

## Direct action as conflicting practices of equality and autonomy

During the beginning of the Covid pandemic this year we heard numerous voices reminding us that for many people “crisis is the norm”, echoing Walter Benjamin's words that “the emergency situation in which we live is the rule”. This is problematic if it is taken to mean that there is no real crisis or that there is no normality. Instead, crisis can be thought of as the state of exception that makes normality possible. This normal order is established and sustained by including everything it can't subsume into abstract universality in the form of an exception.

This happens at multiple and ambiguous sites. It happens at the volunteer-run homeless shelter that accommodates people with no recourse to public funds. It happens in the form of zero hour contracts and bogus self-employment. It happens through gatekeeping practices in social and health care services. It also happens when we compartmentalize ourselves, trying to maintain professional boundaries and a healthy work-life balance.

During the pandemic, these exclusions that are included only as exceptions, become apparent and threaten to expose the contingency of the “normal” social, economical and political order. For example, the fact that there are people living three to a room in hostels becomes a visible and urgent problem. Or people become aware how much they struggle to manage their time and mental health without pre-given structures of employment.

Instead of hiding these contradictions, the government's response is to declare a public crisis, bringing them to the centre of politics and public discourse in the form of an emergency. If the public had been given honest and up to date information about the risks of Covid-19, the government would have left the decision on the application of its laws to the individual and made itself redundant. If it had enforced strict measures, the lives and situations that were excluded would have exposed the government's authoritarianism and the entrenched injustices of our society. Instead, the crisis was “managed” through multiple and contradicting exceptions. Our lives, behaviours, feelings and fears have been “managed” with mixed messages, short-term solutions, and what I can only describe as a large-scale public gaslighting campaign.

I think we have witnessed during lock-down what happens when the existing balance of power is threatened. For me, it revealed how ineffective and unsustainable many of our supposedly radical activities are. Of course, this lesson had already been learned by groups and activists who have faced brutal repression while other members of their wider social movements looked on. But perhaps a lot of us have felt reassured in the radicality of our activities precisely because they have been ineffective.

So what can we learn from this experience and from the tradition of the oppressed teaching us that this experience is in fact the rule? The question I will address here is: what kind of action can both disrupt normality and sustain itself through crisis? What kind of action has a disruptive power but is also rooted in, and capable of building, structures that offer stability and safety? To answer my question, I reflect on existing grass-roots practices that resist or refuse oppression, including groups and practices that don't necessarily self-identify as “anarchist”.

Anarchist theory often emphasizes the spontaneous and disruptive aspect of radical action. I suspect this is because the writers in question do not need to conceptualize or build spaces for themselves in which they are safe and supported, because these structures already exist for them. My experience of organizing and living in community has taught me that there are multiple intersecting ways in which people take their safety in a group for granted, or don't, and behave accordingly. Feminist and queer organizing practices and theory have focused much more on building and maintaining spaces that are safer for everyone but such practices have often been dismissed as restrictive and un-anarchist.

I will specifically look at the practice and concept of “direct action” as a practice that is both inside and outside the “normal” order. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes the power of the sovereign as the power given by law to suspend the law in order to create the exception through which law gains its validity. The sovereign is therefore simultaneously inside and outside the law. Normality, according to Agamben, is a kind of truce or balance of power. It can be suspended any time by the sovereign state in the form of a state of emergency or by a mass uprising.

As critics such as Derrida and Ranciere have pointed out, this places political practice into a trap. Neither the pure sovereign state nor the revolutionary masses exist or wield absolute power yet our politics is caught up in a false dilemma between the two. I will argue that if there is a way out of this dilemma it is not to overcome it but to diffuse it. The conflicting dynamics between inclusion and exclusion are part of our everyday life and organizing, playing out at multiple sites, and differently in each specific situation. I will argue that direct action takes place at the multiple thresholds or exclusions that constitute normality. It is action that transgresses or blurs these limits, contesting the power to decide and putting the very decidability of these limits into question.

