

INDYPENDENT READER

toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .

Published on *Independent Reader* (<https://indyreader.org>)

Home > Are We Addicted to Rioting? Anarchists at the G20 Protests and Social Movement Strategy

Are We Addicted to Rioting? Anarchists at the G20 Protests and Social Movement Strategy

Contributed by:

Ryan Harvey[1]

Wednesday, September 30, 2009 - 17:09



As an organizer with a decade of experience in all types of work, from anarchist organizations to peace groups to labor organizing, I don't think over-hyping our actions does anything for us.

September 24, 2009

Part One:

The G20 is upon us, and though BBC World News featured some of "the troubles" in Pittsburgh, on-the-ground reports hardly match up with the media-inflation, police-inflation, and activist-inflation of the actual thing.

As is often the case, the media makes things look a whole lot crazier than they actually are in the interest of higher ratings. And though one might guess that most Americans would be against

rioting, they apparently love to watch riots on TV. So the media is hyping the G20 protests to get some extra points, but not enough to anger their parent companies.

The police, of course, have to inflate the threats posed by relatively small numbers of protesters to justify the gigantic amount of City, state, and federal tax-payer money used to buy new weapons, vehicles, chemical munitions, and armor. They get to keep all these goodies to use against whomever crosses their path in the future. So little pebbles getting tossed at robo-cops become boulders, and little marches becoming security threats.

To match these two forces, the protest groups, especially my own comrades in the anarchist groups, inflate their stories, numbers, and actions to try to gain support and build momentum. So a dumpster getting rolled down a street into an intersection will be embellished in well-designed pamphlets to come and will be talked about for years the way my generation still talks about the fence-chasing incident at A16, (World Bank/IMF protests on April 16, 2000 in DC).

What is so crazy about all of this inflation is that it doesn't seem to help. As an organizer with a decade of experience in all types of work, from anarchist organizations to peace groups to labor organizing, I don't think over-hyping our actions does anything for us. In fact, I think it works to our disadvantage. It adds to a culture of dishonesty, of not addressing our shortcomings, of not reflecting and refining our work.

Pittsburgh had a crowd of 4,000-10,000 people according to different reports. While this is a big number in general, it's not so big compared to public opinions on such issues at the bailout, corporate executive bonuses, or the global economic order in general. Most folks in the U.S. are pretty angry, from the far left to the independent right/libertarians. Instead of congratulating ourselves on a "large turnout", we should be asking why it wasn't nearly the size of most anti-war demonstrations that have happened - not to put ourselves down in any way, but to consider the factors so that we can go about building a stronger movement for economic justice. When we don't look into these factors, we are walking blind.

Another major issue in these protests is that when militant groups over-hype themselves beforehand, to make themselves seem bigger, more powerful, and often more willing to use violence or property destruction, they invite and allow public justification for large, well-funded and well-equipped police action, which they are not prepared to face. They are usually fronting, thinking that talking big will make the actual thing big. This is not how organizing works. You actually have to do the work, not just front like you have. You end up in dangerous situations when you do this.

A flimsy PVC-reinforced banner is not going to last long against a few riot-police. I've seen it many times and it's never done anything more than look cool in a photo to those who've never seen the damn things break on impact. I once saw a cop beat an anarchist with a piece of his own broken PVC "shield" banner.

I came from this scene, learned all the tactical terms, and met many good people who I ran in the streets with, and we got into some crazy situations. I have been around the block a few times. I have inhaled tear gas and pepper spray, heard the close-up clicks on the infamous taser, and heard the sobering sounds of riot batons breaking human bones. I once saw a guy almost burn a hole in his hand throwing a tear gas canister back at the police in Quebec City in 2001. At the beginning of the Iraq war, I helped drag a 16 year-old girl away from a group of police who were beating her in DC. Both her ankles and one of her arms were broken. In Miami in 2003, I heard the

explosion of "less-lethal" weapons and heard a loud pop next to me. As I turned, a middle-aged woman was starting to run away with blood literally pouring out of her mouth. She had been hit in the face with a rubber bullet.

