*Andrew X*

# Give Up Activism

The Anarchist Library

# Contents

One problem apparent in the June 18th day of action was the adoption of an activist mentality. This problem became particularly obvious with June 18th precisely because the people involved in organising it and the people involved on the day tried to push beyond these limitations. This piece is no criticism of anyone involved — rather an attempt to inspire some thought on the challenges that confront us if we are really serious in our intention of doing away with the capitalist mode of production.

## Experts

By 'an activist mentality' what I mean is that people think of themselves primarily as activists and as belonging to some wider community of activists. The activist identifies with what they do and thinks of it as their role in life, like a job or career. In the same way some people will identify with their job as a doctor or a teacher, and instead of it being something they just happen to be doing, it becomes an essential part of their self-image.

The activist is a specialist or an expert in social change. To think of yourself as being an activist means to think of yourself as being somehow privileged or more advanced than others in your appreciation of the need for social change, in the knowledge of how to achieve it and as leading or being in the forefront of the practical struggle to create this change.

Activism, like all expert roles, has its basis in the division of labour — it is a specialised separate task. The division of labour is the foundation of class society, the fundamental division being that between mental and manual labour. The division of labour operates, for example, in medicine or education — instead of healing and bringing up kids being common knowledge and tasks that everyone has a hand in, this knowledge becomes the specialised property of doctors and teachers — experts that we must rely on to do these things for us. Experts jealously guard and mystify the skills they have. This keeps people separated and disempowered and reinforces hierarchical class society.

A division of labour implies that one person takes on a role on behalf of many others who relinquish this responsibility. A separation of tasks means that other people will grow your food and make your clothes and supply your electricity while you get on with achieving social change. The activist, being an expert in social change, assumes that other people aren't doing anything to change their lives and so feels a duty or a responsibility to do it on their behalf. Activists think they are compensating for the lack of activity by others. Defining ourselves as activists means defining *our* actions as the ones which will bring about social change, thus disregarding the activity of thousands upon thousands of other non-activists. Activism is based on this misconception that it is only activists who do social change — whereas of course class struggle is happening all the time.

## Form and Content

The tension between the form of 'activism' in which our political activity appears and its increasingly radical content has only been growing over the last few years. The background of

a lot of the people involved in June 18th is of being 'activists' who 'campaign' on an 'issue'. The political progress that has been made in the activist scene over the last few years has resulted in a situation where many people have moved beyond single issue campaigns against specific companies or developments to a rather ill-defined yet nonetheless promising anti-capitalist perspective. Yet although the content of the campaigning activity has altered, the form of activism has not. So instead of taking on Monsanto and going to their headquarters and occupying it, we have now seen beyond the single facet of capital represented by Monsanto and so develop a 'campaign' against capitalism. And where better to go and occupy than what is perceived as being the headquarters of capitalism — the City?

Our methods of operating are still the same as if we were taking on a specific corporation or development, despite the fact that capitalism is not at all the same sort of thing and the ways in which one might bring down a particular company are not at all the same as the ways in which you might bring down capitalism. For example, vigorous campaigning by animal rights activists has succeeded in wrecking both Consort dog breeders and Hillgrove Farm cat breeders. The businesses were ruined and went into receivership. Similarly the campaign waged against arch-vivisectionists Huntingdon Life Sciences succeeded in reducing their share price by 33%, but the company just about managed to survive by running a desperate PR campaign in the City to pick up prices.[1] Activism can very successfully accomplish bringing down a business, yet to bring down capitalism a lot more will be required than to simply extend this sort of activity to every business in every sector. Similarly with the targeting of butcher's shops by animal rights activists, the net result is probably only to aid the supermarkets in closing down all the small butcher's shops, thus assisting the process of competition and the 'natural selection' of the marketplace. Thus activists often succeed in destroying one small business while strengthening capital overall.

