

corny as we thought. You flourished, feeding off the ghetto garbage, dumpster diving and stealing from supermarkets, a rebel without a pause, and we hoped that would be enough. And for a New York minute, it was. For a minute.

I hope you don't get it twisted, cuz I still got mad love for you. How could I not? We been to the mountaintop and the project rooftop together, we rode and wrote on the subways and highways before we went our separate ways. We saw a promised land of free meals, free lands, free minds, free hands, and back then we really gave a damn. I still remember how we held our boom boxes and ghetto blasters high as our head and wherever the beat fell was our traveling autonomous zone. And we did it all on our own. Now that was fame. Remember?

Peace,



Dear Punk Rock Activism,

We go back a long time. I don't exactly remember when we met. Maybe it was when a local band handed out animal rights fliers between songs at one of my first shows. Or maybe it was the day I opened a box of mail-ordered records, put one on, and a woman screamed out a question at me with more passion and hurt than I had never known. "Do you know what it's like to walk down the street at night? Do you know what it's like to feel the threat?" (Spitboy). No, I guess I don't.

I learned a lot from you. It was from poorly copied feminist fanzines, snatches of lyric sheets, and limited edition record sleeves that I received my politics. True, my parents' progressivism, their stories of '60s glory, played their part, but it was you who gave me a

politics of my own. You threw it all at me at once. "The flag is soaked in bullshit and lies, and the decrement of a million dead [Struggle]. When the system starts to crack, we've got to be ready to give it all back [Chumbawamba]. Somewhere along this line we were stripped of identity, creativity . . . trapped in the 9 to 5 . . . We're all in prison in these free countries of ours [Chokehold]." You taught me that it was all connected years before any college professor mentioned the words "interlocking systems of oppression." You were there, Punk Rock Activism, when my Bad Religion T-shirt got me kicked out of high school, and I sued. You were there when I snipped a picture of two boys kissing—probably the first I'd ever seen—from a queercore zine, and pasted it into the school newspaper next to an article I'd written denouncing homophobia at school. And I thank you for that.

But you put some confused notions in my head, too. Do you remember when I was eighteen, living in my first punk house, and that older kid from out-of-town changed my life through late-night political talks and the books and bands he introduced me to? "Where do you get all this stuff?" I asked him, while plying through his books about Kropotkin and newspapers explaining how to scam free food and bus tickets. "Oh, you know, from infoshops, or just people in the anarchist scene," he answered, disinterestedly. I must have seemed big-eyed and naïve when I asked him what these "scenes" were like. "It's a lot like the punk, actually," he told me. "People usually live in collective houses or squats. And they do events, but instead of putting on shows for bands, they have speakers or show movies and have discussions. Or they write zines, but they're about politics instead of music." I was totally fascinated and wanted to be part of what he was talking about. Thinking back now, I realize how this moment cemented a simple, problematic equation in my head: Punk=Anarchism=Activism.

That same year, in that same filthy, freezing house, I started my first activist organization. Big surprise: it was a Food Not Bombs chapter. We were earnest, but the group quickly shriveled and sedimented, like the vegan slop we never got around to cleaning out of the

pots after the "sharings." Our numbers shrunk because folks could quickly see it wasn't serving a purpose. We had launched the group because we sensed that it was what our kind of activists were supposed to do, rather than to meet local needs or challenge specific conditions.

After the Seattle WTO protests, it was amazing how much you seemed to change, Punk Rock Activism. Suddenly there was a flurry of mass mobilizations, black blocs were everywhere, and people were actually noticing. For about a year, it seemed like we were part of a new mass movement, not just an activist scene. But then the routine started to set back in, and we began discarding the tentative alliances with the unions, NGOs, and poor people's community groups. It was disheartening when summit mobilizations began to feel like simply one more modular, prefabricated activist effort, undertaken with little local connection or critical self-reflection, like so many chapters of Food Not Bombs, Anti-Racist Action, Critical Mass, and other punk "franchise activism" projects did throughout the '90s.

As much as I want to convey appreciation for how far you brought me, I can't help but express some disappointment, too. It's not just my own, but that of a lot of my friends as well. The problem, Punk Rock Activism, is that you're just not that effective at making lasting structural changes. No doubt, you've done a lot for us personally—given us a community, assured us we're not crazy for feeling out of place in our home towns. But some terrifying shit is going down these days and you can be—you *need* to be—more effective.

Recently I was reading an amazing book called *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism*, in which an older generation prison activist named Bonnie Kerness asks the author, "Have you seen white kids running about with punk hairdos and green hair and rings in their nose? I have had an opportunity to work with some of them, and they are not serious. Not in the least." Punk Rock Activism, she's talking about you! And she's talking about me—at least me at one point in my life. At first I was hurt and angered by her comments, and I reacted defensively. But at the same time, I knew she was at least partially

right. Kerness goes on to ask us some questions directly: "What is your goal? What is your strategy? Who are you changing?" She says, "They think that organizing is throwing an event, and it is not. Not even close. Running around and yelling 'smash the state' is not necessarily productive in terms of organizing a mass movement."

These are serious questions, and Bonnie Kerness is hardly the only one asking them. For the last five years, after every single summit or meeting we crash, other radicals have presented the same constructive criticism: direct action activists need to be organizing locally, working with communities most severely and directly affected by globalization, and connecting local issues to global ones. Otherwise, they argue, we won't be able to build the kind of mass movement required to win real changes, and the priorities and needs of the most oppressed won't be central to the struggle. If the movement isn't about self-empowerment and changing conditions of oppressed people, it's not radical, no matter how bold the slogans on the T-shirts or how daring the direct actions.

