, utilised in the service of a wide range of causes. More recently, the notion that DA forms the basis of a radical social movement of itself has gained some currency (e.g. Doherty, Plows and Wall 2003). This paper argues that we should rather understand DA as an orientational frame: a structure of normative beliefs that can form a guide to understanding and action in a variety of contexts (Gillan 2008).

Examining documentary sources on the British DA tradition and ethnographic data from recent instances of DA protest against globalisation and war, I identify the core beliefs that hold the DA frame together. Three elements in particular are identified. First, DA is based on a fundamental belief in individual freedom that motivates an evaluation of the individual moral culpability of both protest participants and their opponents. Second, DA groups have an attitude to decentralised, non-representative decision making that offers a particular understanding of democracy. Third, DA involves the re-imagining of political space as grassroots collective constructs free from systems of domination, that are consciously sought or created by DA groups.

Exploration of these key ideational elements will offer two benefits. First, we will see how the interaction and translation of ideas within particular contexts shapes the possibilities and constraints that movement participants encounter. Second, this analysis opens up possibilities for comparison with (and critique from) more obviously ideological structures of belief.

Direct action (DA) is often considered as a tactical approach to protest that is utilised by a variety of movements. More recently, the notion that DA forms the basis of a radical social change movement of itself, i.e. a 'direct action movement', has gained some currency (Doherty et al. 2003). However, it is clear that DA has been used to a variety of purposes including opposing nuclear power and nuclear weapons; defending fragile ecosystems and local communities; contesting neoliberal globalisation; and attempting to stop wars. Social movement scholars typically identify social movements according to the issues around which they mobilise and this remains a sensible way of grouping empirical phenomena for analysis. It is true that identifiable networks of individuals and groups persist across different movements, mobilizing around what they see as the most urgent issues of the day (Welsh 2001). But involvement in new issues usually brings with it different political contexts and new movement dynamics. Rather than understanding DA as either a tactic or a movement, therefore, this paper aims to both demonstrate the plausibility and utility in understanding DA as an interpretative frame.

What's in a Frame? ¹

One overview of the framing literature provides the following definition of frames:

collective patterns of interpretation with which certain definitions of problems, causal attributions, demands, justifications and value-orientations are brought together in a more or less consistent framework for the purpose of explaining facts, substantiating criticism and legitimating claims. (Rucht & Neidhardt 2002: 11)

Following Snow et al.'s (1986) original exposition of the approach, most empirical applications have investigated the ways in which social movement organisations use framing strategically to mobilize bystanders: it is the process of framing, rather than the content of frames, that have received most attention (Polletta 1997: 439). However, as the definition above demonstrates, the approach is based on the notion that frames have ideational content that offers a justificatory worldview, utilised by groups to make sense of the world and of their role in it. Indeed, since the approach is based on Goffman's (1986) *Frame Analysis*, any explanation of movement participation on the basis of interpretative frames must investigate the ways in which the contents of frames structure the experience and understandings of individuals. The appeal of the framing approach is that by exploring the patterning of individual interpretations we can make sense of collective action.

¹ The following paragraphs are based heavily on Gillan (2008), where the conceptual issues raised here are given more extended treatment.

It is in order to capture the content of frames that I have delineated a novel conception of 'orientational frames' (Gillan 2008). In this view frames are rather like ideologies: they are structures of political beliefs and values that are culturally available and may be put to a number of uses. But to label any particular activists' views as ideological carries excess baggage. The various pejorative conceptions of ideologies see ideological thinking as an aberration of rational thought (Larrain 1979: ch. 6). While we may indeed wish to criticise the contents of particular belief structures generated by social movements we cannot do so *a priori*; to start with an assumption of irrationality on the part of movement participants has long been recognised as misleading. Beyond the pejorative versions of ideology the identification of actual ideologies is typically tied to the philosophical writings of revered individuals or to the policy innovations of mainstream political parties (Freeden 1996: 16). The attempt to catalogue ideologies in this manner tends to produce rather static descriptions of key ideas that has little to say about how these ideas might be used by movement participants (Snow & Benford 2000: 56).