A similar thing applies with anti-roads activism. Wide-scale anti-roads protests have created opportunities for a whole new sector of capitalism — security, surveillance, tunnelers, climbers, experts and consultants. We are now one 'market risk' among others to be taken into account when bidding for a roads contract. We may have actually assisted the rule of market forces, by forcing out the companies that are weakest and least able to cope. Protest-bashing consultant Amanda Webster says: "The advent of the protest movement will actually provide market advantages to those contractors who can handle it effectively."[2] Again activism can bring down a business or stop a road but capitalism carries merrily on, if anything stronger than before.

These things are surely an indication, if one were needed, that tackling capitalism will require not only a quantitative change (more actions, more activists) but a qualitative one (we need to discover some more effective form of operating). It seems we have very little idea of what it might actually require to bring down capitalism. As if all it needed was some sort of critical mass of activists occupying offices to be reached and then we'd have a revolution…

The form of activism has been preserved even while the content of this activity has moved

[1] *Squaring up to the Square Mile: A Rough Guide to the City of London* (J18 Publications (UK), 1999) p. 8

[2] see 'Direct Action: Six Years Down the Road' in *Do or Die* No. 7, p. 3

beyond the form that contains it. We still think in terms of being 'activists' doing a 'campaign' on an 'issue', and because we are 'direct action' activists we will go and 'do an action' against our target. The method of campaigning against specific developments or single companies has been carried over into this new thing of taking on capitalism. We're attempting to take on capitalism and conceptualising what we're doing in completely inappropriate terms, utilising a method of operating appropriate to liberal reformism. So we have the bizarre spectacle of 'doing an action' against capitalism — an utterly inadequate practice.

## Roles

The role of the 'activist' is a role we adopt just like that of policeman, parent or priest — a strange psychological form we use to define ourselves and our relation to others. The 'activist' is a specialist or an expert in social change — yet the harder we cling to this role and notion of what we are, the more we actually impede the change we desire. A real revolution will involve the breaking out of all preconceived roles and the destruction of all specialism — the reclamation of our lives. The seizing control over our own destinies which is the act of revolution will involve the creation of new selves and new forms of interaction and community. 'Experts' in anything can only hinder this.

The Situationist International developed a stringent critique of roles and particularly the role of 'the militant'. Their criticism was mainly directed against leftist and social-democratic ideologies because that was mainly what they encountered. Although these forms of alienation still exist and are plain to be seen, in our particular milieu it is the liberal activist we encounter more often than the leftist militant. Nevertheless, they share many features in common (which of course is not surprising).

The Situationist Raoul Vaneigem defined roles like this: "Stereotypes are the dominant images of a period… The stereotype is the model of the role; the role is a model form of behaviour. The repetition of an attitude creates a role." To play a role is to cultivate an appearance to the neglect of everything authentic: "we succumb to the seduction of borrowed attitudes." As role-players we dwell in inauthenticity — reducing our lives to a string of clichés — "breaking [our] day down into a series of poses chosen more or less unconsciously from the range of dominant stereotypes."[3] This process has been at work since the early days of the anti-roads movement. At Twyford Down after Yellow Wednesday in December '92, press and media coverage focused on the Dongas Tribe and the dreadlocked countercultural aspect of the protests. Initially this was by no means the predominant element — there was a large group of ramblers at the eviction for example.[4] But people attracted to Twyford by the media coverage thought every single person there had dreadlocks. The media coverage had the effect of making 'ordinary' people stay away and more dreadlocked countercultural types turned up — decreasing the diversity of the protests. More recently, a similar thing has

[3]Raoul Vaneigem — *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Left Bank Books/Rebel Press, 1994) — first published 1967, pp. 131–3

[4]see 'The Day they Drove Twyford Down' in *Do or Die* No. 1, p. 11

happened in the way in which people drawn to protest sites by the coverage of Swampy they had seen on TV began to replicate in their own lives the attitudes presented by the media as characteristic of the role of the 'eco-warrior'.[5]

"Just as the passivity of the consumer is an active passivity, so the passivity of the spectator lies in his ability to assimilate roles and play them according to official norms. The repetition of images and stereotypes offers a set of models from which everyone is supposed to choose a role."[6] The role of the militant or activist is just one of these roles, and therein, despite all the revolutionary rhetoric that goes with the role, lies its ultimate conservatism.