I get the sense that you don't understand or agree with these criticisms, so you dismiss them. I can hear you saying, "What do you mean, we don't organize locally? In between summits, we hold benefit shows, plant community gardens, create infoshops, screen political videos, hold anti-sexism discussion groups, and lots more. Anyone is welcome. Plus, many of us squat instead of paying rent, we're vegan, we don't drive cars—we connect everything we do in our daily lives to our politics."

This is where the conversation usually breaks down. The problem is, you and your critics are using a lot of the same words, but you mean different things by them. In my experience, there's a tendency for kids who get politically active through punk to conflate the concepts of "activism" and "organizing." But there's a distinction between the two. Basically, *activists* are individuals who dedicate their time and energy to various efforts they hope will contribute to social, political, or economic change. *Organizers* are activists who, in addition to their

own participation, work to move *other* people to take action and help them develop skills, political analysis, and confidence within the context of organizations. Organizing is a process—creating long-term campaigns that mobilize a certain constituency to press for specific demands from a particular target, using a defined strategy and escalating tactics.

Organizing people is different than organizing (coordinating) projects and events. It's not that these efforts lack merit, but rising out of our youth culture scenes, as they typically do, they are often invisible, off-putting, or irrelevant to other constituencies. We've been satisfied talking to ourselves, not organizing anyone, and not building bridges to other groups and organizations for far too long. Why are we seemingly unable to do these things? The reasons are complicated and multiple, but I want to propose one to you right now, Punk Rock Activism.

You've blurred the line for us between oppression and exploitation on the one hand, and alienation on the other. We both know that in the United States, punk is overwhelmingly a white and middle-class subculture. You channel and encourage the rage, anger, and disillusionment of largely privileged youth—and you are right to do so. But along the way, the racist police brutality, the poverty of minimum wage, the violence of rape and war that others feel becomes almost one and the same with the emptiness of consumer-culture, the stultifying pressure of middle-class expectations, and the boredom of cul-de-sac suburbia that we, much more immediately, feel in our lives. Oppression and alienation are connected, of course, but they certainly aren't interchangeable.

We equate our activism first of all with rejecting white middle-class culture and try to withdraw our participation from it. We work to solidify an identity in opposition to the mainstream, and have that identity validated by a like-minded community, hoping others will follow the cue. Our thrift store fashion, contempt for manners and hygiene norms, and our dumpster-diving, nomadic lives make sense in this context—they're efforts at creating a "culture of resistance." The

problem is that the Punk=Anarchism=Activism equation taught me and others that our personal choices constituted good activism, and that the world of social justice work—at least the worthwhile kind—was circumscribed by the scene.

But is being a radical about creating an alternate identity or is it about organizing masses of people? Is activism for you or for those most affected by systems of oppression? The easy answer to these questions, which you've provided us with, is "Both." The problem is that, in practice, these two directions often contradict one another. Effective organizing requires being rooted in a defined community, and (at least initially) minimizing differences between oneself and those one is trying to move to action.

While community might be the most natural of concepts for some folks, it's entirely troubling for us punks. What kind of communities do unions and other groups usually see as natural constituencies to organize? Workplaces, religious congregations, schools, neighborhoods, and ethnic or immigrant groups top the list. But punks, in serving their first goal of rejecting "the good life" on offer and expressing their contempt for mainstream values, work as little as possible and change jobs frequently, hate and mock religion, endlessly drop in and out of other people's communities, and are predominantly white and U.S.-born. As for organizing the white middle- or solidly working-class communities punks usually come from, we rarely live there or identify with them once we can get away. Our instinct is that those communities are the problem, not part of the solution.

Without doubt, seasoned radicals can't expect young folks to know how to organize instinctively. Developing winning strategies and negotiating class, race, and other divisions is incredibly difficult, and needs to be taught. The problem, it seems, is that for all you're worth, Punk Rock Activism, you don't know how to teach these skills, and we often don't know where else to look for them. So, while many organizers from other backgrounds and traditions have stepped up to the

challenge, our assumptions have, in large part, kept us disconnected and sometimes created obstacles for the broader movement.

✓ I know this is a lot to throw at you. I hope you can recognize that this criticism comes from a place of love. I also hope you'll realize that it's not an either/or I'm calling for—but rather an acknowledgment that activism and organizing, that overcoming alienation and fighting oppression, are always in tension, and that we need to be conscious of that tension when we engage in our work. You still have the power to politicize young people as you did for me and hundreds of others I know. You have the potential to *help* develop us—not just into activists, but also into organizers, changing rather than abandoning the places and people we come from, working in solidarity with people that are struggling daily to force the boot off their own necks, working for collective liberation.

Punk Rock Activism, you remember this one, right? "Boy/Girl Revolutionaries, that's what you told me. So show me!" (Huggy Bear).

So show me.

Towards victory,
Andy Cornell



My dear sistas, brothas n sista-brothas, my dear comrades and allies, my dear lovers n friends in the Movement,

I am young. I am passionate. I have energy. I am full of fury and rage. And I want to put my heart in this Movement but sometimes I feel like there is no room for it. I fight for freedom 'cause I got this feeling in my gut. Because when I close my eyes and sing "Freedom!" I can see a light.