Haymarket '86
Tactical Considerations Then & Now

In preparing to attend the Haymarket '86 Anarchist Gathering, I began thinking about the methods used by the Chicago anarchist community of a century ago to build toward the social revolution. Their overall strategic outlook, it began to appear, held a multitude of lessons for us, the inheritors of that struggle. The actual four-day centennial celebration was full of examples of the anarchist solidarity, mutual aid, self-discipline, and individual responsibility which are prerequisites to the establishment of an anarchist society.

In 1886, the anti-authoritarian left looked to the peasant revolts of the Middle Ages and to the Paris Commune of 1871 for its historical inspiration. The anarchists in Chicago sought not only the destruction of capitalism and the State, but the establishment of the "Commune of Chicago." They worked for no less than a total revolution in human relations. At the dawn of the era of industrial centralization and standardization, they sought to create an alternative society based on community, freedom, and equality instead of the domination and privilege of the established order. By the time of the Haymarket explosion, there had developed in Chicago a rich anti-authoritarian/cooperative counterculture deeply rooted in the working class and totally opposed to the values of the prevailing system. Neither the liberal/labor movement nor the authoritarian left wants to talk about the "American Commune" for which the Martyrs labored, nor the total social revolution which they had convinced themselves was at hand.

Though events did finally prove the Chicago anarchists to have been overly optimistic in their expectation of the imminent social revolution, these expectations were certainly supported by the presence of the cooperative counterculture in which they lived and operated. The development of the State's centralized control apparatus, immensely accelerated by the "Civil War" had, however, overtaken them. Since Haymarket, two World Wars and the Great Depression have further intensified the State's centralizing tendencies. We cannot, therefore, be quite so sanguine as could the Martyrs about the imminence of the social revolution. Not only are we far short of the anarchist community present a century ago in Chicago, but the mature and declining Industrial State in which we live owns engines of repression so sublime as to belong to the realm of fantasy.

Attempts at social revolution worldwide since the Paris Commune must give us a perspective on the difficulties involved which the Haymarket Martyrs could not have had. We overwhelmingly encounter silent disbelief when we try to talk to people about self-managed, cooperative ways of doing things. Most of the people we meet are truly convinced that the modern capitalist system gives them real political and economic freedom. "Modern Industrial Man" has lost the will even to take responsibility for his own actions, a situation extremely favorable to the further development of the hierarchical, centralized State. Far from grasping the concept that bosses are socially counterproductive and parasitical, he is likely to call for an ever more powerful State to "preserve order." The recent upsurge of fascist activity in this country can only be seen as the direct result of this overwhelming social consensus. The single and fundamental obstacle to the establishment of a society based on self discipline and individual responsibility lies in the fact that most people don't seriously question the wisdom of the hierarchical way of doing things.

The current U.S. anarchist movement sort of tested itself against the State in Chicago between the first and fourth of May. Approximately five hundred anarchists (on Fri. evening the local TV news said a thousand) proved at least that they could resolve serious disagreements without calling in authoritarian "minions of order." What our friend Mike Gunderloy termed "effective decentralized action" was in plentiful supply when needed to deal with crises. The Haymarket '86 Anarchist Gathering's success will ultimately be measured, though, by the amount of continuing anarchist activity on behalf of the social revolution which comes out of it. In our continuing struggles, action and issue-specific alliances with hierarchical but otherwise progressive groups are also sometimes called for. Working with all like-minded spirits, we must continue to oppose all intrinsically centralizing social forms while we build real-life examples of the cooperative society toward which we strive. This is the only way to show people that anarchism works and is worth fighting for. In the words of the bumper sticker, we need to "subvert the dominant paradigm."

In our efforts to change people's perceptions of social reality, the creative alteration of billboards and other such large-scale message delivery devices is often helpful. We also need to participate in and reinvigorate various local traditions of self reliance while we attack the constantly increasing centralization and social and environmental degradation brought on by industrial "civilization." For example, if while we are trying to develop alternative ways of defense, or producing and distributing food, we also participate in and support the local volunteer fire department, we'll find our ideas much more readily accepted than they would be were we to stand aloof (the same line of reasoning followed by the Chicago anarchists in deciding to support the eight-hour movement a hundred years ago.) Anarchist participation in extant institutions would obviously be critical in character. While excelling as volunteer firemen, we oppose hierarchy and domination wherever they appear, and support anti-authoritarianism and decentralization wherever we find <u>them</u>. To be accepted, our suggestions must be born of a marriage between anarchist principles and local traditions. Every community has some sort of a tradition of local self-reliance, and it's up to the anti-authoritarian left to find and reinvigorate them, thus empowering these communities to control their own affairs and decentralizing the overall decision-making process. Community land trusts for the ownership of