The supposedly revolutionary activity of the activist is a dull and sterile routine — a constant repetition of a few actions with no potential for change. Activists would probably resist change if it came because it would disrupt the easy certainties of their role and the nice little niche they've carved out for themselves. Like union bosses, activists are eternal representatives and mediators. In the same way as union leaders would be against their workers actually succeeding in their struggle because this would put them out of a job, the role of the activist is threatened by change. Indeed revolution, or even any real moves in that direction, would profoundly upset activists by depriving them of their role. If *everyone* is becoming revolutionary then you're not so special anymore, are you?

So why do we behave like activists? Simply because it's the easy cowards' option? It is easy to fall into playing the activist role because it fits into this society and doesn't challenge it — activism is an accepted form of dissent. Even if as activists we are doing things which are not accepted and are illegal, the form of activism itself the way it is like a job — means that it fits in with our psychology and our upbringing. It has a certain attraction precisely because it is not revolutionary.

## We Don't Need Any More Martyrs

The key to understanding both the role of the militant and the activist is self-sacrifice — the sacrifice of the self to 'the cause' which is seen as being separate from the self. This of course has nothing to do with real revolutionary activity which is the seizing of the self. Revolutionary martyrdom goes together with the identification of some cause separate from one's own life — an action against capitalism which identifies capitalism as 'out there' in the City is fundamentally mistaken — the real power of capital is right here in our everyday lives — we re-create its power every day because capital is not a thing but a social relation between people (and hence classes) mediated by things.

Of course I am not suggesting that everyone who was involved in June 18th shares in the adoption of this role and the self-sacrifice that goes with it to an equal extent. As I said above, the problem of activism was made particularly apparent by June 18th precisely because it was an attempt to break from these roles and our normal ways of operating. Much of what is outlined here is a 'worst case scenario' of what playing the role of an activist can lead to. The

[5] see 'Personality Politics: The Spectacularisation of Fairmile' in *Do or Die* No. 7, p. 35

[6] Op. Cit. 2, p. 128

extent to which we can recognise this within our own movement will give us an indication of how much work there is still to be done.

The activist makes politics dull and sterile and drives people away from it, but playing the role also fucks up the activist herself. The role of the activist creates a separation between ends and means: self-sacrifice means creating a division between the revolution as love and joy in the future but duty and routine now. The worldview of activism is dominated by guilt and duty because the activist is not fighting for herself but for a separate cause: "All causes are equally inhuman."[7]

As an activist you have to deny your own desires because your political activity is defined such that these things do not count as 'politics'. You put 'politics' in a separate box to the rest of your life — it's like a job… you do 'politics' 9–5 and then go home and do something else. Because it is in this separate box, 'politics' exists unhampered by any real-world practical considerations of effectiveness. The activist feels obliged to keep plugging away at the same old routine unthinkingly, unable to stop or consider, the main thing being that the activist is kept busy and assuages her guilt by banging her head against a brick wall if necessary.

Part of being revolutionary might be knowing when to stop and wait. It might be important to know how and when to strike for maximum effectiveness and also how and when NOT to strike. Activists have this 'We must do something NOW!' attitude that seems fuelled by guilt. This is completely untactical.

The self-sacrifice of the militant or the activist is mirrored in their power over others as an expert — like a religion there is a kind of hierarchy of suffering and self-righteousness. The activist assumes power over others by virtue of her greater degree of suffering ('non-hierarchical' activist groups in fact form a 'dictatorship of the most committed'). The activist uses moral coercion and guilt to wield power over others less experienced in the theogony of suffering. Their subordination of themselves goes hand in hand with their subordination of others — all enslaved to 'the cause'. Self-sacrificing politicos stunt their own lives and their own will to live — this generates a bitterness and an antipathy to life which is then turned outwards to wither everything else. They are "great despisers of life… the partisans of absolute self-sacrifice… their lives twisted by their monstrous asceticism."[8] We can see this in our own movement, for example on site, in the antagonism between the desire to sit around and have a good time versus the guilt-tripping build/fortify/barricade work ethic and in the sometimes excessive passion with which 'lunchouts' are denounced. The self-sacrificing martyr is offended and outraged when she sees others that are not sacrificing themselves. Like when the 'honest worker' attacks the scrounger or the layabout with such vitriol, we know it is actually because she hates her job and the martyrdom she has made of her life and therefore hates to see anyone escape this fate, hates to see anyone enjoying themselves while she is suffering — she must drag everyone down into the muck with her — an equality of self-sacrifice.