The orientational frame is, therefore, an ontologically mid-range concept. It allows us begin from the actual ideas expressed in the talk and action of movement participants. Identification of an orientational frame offers the analyst a more stable set of beliefs and understandings than the highly context-specific, strategic presentation of ideas often found in the framing literature. To examine ideas at this level is to recognise that 'Frames are not objects or utensils in the objective world, which agents can pick up and use like tools. They are constitutive aspects of the subjectivity of social agents' (Crossley 2002: 141). And by identifying orientational frames in the empirical reality of everyday speech and action – rather than looking through the lens of elite-generated ideologies – we open rather than close questions about the influence of particular ideologies on particular movements and vice versa. We may well hypothesise that philosophical writings by, for instance, Marxists or feminists have had an impact on the thought and action of participants in particular movements. To test that hypothesis we need first to identify the actual patterns of interpretation utilised by those participants, so that we can compare them with the patterns of thought generated in different times and places.

Identification of the direct action frame is achieved, in this paper, by combining contemporary ethnographic data collection with a hermeneutic mode of analysis. Ethnography allows entry into a field of movement activity; in this case the scope was defined by identifying the activities of broadly left or liberal protest groups based in Sheffield in the period 2001-5. The expectation was to examine the various ways in which groups contested globalisation, although after 9/11 it became immediately obvious that

those groups had diverted most of their energies to opposing the ‘war on terror’. Data generated from participation in meetings, actions and informal settings, as well as from qualitative interviews, were made sense of through deconstruction of the various worldviews demonstrated by participants’ speech and actions.² The concept of orientational frames is used as an analytical construct that allows the reconstruction of those parts in a way that makes sense of the strips of activity observed. This is a particular application of the notion of the hermeneutic circle, wherein understanding results from

working backward and forward between the wider context and the particular text or action in question, building up an interpretation in layers since not everything can be understood at once... Movement between the part and the whole necessarily involves understanding phenomena in their intellectual, social and historical context (Oliver 1983)

My analysis begun with the specifics of arguments, illustrations, myths and practices evidenced by local activists, seeking out the wider contexts in which these made sense. For presentational purposes this order has been reversed, so the specific and the local appears in later sections; it is to the intellectual and historical context of direct action that I turn now.

Developing Direct Action Practices in the UK

In this paper ‘direct action’ refers specifically to protest that seeks to impact identified targets without any mediation. The notion of unmediated impact is closely linked with a number of tenets that together make up a coherent orientational frame. Other tenets explored here include a stress on the primacy of action over theory; a critique of capitalism that targets the inevitable abuse resulting from concentration of power among political and economic elites; an anti-authoritarianism linked to a very high value on individual freedom; a commitment to participatory decision making that describes a particular vision of democracy; and a commitment to living according to one’s moral values in the present.

That combination of ideas has quite clear connections with anarchist ideology and, examining the confrontational tactics of alter-globalisation protesters, David Graeber (2002: 62) claims that ‘The very notion of direct action ... emerges directly from the libertarian tradition. Anarchism is the heart of the movement.’ Anarchism undoubtedly forms an important part of the ideational context of direct action, centralising it as the preferred way of acting for social and political change. The unmediated nature of the action,

² The total dataset comprised over 3000 items in a database including interview transcripts, email discussions, news reports, movement generated propaganda and so on. The direct action frame is just one among several evident among local activists and this paper is therefore based on a subset of that data.

distinguished clearly from attempts to persuade elected representatives to act, links it to the deep antagonism to power that must be central to any description of anarchist ideology (Freeden 1996: 311-4). Anarchist and feminist writer, Voltarine de Cleyre (c.1912), explained,

Every person who ever had a plan to do anything, and went and did it, or who laid his plan before others, and won their co-operation to do it with him, without going to external authorities to please do that thing for them, was a direct actionist.

When direct action is collective it is to be organised 'in a form that itself prefigures an alternative' (Graeber 2002: 62). Thus direct action affinity groups tend to organise with the utmost respect for the individual liberty, and such free association for collective purposes is expected to demonstrate the relationships that would compose a preferable future.

