

10 Points on the Black Bloc

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“It is true that the State is not a window, but neither is it just an abstract concept. Breaking windows is not a revolutionary act and neither is any other act if taken out of context and presented as an abstraction, ignoring the intentions and strategy of those who break the windows. The State or Capital or colonialism cannot be attacked as abstractions. They can only be attacked in their material forms, their social relations and their institutions. It is not possible to attack all forms and material components of oppression at once, so they must be attacked in pieces at different times and locations.”

– Oshipeya, *No action is sufficient in itself, black bloc or otherwise*

10 Points on the Black Bloc

The February 13th heart attack march successfully clogged the arteries of capitalism by having a riotous time through the streets of Vancouver during the convergence against the 2010 Winter Olympic Games.

In the immediate aftermath, supposed allies of the social denounced the tactics and attempted to distance themselves from the more radical elements in this movement.

In a strict breach of the statement of unity that the Olympic Resistance Network had articulated, social liberals who had little or no part in organizing any of the convergence took it upon themselves to denounce the violence of the protesters, not the violence of the police.

They also questioned the effectiveness of the black block tactic. What follows is a transcription of Harsha Walia's (of No One Is Illegal Vancouver) words at a debate between Harsha and Derek O'Keefe on the diversity of tactics.

The full video of the debate can be viewed at:
<http://vancouver.mediacoop.ca/video/2916>

"I could tell you that schwarze Block was a tactical form, that it was a means of preventing the police from identifying and isolating who committed what gesture during a riot. I could tell you that dressing in black meant: we are all comrades, we are all in solidarity, we are all alike, and this equality liberates us from the responsibility of accepting a fault we do not deserve: the fault of being poor in a capitalist country, the fault of being anti-fascist in the fatherland of Nazism, the fault of being libertarian in a repressive country. That it meant: nobody deserves to be punished for these reasons, and since you are attacking us we are forced to protect ourselves from violence when we march in the streets. Because war, capitalism, labor regulations, prisons, psychiatric hospitals, those things are not violent, however you see those of us who want to freely live our homosexuality, the refusal to found a family, collective life and the abolition of property as the violent ones."

— Claire Fontaine, *This is Not the Black Bloc*

Thank you folks. My name's Harsha. I have to admit, in terms of this debate, I know it's been going on for a week but I only just read all the messages and emails floating around this morning as I tried to prepare my thoughts. I'm really frustrated and really angry to be quite honest. I'm not going to be engaging in esoteric generalizations about diversity of tactics because I think that starting point is problematic, and I'll explain why. I'll try to be as specific as possible about what happened on Saturday and what the organizing for that looked like.

First, I want to locate myself in this dialogue. I don't personally engage in black block tactics, but as a long-time community organizer and as a woman of colour, I stand in full and firm support

of diversity of tactics and in solidarity with those who are facing police repression during this time.

I did march on Feb 13th in the Heart Attack demonstration with other members of No One is Illegal, which is a collective of predominantly people of colour. While I cannot speak for the personal motivations and intentions of those who engage in black block tactics, I think the distance that I have from those tactics is somewhat useful in this debate, because there is this idea that only those who engage in black block actions support black block tactics. This is an attempt to marginalize and isolate our comrades which I hope my presence here will counter.

One of the criticisms of the black block tactic is that it's undertaken by predominantly white males and therefore is inherently oppressive to women of colour and Indigenous women in particular. As a woman of colour with a myriad of precarious systemic barriers including precarious legal status and health – and I can only speak for myself – but I can say that the black block tactic does not in itself oppress me or render me more vulnerable in protest. So I'd appreciate it if other white men did not make such pronouncements on my behalf.

So that being said, I want to make ten quick points on the black block.

1. Tactic

First of all, the black block is a tactic. Like any other tactic it cannot be judged in itself, but can only be judged as part of the spectrum of a much broader movement and as part of a spectrum of tactics that we all engage in. The black block has various utilities, both defensive and offensive. I think the one point that is often missed is the defensive strategies around the black block. As people know, a lot of black block activity going back to the 70s and 80s in Europe includes really important actions including de-arresting comrades. It includes the very basic principle of no comrade left behind, that we do not leave people in the police lines and decide to flee, and for that the black block is deeply courageous.