After that incident I began a long reflective process, one that started in the bloodstained streets of Miami and hasn't stopped yet. Something clicked when the blood poured out of this woman's mouth; this is for real. I am really here and we are really getting the shit kicked out of us. What before seemed sort of fun, sort of therapeutic, sort of educational, now seemed totally dangerous, serious, and life-threatening.

It also became clear that our actions in the streets were not usually connected to any real strategy to achieve change, no goals that we could attain, no real meaning for being there at that time, besides to ruin the party for the bigwigs. Not that that's a bad thing to do, it's just not worth my eye, hand, or life. It went on like this for years for me before I took a step back and realized I was in the middle of a big mess, a mess with very few details. It was like a messy room that only has large furniture in it, no scraps of paper, no old dishes, no crumbs. Everything upon observation was really clear, it was obvious what was wrong.

I began to think about my purpose for protest, my desire for economic and social justice, peace, and equality. As I reflected, I became disillusioned with protest, burned out, depressed, and lost. It took a while to crawl out of it, but I came out on top. I learned a lot during my down time and came to some understandings.

One of the clearest understandings I reached, one that was really solidified recently after reading a book called *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning* by Chris Hedges, is that me and many friends were pretty much addicted to these intense street situations. We were engaging in "combat scenarios" and really, to a scary degree, creating mini-war scenes where we could play out some strange fantasies.

War is A Force That Gives Us Meaning deals with the strange attraction that people have to war, even those highly opposed to it - even those scarred by it, terrified by it, and deeply effected by it. Some go into war and get real messed up, vowing to never return, only to soon find themselves desiring that adrenaline, the fear, the intensity. Hedges was a journalist in Bosnia, El Salvador, Lebanon, and Iraq. He realized after many years that he was experiencing a type of addiction, seeking a high that can only be attained in a combat situation.

I fear that we too, anarchists and street militants, have similar symptoms. We intentionally go into situations that we know are dangerous, that we often know don't really have any solid plan. Maybe it's part machismo, maybe it's part desperation, maybe it's part legit too, but I think it's a lot of high-seeking. We desire the intensity, the rush. We get to enact roles that we don't get to enact in our everyday lives, heroism, bravery, sacrifice, quick thinking, fear-testing, and some forms of solidarity. We also get to experience prison, pain, and life-changing trauma.

All of this is well worth it if we have our eyes on the prize and are fully aware of the risks, reasons, and responsibilities of these types of actions. The risks are obvious, and the reasons are usually few and far between (meaning we usually don't have a very sound strategic approach to protest that results in the real changes we desire). The responsibilities are usually totally missing, aside from street medics and basic legal support. But larger programs- like trauma support for years afterward, support for those abused in prison, networks of real care and compassion like those

veterans have created with groups like Vets 4 Vets and Homefront Battle Buddies to heal from the painful experiences of violence - don't exist yet.

I have seen all of this go pretty much unnoticed by those of us who organized actions that resulted in the trauma, like those of us who helped organize in Miami. A lot of us who were there learned that lesson real quick afterward, but a bit too late. I know a woman who has full audio/visual flashbacks from Miami, another parallel with war, and a common symptom of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many of my friends have PTSD from their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. It would not be surprising if many of us have been coping with similar effects from Philadelphia, Miami, DC, and St. Paul and didn't know it because we are not in a movement that is prepared to handle or reflective enough to admit such things.

While the experiences of violence can easily change you, I don't want to dwell on this too much. I don't want my point to get blurred. I'm not scared of violence all the time. I'm not against violence all the time. I'm not against riots all the time, and I'm not against folks putting themselves in harms way just to prove a point all the time. But I am no longer lending my support to these acts if they are not solidly rooted in an organizational and movement-wide foundation, supported by large numbers of people who understand their purpose and the steps to take afterward. If we are "stepping it up" or "escalating" without the massive numbers of people that we were previously standing with, we are losing people, and are thus destined to fail. I don't want to be in a people-less movement, I want to build strong movements that can take bold and seemingly dangerous steps together, growing as they move forward. This can justify the risk.

Source URL: <https://indyreader.org/content/are-we-addicted-rioting-anarchists-g20-protests-and-social-movement-strategy>

Links:

[1] <https://indyreader.org/contributor/ryan-harvey>