The aim of this paper is not to seek anarchism in recent activism, but rather to describe the ideas utilised in practical ways to justify contemporary protest behaviour and to decide on tactics, targets and so on. The relationship to anarchism may be rather indirect, not least because recent participants in direct action have often prioritised action and rejected doctrinal debates found in self-consciously anarchist groups (Doherty 1998: 378). In one interviewee's words: 'action is more important than the philosophy behind it, which is possibly one of the weaknesses of the movement – things aren't as well thought out as they should be ... but its one of the strengths as well, because things tend to happen' ('Scott', interview, May 2003). The primacy of action over theory suggests that a more relevant context is found in the development of direct action practices in the wider movement culture and history, elements of which may be passed across movements and generations, through individuals' political networks or through discursive forums (Welsh 2001). For this reason, description of some key points in the history of direct action in the UK provides valuable context to understand the contemporary DA frame.

The development of a movement against nuclear weapons in the 1950s offered one key location for the development of direct action practices. The 1957 Committee explored the possibilities for importing Gandhian techniques of protest in the UK, directed not only to opposing nuclear weapons but also 'to ending war and to bring about radical social changes' in a manner that ought to prefigure the ideals of a non-violent society (1957 Committee founding document, quoted in Taylor 1988: 121). By the end of the 1950s the group became the Direct Action Committee and led the first Aldermaston march, now an annual ritual, to the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment in Berkshire. Significantly, the first march was *from* London *to* Aldermaston, seeking to directly address those

working in the industry. (Later, under the leadership of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the direction was reversed.) The original march culminated in a demonstration and picket of the base and attempts to persuade facility staff to pledge to end their involvement in the manufacture of nuclear weapons. Subsequent demonstrations at UK and US airbases went as far as creating blockades around building equipment, prompting significant debates within the peace movement about the rectitude of obstruction within a liberal democracy (Taylor 1988: 123-30).

The 1956-61 period of peace activism represented a reawakening of politics outside of normal channels and the practice of disobedience necessarily instilled in participants the notion that there could be a moral justification for law-breaking. While this led for some to a political radicalisation encompassing broad systemic critiques the possibility for acting on these ideas was mitigated by the diversity of participation and the single-minded focus on the issue of nuclear weapons. Even among the most radical, the anarchist notion of direct action was considered to be a step too far. April Carter, a central DAC protagonist, noted in *Peace News* that “the pure Direct Action approach is basically anarchist and anti-authoritarian - the Direct Action approach to a rocket base is ‘let’s demolish the damned thing’”; ‘full-blooded’ direct action seemed neither compatible with non-violence, nor the openness with authorities that the groups scrupulously practiced (quoted in Taylor 1988: 185).

With the development of ecological critique from the late 1960s a new site of direct action practices was established. The first action of Friends of the Earth UK (FoE) after its establishment in 1970 was the dumping of thousands of empty bottles at offices of Schweppes, after the soft drinks manufacturer had begun to use disposable rather than returnable bottles. Thus capitalist organisation became the target of actions that sought no mediation through government channels. The rapidly expanding group emphasised the role of decentralisation, democracy and regional self-sufficiency as solutions to environmental crisis (Veldman 1994: 224-7). Many of the 1970s environmental protest groups moved in the directions of research and lobbying, however, and it wasn’t until the anti-roads movements of the 1990s that a more radical interpretation of environmental direct action in the UK emerged. The first UK Earth First! (EF!) group learned lessons from the wilderness protection techniques of their US sister organisation, adopting the occupation of land and trees in delaying the construction of new roads. Protest camps sprung up at nearly a dozen road building projects around the UK and similar tactics have been used for a number of forms of ecological defence.

While the anti-roads campaigns were all clearly defensive, there were more positive, forward-looking elements to the direct action culture. This is most obviously evinced by the creation of Reclaim the Streets in 1995 out of the protest occupations against an extension to the M11 through Wanstead, London. This campaign was different, being placed in an urban setting (occupying buildings rather than trees) and intertwining with those aggrieved by the proposed Criminal Justice Act (CJA). The CJA brought a new group of potential allies into contention: ravers, new age travellers and gay rights campaigners were among those offended by the legislation. Furthermore, 'Many of those criminalised by the CJA share a rejection of dominant social values. In place of conspicuous consumption and the achievement ethic they prioritise non-material values such as autonomy, community and self-expression' (Welsh & McLeish 1996: 29-30). The result was a highly creative, committed group who were willing to put themselves in risky, confrontational situations and determined to enjoy the experience. The combination of party and protest through trespassing on urban streets caught hold across the UK and groups organising RTS parties emerged, 'spontaneously' defying the Criminal Justice Act. RTS had both taken aim against car culture, and against the encroachment of the state onto private space. Those involved were willing to concretely specify their claims for direct action:

the alternative message that RTS was pushing was one of empowerment - for people to participate in direct action, not only in the political arena but in all aspects of their lives. It was an attempt to dissuade people from the belief that we can change things by working within the system (EF! publication, quoted in Doherty 1999: 289).

During the late 1990s in Britain, the targets of direct action became much broader. The Birmingham meeting of the G8 in 1998 was met with a number of direct actions, while the 'Carnival Against Capital' in the City of London on 18th June 1999 was timed to coincide with the beginning of a G8 meeting in Germany. The latter was, for some, the event which demonstrated the birth of a new direct action movement against capitalism. The 'call to action' that led to the J18 protests described the target as: 'the heart of the global economy: the financial centres, banking districts and multinational corporation power bases'. (Anon. 1999) That this event was an important moment in the development of beliefs is evidenced by activists who, like 'Scott', admit,

For me it was a couple of years or so before I got the whole picture, 1999 was very important, people started to link all the arms of capitalism, something RTS had been doing... people started to get that all the environmental and social problems are like a many-headed monster, you can keep hacking away at the heads but you've got to go to heart, which is capitalism itself. ('Scott', interview, May 2003.)

It is at this point, therefore, that for many activists the ecological critique was brought together with an anarchistic critique. Capitalism became understood as the root cause of

major social problems because it is based on exploitation, and therefore contains inherent social inequality and environmental destruction.

The practice of direct action can be found in many more social movements than have been explored here. But by outlining the nuclear disarmament movement I hope to have demonstrated that the direct action tactic has always come with connected ideational content: at least some practitioners saw in it a mode of organising that prefigured preferable alternatives for the future. The discussion of the anti-roads movement demonstrates the development of the explicitly anti-capitalist credentials of the present DA frame. This contributed to the blossoming of protest in multiple, seemingly disparate sites that some scholars describe as Britain's direct action movement.

The Contemporary Direct Action Frame

The foregoing paragraphs suggest that direct action in the UK has always been connected to a belief in the power of unmediated protest and the desire to prefigure alternatives in the present. It is also clear that the way direct actions have been carried out and understood has changed. Changes have been in the direction of a more militant expression of protest, to a broader set of purposes, and a stronger understanding of the ideals which direct action ought to prefigure. For many in the 1950s nuclear disarmament movements, direct action was clearly a last resort, whereas by the late 1990s RTS had described it as the 'preferred way of doing things'. This suggests an increased value on ideas drawn from the anarchist ideology as it has become less acceptable to proponents to attempt to work through the political system. However, unmediated protest and prefiguration only make sense to activists within a broader ideational structure – a direct action frame – that includes other key precepts detailed below.

Coercion and Moral Culpability

Confrontational direct actions, based on affinity groups, and using tactics such as locking-on and blockading are now the 'classic' expressions of the DA frame. This is the model of action that took place on the J19 'Carnival against Capital'. Within the period of my ethnographic research it is the protests against the Defence Systems Equipment International (DSEi) arms fair in September 2003 that most resembled those events. Taking place biannually in London's Docklands, the arms fair had already attracted protesters from a range of political perspectives in 2001. London-based Disarm DSEi called for autonomously organised protests in 2003 and the call was answered publicly by over 60 different activist groups (Allison 2003). The most spectacular direct action was