I want to quote Barbara Ehrenreich who suggests that one of the biggest utilities of the black block is it really breaks the heavily ritualized nature of modern civil disobedience. When we talk about tactics, we have to be able to gauge the black block tactic amongst many other tactics. So the fact that other tactics may or may not be more effective does not in itself render the black block tactic any less effective. I think that's important to state because it's all been reduced to whether window smashing is effective or not. I think that as a starting point is fundamentally problematic, because this movement is about more than window-breaking and it's also about window-breaking.

2. Violence

The next point that I want to make in terms of the black block – and I won't spend much time on it because I don't think there's much debate here – is if the black block engages in violent tactics. The only response I really care to make to that is that we're asking the wrong side the question about violence. If we're going to talk about violence, we need to be talking about corporate sponsors, the state, the military, and the police who daily commit violence on people. Not a single individual and not a single animal have been harmed in the tactics of Feb 13th. What

have been harmed are lifeless windows. So let's be very clear what we're talking about before we start to perpetuate mainstream media rhetoric about violence and feed into our enemy's rhetoric.

3. Masks

The fact that people are anonymous when they mask up or bloc up is not unique. As we know, people wear masks around the world, probably the most romanticized of whom are the Zapatistas. If we're going to be able to have solidarity with global struggles, we have to understand that the reasons for wearing a mask are the same whether it's in Chiapas or Palestine or it's the black block on our streets. State surveillance, particularly in the context of the Olympics where people have had visits by the Vancouver Integrated Security Unit, means people need to protect themselves. To me, the black block is not anonymous. It's a tactic and the members of the black block are known to me. If people want to come down to tent village, you'll probably meet many of them.

4. Police Provocateurs

There is this idea, relating to anonymity, that the bloc is more susceptible to provocateurs. The entire movement is susceptible to police provocateurs. The actual police provocateurs that were ousted on February 12th were posing as journalists, not the black bloc. Another very clear example of this is what happened in Montebello when police provocateurs did present themselves as the black block, they were first outed by the black block themselves.

5. Community organizers vs. Insurrectionaries

There is an unfortunate dichotomy that has been created between so-called community day-to-day organizing and insurrectionary actions. Critics have made false digs about the lack of organizing commitment to movement-building by anarchists. I am a self-identified anarchist. The Olympic Tent Village has been thrown around a whole lot in context of this debate. As people know, the tent village is happening right now at 52 West Hastings on a Concord Pacific lot that's currently being leased out by the Vancouver Olympic Organizing Committee. Anarchists have put in countless hours – and by countless hours, I mean 16-hour days – to contribute to the tent village. That includes graveyard shifts to do security (and this might be a surprise to some, but that includes de-escalation of law enforcement, which all of us are completely capable of doing), construction, cooking and clean up of the site under the leadership of Downtown Eastside residents and Elders. As someone who is on this site over 20 hours a day, I can say that sadly the same cannot be said to be true of those who appear to be strategically utilizing community-based direct actions like the tent city in debates about movement building. I want to take a moment here to thank everyone who is supporting the Downtown Eastside tent village.

6. Effectiveness

My main point, and I've already talked about this, is that all tactics should be judged from the same starting point.

This is, for me, the crux of the argument. It's not that black block tactics in *specific contexts* are immune for criticism. If people have criticisms about the 13th, then let's talk about specific criticisms, but all that we have seen is a general denunciation of property destruction. As far as I'm concerned, every tactic is open to criticism. That includes if we're going to have mass rallies where politicians are given a free stage to speak despite the daily violence they are responsible for. We can talk about the fact that symbolic rallies once a year are equally ineffective. If we're going to talk about ineffectiveness, we need to be able to have the same starting point for every single tactic. I'm thankful for this debate, but the next time that there's a symbolic rally appealing to politicians to please give us something; let's talk about its effectiveness too then.

Black bloc is a strategy that is part of a movement, and we can't romanticize or generalize either way. Tactics can be effective, they can be ineffective, but inherently they are neither. Whether the black block tactic of smashing windows is simply symbolic and gains nothing, well again, a whole lot of our protests are often symbolic. Like any other mass movement, we have to gauge them as part of a long-term campaign. So if we're going to talk about the black block tactic, we have to talk about it as part of the anti-Olympic movement. In my opinion, you can't separate those things and as far as I know, the anti-Olympic movement as a whole including all of its parts has been very successful.

In terms of the black block tactic in and of itself, if we are to separate it out, I would argue that it has been effective for several reasons. The first is that the black block tactic does actually help build mass movements, counter to this idea that the black block marginalizes mass movement. And I think that happens in several ways. The first is that there is no monopoly on the mass movement. There are a lot of people who don't engage in what is the monoculture of the mass movement, in symbolic protest, and who find direct action to be very empowering. From that perspective, the black block is growing, and therefore, the black block as part of the movement is helping the movement grow.