In the old religious cosmology, the successful martyr went to heaven. In the modern

[7]Op. Cit. 2, p. 107

[8]Op. Cit. 2, p. 109

worldview, successful martyrs can look forwards to going down in history. The greatest self-sacrifice, the greatest success in creating a role (or even better, in devising a whole new one for people to emulate — e.g. the eco-warrior) wins a reward in history — the bourgeois heaven.

The old left was quite open in its call for heroic sacrifice: "Sacrifice yourselves joyfully, brothers and sisters! For the Cause, for the Established Order, for the Party, for Unity, for Meat and Potatoes!"[9] But these days it is much more veiled: Vaneigem accuses "young leftist radicals" of "enter[ing] the service of a Cause — the 'best' of all Causes. The time they have for creative activity they squander on handing out leaflets, putting up posters, demonstrating or heckling local politicians. They become militants, fetishising action because others are doing their thinking for them."[10]

This resounds with us — particularly the thing about the fetishising of action — in left groups the militants are left free to engage in endless busywork because the group leader or guru has the 'theory' down pat, which is just accepted and lapped up — the 'party line'. With direct action activists it's slightly different — action is fetishised, but more out of an aversion to any theory whatsoever.

Although it is present, that element of the activist role which relies on self-sacrifice and duty was not so significant in June 18th. What is more of an issue for us is the feeling of separateness from 'ordinary people' that activism implies. People identify with some weird sub-culture or clique as being 'us' as opposed to the 'them' of everyone else in the world.

## Isolation

The activist role is a self-imposed isolation from all the people we should be connecting to. Taking on the role of an activist separates you from the rest of the human race as someone special and different. People tend to think of their own first person plural (who are you referring to when you say 'we'?) as referring to some community of activists, rather than a class. For example, for some time now in the activist milieu it has been popular to argue for 'no more single issues' and for the importance of 'making links'. However, many people's conception of what this involved was to 'make links' with *other activists* and other campaign groups. June 18th demonstrated this quite well, the whole idea being to get all the representatives of all the various different causes or issues in one place at one time, voluntarily relegating ourselves to the ghetto of good causes.

Similarly, the various networking forums that have recently sprung up around the country — the Rebel Alliance in Brighton, NASA in Nottingham, Riotous Assembly in Manchester, the London Underground etc. have a similar goal — to get all the activist groups in the area talking to each other. I'm not knocking this — it is an essential pre-requisite for any further action, but it should be recognised for the extremely limited form of 'making links' that it is. It is also interesting in that what the groups attending these meetings have in common is that

[9] Op. Cit. 2, p. 108

[10] Op. Cit. 2, p. 109

they are activist groups — what they are actually concerned with seems to be a secondary consideration.

It is not enough merely to seek to link together all the activists in the world, neither is it enough to seek to transform more people into activists. Contrary to what some people may think, we will not be any closer to a revolution if lots and lots of people become activists. Some people seem to have the strange idea that what is needed is for everyone to be somehow persuaded into becoming activists like us and then we'll have a revolution. Vaneigem says: "Revolution is made everyday despite, and in opposition to, the specialists of revolution."[11]

The militant or activist is a specialist in social change or revolution. The specialist recruits others to her own tiny area of specialism in order to increase her own power and thus dispel the realisation of her own powerlessness. "The specialist… enrols himself in order to enrol others."[12] Like a pyramid selling scheme, the hierarchy is self-replicating — you are recruited and in order not to be at the bottom of the pyramid, you have to recruit more people to be under you, who then do exactly the same. The reproduction of the alienated society of roles is accomplished through specialists.