The ubiquity of direct action is reflected in Voltairine de Cleyre's description of direct actionists as “ Every person who ever thought he had a right to assert, and went boldly and asserted it”, “ Every person who ever had a plan to do anything, and went and did it” and “ Every person who ever in his life had a difference with anyone to settle, and went straight to the other persons involved to settle it”. She also points out that most people take both direct and indirect action, depending on the situation they find themselves in, without necessarily weighing up the respective merits of directness or indirectness.

Voltairine de Cleyre seems to understand directness as action that does not appeal to or even recognize the role of a higher authority. It asserts and attempts to create a level playing field; a situation where people can cooperate or settle their disputes at eye level. This is very different from Uri Gordon's interpretation of direct action as unmediated intervention (2008: 4). Gordon asserts that groups use direct action where they use “their own power and resources to change reality in a desired direction”, thereby taking social change in their own hands (2008: 17). Gordon excludes actions that constitute a dialogue, even a confrontational one, between activists and authorities.

However, this is exactly the way direct action is used and thought by many anarchists and activists. For example, Lorenzo Komboa'Ervin describes direct action as tactics such as boycotts and strikes that compel the government to give up power and resources which can then be used to care for the needs of the community. In this view, direct action confronts and negotiates with

authority with the aim of undermining and ultimately abolishing it.

Direct action seeks to challenge and undermine institutional authority; however, it always takes place within an institutional context. It is always mediated in some way by the legal system, public opinion, and the actors' socialisation. David Graeber makes this observation in “Direct Action: an Ethnography”. He gives the example of an activist lying down in front of a truck to prevent deforestation. Graeber points out that if the truck driver does not run over the activist, this may be because of the driver's fear of legal repercussions or their moral scruples, which means that the effectiveness of the action is mediated by moral norms and a legal system.

To use Agamben's term, this action works because the activist is *not* homo sacer. The activist may *not* be killed and their killing *would* constitute a sacrifice. It works because the actor is included in the legal and moral order, and places herself outside of this order, on the side of the excluded, which in this case is the forest under attack. This is the included practising exclusion, which I will here refer to as the practice of autonomy. Another way to express this is that the actor asserts their right, given by law, to break the law. It can therefore also be thought of as an act of sovereignty.

However, unlike Agamben's sovereign decision this action does not create the state of exception but undoes it, even if just for a moment. It causes a split in the sovereign power; and perhaps this is how we can think Benjamin's “real state of emergency”. It forces the authority to either exclude the included by using force against the activist, or to include the excluded by stopping the deforestation. The action therefore either achieves a certain campaign goal or exposes the brutality of the authority. However, either of these results only lasts a moment before the activist is re-included through the exception of the “criminal” or “extremist” and can be legally removed.

If the action achieves a campaign goal this should therefore neither be considered a political success nor a selling out of pure principles. And if it exposes the brutality and injustice of the normal order, this is neither a political failure nor a “pure” unmediated action. The radical force of this action lies in its challenge to the power to declare the exception.

Does this mean that only privileged included activists can take direct action? A different way of conceiving direct action at the thresholds of inclusion and exclusion, is Ranciere's concept of disagreement. Ranciere argues that where those who are excluded assert their equality, they not only contest their particular exclusion but the validity of a regime based on exclusion. According to Ranciere, there is a right to assert this equality, because equality is denied by the authority. The right to assert equality is derived from exclusion. Interestingly, the position of the excluded therefore also bears resemblance to Agamben's sovereign who says "I who am outside the law declare that there is nothing outside the law".

We could think of Ranciere's disagreement as practices of inclusion by those who are excluded, which I will here refer to as practices of equality. Undocumented migration, for example, could be seen in this light as an action that asserts the equal right to move and to stay, to choose and to be acknowledged. It doesn't demand this right, but acts as if this right was already given. Again, such an action forces the authorities to either reluctantly include or brutally exclude the migrant, before re-capturing him in the exception of the "illegal", the "criminal" or "extremist".