carried out by several groups who sailed dinghies into the Thames where individuals chained themselves to a set of lock gates at Galleons Reach Lock. This successfully disrupted the passage of a convoy of naval vessels due to be exhibited alongside the ExCel exhibition centre. Throughout two days of protests, activists repeatedly halted the Docklands Light Railway by locking the train doors open, or locking themselves to the front of the train. One group erected large tripods made from scaffold poles in the middle of a service road, with activists roped to the top (BBC 2003; field notes, DSEi protests, September 2003). The massive transport delays these actions caused resulted in many DSEi delegates walking to the centre where they encountered various street demonstrations, held by organisations not engaged in direct action (field notes, September 2003). The majority of direct actions aimed to disrupt the exhibition itself, on the grounds that, 'the longer we keep them outside, the less time they've got to buy and sell weapons of mass destruction' (Anon., field notes, DSEi Protests, September 2003). Many protesters saw the potential for economic disruption too. It was considered that with high costs, and enough disruption the exhibition would have to find another location. Individuals as well as corporations were targeted: delegates were sought on the public transport system, on the streets or in their hotels, where the Samba bands made a point of making noisy, early morning visits ('Adrian', field notes, September 2003).

These protests offered further evidence that, as Doherty and colleagues rightly note, 'Direct action is ... coercive. Its practitioners assert their moral claims, irrespective of the legality of their protest, by using their bodies to occupy a space or to harm people or damage property' (Doherty et al. 2003: 670). Even when explicitly non-violent, direct action always involves a minority actively impinging on the lives of others. The justification for such action, at least within a liberal democracy, has long been called into question in movements where direct action has been used. The blockades organised at military installations in the 1960s, for instance, sparked particular fractious debate within the peace movement (Taylor 1988: 123-30).

Contemporary justifications for coercive action can be seen in debates in Sheffield around a protest in the lead-up to DSEi 2003. Fluent, a company who develop computational fluid dynamics software (CFD), was identified as a participant at DSEi. In early September 2003 protesters blockaded the entrance to the company's building for several hours, including two people locking on to doors with bicycle locks, and others hung a banner that read 'Fluent Deal in Death' (Sheffield IMC 2003). Other banners advertised the forthcoming actions at DSEi itself and the action was understood partly as a 'warm up'. Criticisms of the Fluent action, posted on the Sheffield Indymedia website claimed that the

company manufactured software that had many positive uses and asked, 'What are you going to do next: picket a spanner manufacturer because they happen to sell some spanners to Lockheed [Martin, US arms manufacturer]?' The responses to that criticism are illuminating. Several respondents claimed simply that they were a viable target because they were exhibiting at DSEi, and therefore their clients would be arms buyers and manufacturers. One respondent noted the complex interrelationships within the arms industry:

Every weapon and delivery system is just a collection of components put together. And every manufacturer of components has to take the blame for the end product. Nobody forces this company to sell their products to the defence industry do they?

Another respondent said:

CFD has lots of beneficial applications, as you mention. If it were being exhibited at, say, a medical exhibition I'd be happy. But that doesn't mean we should remain silent when it's being promoted as a military tool at an arms fair! (Sheffield IMC 2003)

Both of these quotations evidence an attitude to industry that insists on individuals and companies making moral choices about their business actions. Because both comments were written to defend a confrontational action it implies that it is morally acceptable for a small number of people to forcefully hold a business to account for its decisions. While participants may have hoped to stop work at the office for the day, thus having a direct economic impact on the corporation, they also willingly accepted that their actions might intimidate workers and 'ruin their day'. To a degree, therefore, it demonstrates the individual culpability for a business's actions. While the respondent quoted above recognises the complexity of the economic relationships involved, they nevertheless insist on the complicity of those even tangentially involved.

Consensus and Democracy

It is the way in which direct actions are carried out that offers us access to the positive values within the frame; i.e. those values that are prefigured as the ideal. Direct actions at DSEi – similar to those seen at most alter-globalisation protests at least since J18 – were organised by small, autonomous, affinity groups. The latter are seen as the most efficacious means of organising for particular protest actions, with between five and twenty individuals who already know and trust each other organising with a particular goal in mind. The affinity group works in a non-hierarchical manner, with no leadership and key roles regularly rotated. This is valued in part because centralisation is seen as a high risk strategy in relation to the possibility of arrests of key individuals, or the seizure of key resources. However, it is also valued for the possibility of creating relationships that are

free from systems of domination and discrimination and for empowering members of the group to take on challenging roles (direct action training, field notes, October 2002).