Jacques Camatte in his essay 'On Organization' (1969)[13] makes the astute point that political groupings often end up as "gangs" defining themselves by exclusion — the group member's first loyalty becomes to the group rather than to the struggle. His critique applies especially to the myriad of Left sects and groupuscules at which it was directed but it applies also to a lesser extent to the activist mentality.

The political group or party substitutes itself for the proletariat and its own survival and reproduction become paramount — revolutionary activity becomes synonymous with 'building the party' and recruiting members. The group takes itself to have a unique grasp on truth and everyone outside the group is treated like an idiot in need of education by this vanguard. Instead of an equal debate between comrades we get instead the separation of theory and propaganda, where the group has its own theory, which is almost kept secret in the belief that the inherently less mentally able punters must be lured in the organisation with some strategy of populism before the politics are sprung on them by surprise. This dishonest method of dealing with those outside of the group is similar to a religious cult — they will never tell you upfront what they are about.

We can see here some similarities with activism, in the way that the activist milieu acts like a leftist sect. Activism as a whole has some of the characteristics of a "gang". Activist gangs can often end up being cross-class alliances, including all sorts of liberal reformists because they too are 'activists'. People think of themselves primarily as activists and their primary loyalty becomes to the community of activists and not to the struggle as such. The "gang" is illusory community, distracting us from creating a wider community of resistance. The essence of Camatte's critique is an attack on the creation of an interior/exterior division between the group and the class. We come to think of ourselves as being activists and there-

[11]Op. Cit. 2, p. 111

[12]Op. Cit. 2, p. 143

[13]Jacques Camatte — 'On Organization' (1969) in *This World We Must Leave and Other Essays* (New York, Autonomedia, 1995)

fore as being separate from and having different interests from the mass of working class people.

Our activity should be the immediate expression of a real struggle, not the affirmation of the separateness and distinctness of a particular group. In Marxist groups the possession of 'theory' is the all-important thing determining power — it's different in the activist milieu, but not that different — the possession of the relevant 'social capital' — knowledge, experience, contacts, equipment etc. is the primary thing determining power.

Activism reproduces the structure of this society in its operations: "When the rebel begins to believe that he is fighting for a higher good, the authoritarian principle gets a filip."[14] This is no trivial matter, but is at the basis of capitalist social relations. Capital is a social relation between people mediated by things — the basic principle of alienation is that we live our lives in the service of some *thing* that we ourselves have created. If we reproduce this structure in the name of politics that declares itself anti-capitalist, we have lost before we have begun. You cannot fight alienation by alienated means.

## A Modest Proposal

This is a modest proposal that we should develop ways of operating that are adequate to our radical ideas. This task will not be easy and the writer of this short piece has no clearer insight into how we should go about this than anyone else. I am not arguing that June 18th should have been abandoned or attacked, indeed it was a valiant attempt to get beyond our limitations and to create something better than what we have at present. However, in its attempts to break with antique and formulaic ways of doing things it has made clear the ties that still bind us to the past. The criticisms of activism that I have expressed above do not all apply to June 18th. However there is a certain paradigm of activism which at its worst includes all that I have outlined above and June 18th shared in this paradigm to a certain extent. To exactly what extent is for you to decide.

Activism is a form partly forced upon us by weakness. Like the joint action taken by Reclaim the Streets and the Liverpool dockers — we find ourselves in times in which radical politics is often the product of mutual weakness and isolation. If this is the case, it may not even be within our power to break out of the role of activists. It may be that in times of a downturn in struggle, those who continue to work for social revolution become marginalised and come to be seen (and to see themselves) as a special separate group of people. It may be that this is only capable of being corrected by a general upsurge in struggle when we won't be weirdos and freaks any more but will seem simply to be stating what is on everybody's minds. However, to work to escalate the struggle it will be necessary to break with the role of activists to whatever extent is possible — to constantly try to push at the boundaries of our limitations and constraints.

Historically, those movements that have come the closest to de-stabilising or removing or going beyond capitalism have not at all taken the form of activism. Activism is essentially

[14] Op. Cit. 2, p. 110

a political form and a method of operating suited to liberal reformism that is being pushed beyond its own limits and used for revolutionary purposes. The activist role in itself must be problematic for those who desire social revolution.

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