

# In Defence of Activism

Chris Knight replies to his critics

Chris Knight

Submitted by Petroglyph on July 7, 2011



*CHRIS KNIGHT outside RBS, Bishopsgate*

A number of anarchist journals and websites have criticised my own and my comrades' activism in recent months and weeks. Criticism from the right is easy to dismiss. When it comes from comrades I know and respect, I need to take it seriously and come up with a considered response.

The tabloids have depicted me as a 'top anarchist' or 'anarchist ringleader'. The truth is that I count myself a marxist. But like any consistent marxist, my goal is a stateless society. My political beliefs are based on my understanding of human origins and prehistory. For 95 per cent of our existence, our species lived as egalitarian hunter-gatherers, without any kind of state, showing in practice that anarchism works. My interest has been to elucidate precisely how such a lifestyle came into existence and how it worked. Hunter-gatherers are not free in the sense of 'lawless'. They certainly uphold norms and principles of conduct, particularly with respect to sex. But these norms are enforced bottom-up, not top-down. It seems to me that we have much to learn from hunter-gatherers who still practice anarchism/communism today.<sup>1</sup>

Do I think the state can be used as a revolutionary instrument today? No, I do not. The state is intrinsically tied up with territorialism, with borders, with passports, with war. In my view it has to be smashed and replaced with self-organized forms of

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<sup>1</sup> By the way, I am not a primitivist. If you want to understand more about the relevance of hunter-gatherers to revolutionary politics today, see the Radical Anthropology Group website, the lunarchy website or my shorter articles on libcom.

resistance cutting across all borders. Earlier marxists used to think in terms of stages, leaving abolition of the state to some future date following a successful revolution. In today's world, this makes no sense. The revolution is intrinsically internationalist from the start, so talk about retaining the territorial state in any form is just reactionary. That's my view. Whether it makes me an anarchist, I leave for others to decide.

Am I a 'leader', as the tabloids keep describing me? I am active and prominent in 'The Government of the Dead', a small street theatre troupe. We do have our supporters, but I doubt any of them consider me their leader. What's happening here, I think, is a sense of humour failure. The tabloids strive to prevent any element of theatrical comedy from coming across, since it challenges their narrative about 'anarchist thugs'. But if you consider the outcome – in *'The Sun'* newspaper, for example – what you have is a so-called 'anarchist leader' who looks like a top-hatted zombie making a complete clown of himself, apparently on purpose. This is surely preferable to the media creating a believable leader. In my view, we don't need any more Lenins, any more Great Helmsmen. In the spirit of Rabelais and Bakhtin, my theatrical project has been to dissolve any such idea in peals of laughter.

I respect those comrades who say we should never speak to the media. I also respect those who limit their media contacts to liberal middle class publications such as *The Guardian* or *The Independent*. But 'The Government of the Dead' has its own particular project, which is to help break through the wall of censorship erected by the mainstream media. Our project is to break out of the middle class bubble altogether and reach the working class.

Of course it would be nice if we could persuade the *Sun* or the *Evening Standard* to publish a positive piece on the need for revolution and the creative potential of anarchism. But that's cloud cuckoo land. So we have to think of other ways. Accepting that we will be called 'extremists', 'thugs' etc. etc., can we persuade the tabloids to publish the crucial information? Sometimes things go wrong, but we've had our successes, too. In an *Evening Standard* article published just before the TUC march, we managed to insert a map of the route with all the planned feeder marches, encouraging people to expect an interesting day and not just an A-to-B march. Yes, the headline was 'anarchist extremists plan to hi-jack TUC march', but it seems likely that such detailed and informative coverage, however 'negative', may in practice have had a positive effect on the day. Ordinary people who read newspapers are not stupid: they can read through the lines.

Let me now come to the royal wedding. As far as I can see, every section of the anarchist movement was determined to do very little on that day. 'The Government of the Dead' planned some street theatre with a plywood guillotine. Inevitably, the tabloids insisted on describing us as 'anarchist thugs'. They even reported supposed words of mine to foster that impression. I would ask comrades to remember that the mass media systematically lie. They attributed words to me that I never said, and would never have dreamed of saying.

On the day following the wedding, crime reporter Rebecca Camber of the *Daily Mail* (April 30, p. 26) reported not only that ‘hundreds of anarchists’ had planned to ‘wreck’ the event but that on the morning itself ‘masked thugs gathered in central London’ only to be ‘thwarted’ by police as they rounded up 99 ‘troublemakers’. So who were these ‘masked thugs’ seen gathering in their hundreds in Central London? Was there a single arrest of anyone wearing a mask? Those who arrived that morning in Soho Square were a few dozen young people including small children wearing zombie outfits and face-paint. None looked remotely like a ‘masked thug’.