A central and widely adopted norm of affinity group behaviour is consensus-based decision making (CBDM). The aim is never to take a collective decision where any group member objects. The group must avoid the polarisation of debate into a few entrenched positions which might, in other circumstances, be subject to voting. Instead a range of techniques have been developed to discover new compromises and to work through issues between group members so that, ultimately, everyone has full agreement with the final solution. Such techniques have been distilled into handbooks and training courses.³ The most common set of rules is that if a meeting becomes stuck with one or two individuals objecting to a proposition, those individuals must choose how to continue. They may choose to 'stand aside', meaning they register their objection to the decision and are not held responsible for its consequences, but allow it to go ahead. Or, if convinced that the decision would be harmful to the group's objectives, they may block the decision with a veto. Both of these are considered serious breakdowns of the process and are only to be used occasionally. Guides to CBDM usually suggest that if one or two members frequently object to decisions that the rest of the group want to take they should consider leaving the group, or could be asked to leave (Estes 1996; Seeds for Change undated).

CBDM defines a participative vision of democracy within the DA frame. Liberal representative democracy is strongly criticised:

When people vote for an executive they also hand over their power to make decisions and to effect change. This goes hand in hand with creating a majority and a minority... People in a majority rule system don't need to listen to the dissenting minority, or take their opinion seriously because they can simply outvote them... the minority [are] expected to accept and carry out the decision, even if it is against their most deeply held convictions and principles (Seeds for Change undated)

This fits precisely with the anarchist critique pithily surmised by Oscar Wilde's description of democracy as 'the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people' (Wilde, quoted in Woodcock 1962: 426). Representative democracy is thereby seen as inherently repressive of individual freedom and, as a result, the critique that direct actions shouldn't be coercive within democratic states is significantly weakened. While CBDM is usually seen in small group activities, systems of delegation are occasionally used, such as the 'hubs and spokes' model visible at the 'Battle of Seattle', and CBDM has been reported for decision making in groups of up to 5,000 people (Klein 2002; Estes 1996). The practice is used to

³ Seeds for Change offered training in both consensus based decision making and planning direct action at the launch of the Sheffield Social Forum; field notes, March 2004.

highlight the benefits of participatory decision making and prefigure an alternative ideal. Its proponents claim that decisions made under these conditions not only more just but also better decisions: ‘all persons have some part of the truth ... in them, and we will reach a better decision by putting all of the pieces of the truth together’ (Estes 1996: 369).

This view, that I refer to as epistemological pluralism, is an important aspect of the DA frame both because it informs the nature of group decision-making and because it justifies the structure of autonomous groups protest. Willingness to participate in the street-level anarchy of protests at DSEi and J18 must be based partially on the expectation that others will have selected appropriate targets and presented broadly agreeable critiques. This is evident even in smaller, local actions as when, for instance, around thirty Sheffield residents participated in an anti-consumerist ‘No Shop Day’ protest at a major shopping centre in late November 2002. Despite being a close knit group that could potentially have coordinated its actions and message, the group was actually divided into a number of smaller informal affinity groups who had planned their own actions. On the day some groups demonstrated a cultural anti-consumerism, placing stickers on goods that read simply ‘This product will not make you happy’. Others had produced flyers describing sweatshop labour and left them in the pockets of clothes in target stores. Still others protested the corporate takeover of public space by engaging in everyday public activities (e.g. picnics, playing games) that nevertheless drew the ire of the centre’s private security guards (field notes, Meadowhall, November 2002). Groups had planned their own actions with no coordination, to the extent that nobody knew who would turn up on the day or what they would be doing. As such, there was never any sustained debate about why the action was taking place. Although this is clearly a case of action over theory, it is not because of a lack of theory. Rather, it signals an acceptance among group members that each has a valid truth, and that no one is in a position to dictate to others. In this event at least, the multiplicity of themes offered a lively way to present a varied and coherent critique of consumerism.

The critique of representation within the DA frame not only reinforces affinity groups’ preference for CBDM but also their commitment to direct action itself since the latter is intended as an entirely un-mediated (and therefore unrepresented) attempt to change others’ behaviour. However, as direct action might be criticised for its coercive nature, so CBDM might be criticised for its potential for exclusion. The advice noted above, that those who regularly disagree with their group might properly be asked to leave, demonstrates this potential clearly. The importance placed on trust and friendship within affinity groups – felt keenly when planning illegal activities – outlines the limits to inclusivity of the group.