The radical moment of this practice, as argued by Ranciere, is therefore the opening up of the gap that is closed with the exception. It ends with the resolution of this conflict, when the gap is closed and the balance of power is restored. Unlike Ranciere, I believe that this gap can be opened through practices of autonomy as well as practices of equality. Furthermore, I suggest that radical collective action requires reciprocal collaboration between both practices and therefore between people who are included and excluded in different ways and in different moments.

Practices of equality and autonomy are not alternative strategies but neither are they simply complementary. Instead of alternative or complementary, I want to think of these practices as conflicting. I believe, in a healthy community we would each constantly oscillate between both practices. It is not possible to establish equality by saying "we are all the same" or freedom by saying "we are all different". Instead, when I hear you say "we are all the same", I say "no I'm different" and when I hear "we are different" I say "but I am the same as you!" Only through these

moments of conflict can my equality and freedom be established.

Direct actions, as conflicting practices of autonomy and equality, would then always be a necessary part of human organizing. Furthermore, by virtue of their conflicting dynamic, direct actions anticipate and militate for a world where the two practices are no longer distributed along structural divisions such as gender, race and class. On the one hand, collaboration between both practices is necessary because we are all included and excluded in different ways in different social contexts and this will always be the case. On the other hand, collaboration is necessary in order to diffuse the divisions that organize who is included and who is excluded.

Within collective organizing, we are all included and excluded in different ways, not only based on our identity, ability and socialization but also as a result of internal group dynamics like cliques and hierarchies. The meaning and impact of an action depends on the position of the actor within the specific social context in which the action takes place. Practices of equality can only be read in terms of exclusion and practices of autonomy only work on the basis of the actor's inclusion.

Take for example the action I described above. An activist blocks a road with her body to stop trucks from clearing a forest. If the activist can be forcibly removed without the public or even the wider activist movement paying much attention, the action will not have much impact. This might be because the activist belongs to a community that is already heavily policed and this is perceived as normal. Or if she is a young woman, she might be dismissed as naïve and misguided. However, if for example a white elderly man is pushed over by police, this causes a public outcry. I would consider this an effective practice of autonomy.

Conversely, sending flowers to a police station after being arrested could be seen as a radical act of forgiveness if the actor was a person targeted by systemic police violence. It would be a practice of equality because forgiveness asserts a level playing field that is not institutionally recognized. However, if this is done by a white middle class climate activist, this act only affirms an equality that is already given by white and class privilege. This means that in order to do effective actions we need to reflect critically on our position in a specific social and historical context.

So one reason why we need collaboration between practices of equality and autonomy is that we are all included and excluded in different moments and contexts. However, if practices of autonomy only work in a context of inclusion and practices of equality only work in a context of exclusion, there is a sense in which both practices, taken by themselves, are potentially reactionary. This is because each person is fundamentally included in the abstract and empty notion of humanity and each person is also fundamentally excluded as a living being who cannot be subsumed into any category.

This means that practices of autonomy, such as confrontations with the police, are in reality damaging to all of us, no matter how privileged we are. Practices of equality such as sending flowers to the police, always, to some extent, legitimize existing institutions. If we look at these practices in isolation, they both potentially normalize the state of exception, and for that reason, they necessitate each other. This, in turn, means that we need each other and, more specifically, people who are included and excluded in different ways need each other. We need practices of autonomy that contest universals and we need practices of equality that affirm that we are all equally valid and valuable.

In conclusion, I would argue that to be both disruptive and sustaining, political action needs to be founded on the reciprocal and meaningful collaboration between people across divisions using not complementary but *conflicting* practices of equality and autonomy. During lock-down I saw antagonisms between activists who were taking extra precautions against Covid-19 and others who flouted the government restrictions. Or between people who experienced clapping for the NHS as working-class solidarity and people who refused to clap because they felt it legitimized government policy. I would argue that both could potentially be seen as practices of autonomy or equality depending on the situation, and therefore as direct action. The point is not simply that everybody should decide for themselves but that the conflict between these practices is necessary, creative and welcome.