Engaging with the media is always going to be a gamble. There will be costs as well as benefits. I accept that many anarchists have felt upset, particularly when it seemed there was a direct link between sensational coverage and subsequent police repression. Following the G20 protests, I was well aware that the media frenzy prior to our ‘Storm the Banks’ action was being blamed in some quarters for the climate in which Ian Tomlinson got killed. Immediately following that tragic event, I helped form the United Campaign Against Police Violence, working with the Tomlinson family among many others whose loved ones had died while in police custody. Yes, I had moments of doubt. Suppose we hadn’t ‘stormed the banks’. Suppose we’d all stayed at home. Wouldn’t Ian still be alive? It was all very difficult, to say the least. But as I said at the time, none of the violence on that day came from our side. We didn’t assault anyone; we didn’t kill Ian Tomlinson. Please lay the blame where it belongs: with the police! If we allowed state violence to persuade us all to stay in our beds, wouldn’t we be on a slippery slope toward a police state? We need to take inspiration from our counterparts in Syria – comrades who are still protesting despite being shot in the streets and even in their homes.

The Solidarity Federation, like Freedom Press, made their position clear in advance of the royal wedding. ‘We’re not planning anything’, they said on their blog. The Solidarity Federation insisted that it was business as usual – they would continue to focus their energy and resources on the working class. Other anarchists announced that the monarchy is irrelevant – ‘an embarrassing throwback to a bygone era.’ These are legitimate views. But if the monarchy is irrelevant, why did the state resort to such an unprecedented clampdown, arresting dozens of us for merely thinking of doing something on the day? The explanation, surely, is that this feudal spectacle remains vital to the maintenance of capitalist class rule in Britain.

Some people have accused me of wanting to replace monarchist pageantry with some other self-promoting media spectacle. Actually, the project is to dissolve all such spectacle, opening the door to celebratory street parties, occupations, picket lines and, in general, popular revolution as ‘the carnival of the oppressed’. Glimpses of this have begun breaking out during moments of victory across the Arab world and more recently across Greece and Spain. Humour, dance and theatre maximise the difficulties for the media in portraying us as thugs. Anyway, liberation should be fun. As Emma Goldman said: ‘If I can’t dance in your revolution, it’s not my revolution’.

To me, it seems ironic that some anarchist organizations mirror many of the worst aspects of their Leninist and Trotskyist counterparts. They jealously guard their sectarian boundaries, promote their supposedly ‘correct’ theories, insist on being worthy and boring, insist that their radical ideas are the vital ingredient that the working class needs. The truth is that the working class doesn’t need any of this. Workers need information about their own solidarity, their own unity in action, their own ability to stand up to the bosses and liberate themselves, their own human creativity and potential. As workers become collectively empowered, they’ll work out their own theories, making use, perhaps, of some of the ideas we activists can provide. Against that background, any insight which helps expose division and weakness in the enemy camp is useful; anything which fosters the impression that the ruling class is invincible is reactionary.

Let me conclude by saying that the worst possible kind of theory is the sort which says that everything is a ruling class conspiracy, that the police have got it all sewn up, that the system of mass media censorship is totalitarian and invincible, that there’s nothing we can do. A case in point is a recent Freedom article expressing the paranoid idea that Chris Knight and his comrades are actually part of a huge, well-organised police/media conspiracy designed specifically to justify repression of anarchists.

Well, believe that if you like. In fact, though, the ruling class aren’t so devilish clever. The deeper their crisis, the worse their mistakes. I pose this question: Why did the state feel obliged to make those pre-emptive arrests before and during the wedding? Was it a sign of strength? Or of weakness? Despite being arrested and imprisoned, few of us feel in any way intimidated or cowed. As far as the ‘Guillotine Three’ are concerned, we’ve found it hard to stop laughing. We are now in the process of building a movement to defend the right to protest in the face of a regime which appears more intolerant and insecure by the day.

If workers have accepted capitalist society, it’s because the system has offered limited freedoms and improvements in living standards. If it can’t offer either any more, people will be looking for alternatives. We’re heading for interesting times. Let’s stop attacking one another and focus on winning the revolution!

The Ted K Archive

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First Published in *FREEDOM*, June 18 2011.

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Chris Knight's approach to revolutionary politics is very controversial. However, it is also thought-provoking, whether you agree with him or not. Here, he replies to his critics in the anarchist scene.

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