Moreover, participatory decision making is demanding: those unable to attend meetings cannot ask another to represent them, creating a structural exclusion that would operate on, for instance, anyone with mobility difficulties. Coercion and exclusion are parallel issues with the DA frame since both pertain to the definition of the collective. Membership of the collective grants the utmost respect for individual freedom, while that freedom can, under particular circumstances, be curtailed for those outside the group.

Freedom and Empowerment

While the prefiguration of ideals presents elements of an alternative vision of the future, this is limited by respect for individual freedom to choose. As one respondent explained, 'I've got a vague idea of how I would like the world to be. But I think to try and impose that is a really dangerous thing to do ... you start planting the seeds for tyrannies when you start getting into that sort of thing' ('Isadore', interview May 2003). Logically, we might expect some tension between the desire to bring about radical social change and insistence on not pushing a particular vision. Nevertheless, activists do hold both aspects simultaneously.

It's believing that we don't need a state to administer for us, we don't need police forces, we should organise in small local based groups on whatever's appropriate for where we live... that there isn't a blueprint to be imposed on everyone. Everyone has their blueprint, whether its McDonalds or the SWP. My idea would be find your own way within a group, and there will be different ways ('Scott' interview, May 2003).

Here freedom is conceived both negatively (freedom from the state and the police) and positively (equality of access to resources). Moreover, 'freedom' becomes a meta-value; the good society is one in which people are free to choose what constitutes the good society.

The preceding sections demonstrate the importance of this underlying value on individual freedom in justifying modes of protest activity and forms of organising within the DA frame. However, the examples given have thus far been about confrontational protest in reaction to wider social trends. But the ideas contained in the DA frame can be equally applied to positive and creative, rather than simply reactive, movements. Experience in protest occupations has led activists to cherish the possibilities of defining a space in which people's behaviour prefigures alternatives. The society that participants craved could, temporarily at least, exist in the present. At times, these spaces can be created away from the site of particular struggles. The establishment of Sheffield Indymedia is an example. There are fourteen local Independent Media Collectives (IMCs) in the UK, and each subscribes to the organisational principles of the UK Indymedia Collective. These are,

the Indymedia UK collective works on a non-hierarchical basis;

we reject all systems of domination and discrimination;

we acknowledge that the struggle for a better world takes many forms. The focus of the Indymedia UK collective is on grassroots politics, actions and campaigns;

the Indymedia UK collective does not have any ties with political parties or larger NGO's;

we understand that by lobbying there will be no radical change. As a collective our attitude is assertive, and where necessary confrontational. (IMC UK undated)

In their own organisation, therefore, the IMCs reflect the core aspects of the DA frame.

These are reflected in the composition of the websites themselves. News stories are published by users, directly and without moderation. The site administrators, through public e-mail discussion may choose to hide any story that breaks basic editorial guidelines concerning harassment and discrimination. But such decisions are very rare and offending articles remain available on a separate section of the site for those who wish to see how the editorial guidelines have been used in practice.

As far as possible, therefore, IMCs attempt to ensure principles of individual autonomy by facilitating individual self expression. They attempt to enhance the inspirational elements of direct action by allowing those involved to report them to others and they encourage critique of the status quo through their independence from corporate or government funding. Further, they provide a space in which activists can come to understand their history and relationships and discuss issues of politics and tactics, as evidenced by the quotations presented in relation to the Fluent-DSEi action above.

The creation of spaces of freedom is expected to lead to a situation in which individuals will act with mutual respect, and to the collective good. This raises anarchist claims of 'the natural and spontaneous tendency of humans to associate together for their mutual benefit ... it is possible and desirable for society to organise itself without government' (Ward 1982: 4). Similarly,

The aim of the direct action I do is to help along the new society I crave, built on the principles of equality of access to resources, mutual freedom and respect for people and the environment, social and political solidarity, and the development of the individual through social progress. (Solidarity Federation 2000)

However, freedom is not assumed to be automatically enabled by participants' attempts to work with mutual freedom and respect. More realistically, adherents to the DA frame recognise limits to human behaviour that has been conditioned in an inherently unequal system. This is why structures and training for CBDM and affinity group organising are necessary in the first place. The belief in the necessity of the 'development of the individual through social progress' – commonly referred to as empowerment – is the final key to the DA frame.