Second, corporate sponsors, in my experience, have only been mentioned in mainstream media when there have been insurrectionary attacks on them. A lot of these have happened in Ottawa, in particular, and Montreal. In terms of effectiveness, the only times that I've seen Hudson's Bay Company and Royal Bank mentioned and involved in the direct Olympic industry has been when they have taken a hit.

I would also argue that black block tactics actually help open up space for more mainstream tactics to take place, and that's something that I cannot emphasize enough. I would argue that the success of the memorial march and the success of the tent city, at least in part, were due to Saturday, Feb 13th. The reason for that is that law enforcement, because they create a good protestor/bad protestor divide, have been largely absent from the tent city. And part of the reason the tent village has gone positive mainstream media is the spin that this is a peaceful tent village that should be defended and supported. So I would argue that black block tactics absolutely do help build a broader movement, and absolutely do help build a space for various others tactics to take place, and they don't exist in isolation of them.

Beyond that, I don't think building a mass movement is always the gauge of the success of a tactic. If that was the case, Indigenous blockades would not be happening, because we'd have to wait for every single Canadian to denounce Canadian nationalism. Direct action happens because there is a need for it. Direct action happens because people are fighting back, and we're not waiting for millions of people to stand beside us for the revolution to happen.

7. Undermining peaceful protestors

One of the points people have made is that sometimes bloc tactics undermine other tactics. I think this is a fair argument and I think a separation of tactics is often necessary. What was specific about this convergence is that that happened and the black block has been in communication with the organizers of the entire convergence.

Feb 12th was called as an action that was inclusive and family-friendly, and the black block was present. The front line on February 12th was held by Indigenous elders with two contingents behind them, one of which was the No One is Illegal, Canada is Illegal contingent. The contingent next to it was the black block. All of this was in consultation with the 2010 Welcoming Committee.

Let's also not forget black block members were present in the Feb 14th Women's Memorial March. A lot of people have strategically used the Missing and Murdered Women's Memorial March to say people are worried about the black block infiltrating the memorial march. I'm an organizer of the memorial march. We made sure that everyone knew the protocol of the memorial march, including not wearing face masks out of respect for the missing and murdered women, and that was honoured without any issues.

The black block is present at Tent City, and has been present at every action during the week. So in terms of the thoughtfulness of the Heart Attack demonstration, I want to reiterate that there were many conversations and many commitments made to respect the other days of action.

8. Putting others at risk

February 13th was explicitly called as a diversity of tactics. As someone who marched on the 13th unmasked, I did not feel endangered. I can't speak for everyone else, but I can speak for myself. I was happy to be there and I was happy to see the black block doing their thing.

For those who did not know what to expect there were various spokes councils, some of which were publicly announced, for anyone who was interested in getting information beforehand. Within the demonstration, there was an escalation of zones from green to red and at no point did I see the black block trying to hide under the cover of other zones. And I think that's important to reiterate because the people who were actually arrested on February 13th from the green and orange zone have not denounced the black block, so why are other people doing it?

There is also this idea that the black block reinforces and legitimizes the police state. Well if that argument is going to be used then we may as well never be on the streets. That kind of argument is a false one, because this police state justifies itself. We cannot hold our allies accountable for the increased police brutality and the increased visits from the Vancouver Integrated Security Unit.

9. Media smears

This should be really obvious – that the media and law enforcement cannot dictate the terms of our debates. There is this idea that because we have now been denounced in the media, we have lost our credibility. As far as I am concerned, the media was never on our side! The media is not the gauge of the success of our protests, and the corporate media and the police should not be let off the hook by us replicating their smears and their denunciations. Instead, we should be

very clear about not denouncing our comrades as violent. The fact that the media is not picking up on why there is property destruction against the Hudson's Bay Company is not the fault of the black block. The media has not picked up for seven years on why people are protesting the Olympics.

10. Solidarity

Solidarity does not equal censorship. As far as I'm concerned, I don't think that anyone who engaged in black block tactics or supports them is asking for our allies to censor themselves. What I am asking for is for people to not have facebook comments like "silly black block" and "fuck diversity of tactics". We can emphasize communication between our allies. Let's not denounce people publicly. Let's not denounce people in vague generalizations. Let's have a commitment to dialogue. Let's have a commitment to doing that in person.

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