Empowerment is understood as a justification for direct actions, whether those take place in reactive or pro-active modes. One activist declared the aim of his work as ‘empowering people to take control of their own lives, change their own lives, become part of strong communities that can provide support, secure housing, secure work’ (‘Zack, field notes, December 2003). Another local activist, referring to blockades at DSEi protests, claimed, ‘Being able to stop military vehicles entering the arms fair is empowering. You as an ordinary citizen can stand up and make a difference. If more people tried it there would be no arms fair’ (‘Tom’, online response to article on IMC UK 2003). It is valued because empowerment offers something to participants that transcends the experience of a particular direct action. As Welsh & McLeish (1996: 40) note of the protests against the extension of the M11 in London, ‘In whatever way they can, people will carry on the experience back in their private lives. The empowering effects of direct action are at least as important in popularising the campaign as the relevance of the themes.’ It is only once people begin to feel empowered that they are likely to form new collectives for new projects; as such, empowerment may have a similar function in the DA frame as class consciousness does within revolutionary socialism. Further, because it is collective activity that enables empowerment, this can become a major justification for the creation of spaces of freedom, wherein personal and social development further the aims of understanding the possibilities for mutually respectful, just society.

Conclusions

The framing perspective leads us to expect that beliefs and values tend to hang together in structured packages or frames. This paper has identified the structure of ideas that, for contemporary activists, justifies and makes sense of the tactic of direct action. That structure includes commitments to decentralisation and group autonomy; to participatory democracy via CBDM and to the creation of spaces free from domination and discrimination. Such beliefs and practices are pulled together by a fundamental value on individual freedom, which is expected to lead just interactions among equal people, directed at the common good. The implication of freedom, however, is individual moral culpability. This allows the DA frame to justify confrontation and drives participation in protest; once the injustices of capitalism are recognised as such, and the individual is empowered through affinity group support, then inaction cannot be justified. The respect for the individual seen in epistemological pluralism not only justifies participatory decision-making but demands that protest is unmediated. Such ideas clearly draw on anarchist ideology although, as argued above, the stress on action rather than theoretical

debate by those who utilise this structure of belief suggests we should see this as an interpretative framework that is more rooted in traditions of practice than in the writings of theorists.

The preceding discussion raises a number of tensions within the frame. Coercion does not fit easily with the respect for freedom and participatory democracy. Additional justifications – through appeals to the culpability of the targets or the urgency of the issue – are therefore required. Moreover, the demands of participation together with the desire for a close-knit affinity group creates exclusivity. Of course, the existence of one autonomous affinity groups hardly reduces the potential of other individuals to band into affinity groups concerned with similar issues, so exclusivity is not considered to restrict the freedom of others. Nevertheless, it is clear that since consensus is demanding even with like-minded individuals, the possibilities of expanding participatory deliberation beyond the boundaries of the affinity group are limited. Those utilising the DA frame in their understanding of the world are likely to be aware of these tensions and the frame develops in part in response to them. CBMD, for instance, has techniques expressly oriented to issues of the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ identified by Jo Freeman [1972] in relation to non-hierarchical organising.

Tensions within the DA frame undoubtedly offer potential for critique from those motivated by different worldviews. Within broad based movements we would expect multiple structures of belief to be utilised by different groups of participants. This point has been clearly established in relation to alter-globalisation movements and recent anti-war movements (Chesters & Welsh 2004; Gillan et al. 2008). Within such movements the delineation of orientational frames as carried out here might focus on the structural connections and tensions between frames, as well as within them. It is obvious, for instance, that the vision of participatory democracy in the DA frame conflicts with alternative visions put forward on the basis of socialist or liberal ideologies. If understanding belief structures helps us comprehend the actual behaviour of protest participants – and it is the central contention of this paper that it does – then understanding the connections and conflicts between orientational frames offers significant potential for investigating the possibilities for, and limits within, coalitions and alliances in struggles for social change.

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