The British initiative Reclaim the Streets, from the outset wielded considerable influence within the radical wing of the anti-capitalist movement and was a cofounder of the PGA, based on its pioneering of direct action tactics (e.g. street parties, carnivals, mass cycle demos) plus its willingness to form alliances with third world forces and also sections of workers in struggle.

The main organiser of the events in the City of London on 18 June 1999, RTS itself originated from the activists of the British 'Earth First!?, which was founded in 1991. They took their inspiration from the organisation of the same name in the USA. Its original organisers were all 'green anarchists?.

Their earliest direct action tactics centred on attempts to '?protect the rainforest? by preventing shipments of tropical timber being unloaded at ports and to stop road building projects like Twyford Down. In 1992, several national days of action brought large numbers of protesters there to chain themselves to earth moving machinery, climb trees, dig and occupy underground tunnels.

Reclaim the Streets was, at its launch (1995) just a campaign of Earth First aimed at the urban environment. But, thanks to its very success, it soon outgrew its parent. Its symbolic trashing of cars, painting cycle lanes on London streets, ?subverting? car adverts and street parties, sounded a new note in British politics. In the latter, a street would be blocked off by demonstrators, a sound system set up and a lively party held. Sympathy by passers-by, especially youth, meant the police were often taken by surprise and made to look foolish, and resistible, which was the whole point. RTS played the major role in the campaign against the M11 Link Road. The M11 campaign increasingly emphasised social and political issues: the defence of existing urban communities and of the social, not just the 'natural?, environment.

Partly as a response to this direct action, anti-roads campaign, the Tories forced through the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act. It was also aimed at two other 'moral panics? got up by the right-wing tabloid press, ?raves? and New Age travellers.

Raves were ad hoc parties, organised by text messaging without the permission of local authorities or landowners, often in rural or suburban venues. They attracted huge numbers of young people, and often escaped police detection before it was too late, and thus annoyed the redneck Tories of the shires.

So, too, did the New Age travellers? attempts to celebrate the solstices at Stonehenge. The police beat them with unbridled savagery, wrecking their caravans and pursuing them for miles. Alongside squatting, these 'social problems? prompted the increasingly unpopular Tories to pass the draconian CJA which would virtually ban all assemblies which did not have police permission, including demonstrations.

The Anti-CJA campaign?s importance was that it generalised and brought together a whole series of disparate activists: anti-road protesters, squatters, rave organisers, hunt saboteurs as well as the left and the rank and file of the unions.

All of them saw their right to protest under attack and this provided a new mass basis for resistance and a new counterculture. They learned tactics from one another and there was a sort of hybridisation which directly prefigured the later anticapitalist movement. Street parties/carnivals combined mockery and exposure of the actions of corporations and the state, and gathered together a milieu in which pre-prepared (largely) non-violent direct actions could be organised.
It combined militant (indeed illegal/unlawful activities) and mass civil disobedience with what was, in effect, a festival of music and dance. In short, they were a lot of fun for rebellious youth, many of whom became much more politicised as a result.

The final years of the Tory regime (1996/97) also witnessed the Liverpool Dockers? strike/lockout, which lasted over one year. This section of organised workers certainly exerted an influence on RTS, as did their use of flying pickets, occupations and the new technology to spread their fight around the globe. Though this should not be regarded as simply spontaneous since it certainly involved left organisations and parties.

This phase of mobilisation culminated in a huge carnival-like demonstration shortly before the general election in May 1997, when public sector trades unionists and the ecological campaigners all came together. An RTS sound system took over Trafalgar Square and a street party was held till after sundown. Many people felt that this was the first sizeable radical event since the Poll Tax riots five years before.

RTS activists became involved in actions against Shell in solidarity with the Ogoni people of the Niger Delta at the time of the judicial murder of Ken Saro Wiwa. With the exception of Workers? Power and REVOLUTION and the supporters of Workers? Press, the British socialist far left largely ignored these developments, thus leaving the field open to anarchism.

RTS worked in support of the tube workers and Workers Power and REVOLUTION involved them in actions in solidarity with the Colombian oil workers? struggle against BP. RTS?s collaboration with the labour movement culminated in the second march for social justice in April 1997. At the same time, a struggle was taking place within RTS between different anarchist groups (the Anarchist Federation, Solidarity Federation and, to a lesser extent, Class War) over both tactics and orientation.

It was also during these years (1997-99) that the anticapitalist movement began to coalesce but, even as it grew, a differentiation was taking place and this led to the eruption into prominence of a militant direct action oriented wing (as opposed to the Jubilee 2000 NGO-style mobilisations with their silent vigils, cross-bearing marches and, human chains).

This wing?s social agenda, tactics and organisational methods were very strongly influenced by libertarian anarchism. It saw global capitalism and the big corporations as its main enemy. Its methods of struggle focused on mass mobilisations of young people, within which groups of activists utilised humour and spectacle, and above all the element of surprise to wrong foot the police. It drew inspiration for this, from the Parisian situationists of the 1960s (e.g. Guy Debord) or from the libertarianism of the Amsterdam ?panic? movement of the early 1970s, (e.g. Hakim Bey). This wing eventually came to be known as the ?pink and silver? block of the mobilisations of the new century.

Other anarchists were much more attracted to the tactics of ?trashing? symbols of corporate power, the consumer society and, of course, the state. These had more in common with the ?street fighting? approach of the US ?Black Block? or the German ?Autonoms?.

Hence the targeting of Mc-Donalds or the stock exchange, etc and open defence of ?violence against property?. Whilst the J18 ?carnival against capitalism? in the City of London made world headlines, for RTS it was a pyrrhic victory. It exacerbated to breaking point the tensions between the Panic elements and the Black Block elements.

A ferocious polemic between these approaches, often called ?fluffy? versus ?spikey? erupted, centring on the role of violence. This prefigured the divisions over tactics in Seattle, on the London May Day 2000 and in Prague (where the two wings formed separate sections or blocks of the march).

The entry of the SWP into the anti-capitalist movement after Seattle also prompted a reaction, giving the hard-line ?anti-authoritarian? and ?anti Marxist? elements the upper hand in RTS. Some of the movement?s founders decamped. Added to this, the arrest and heavy sentences imposed on many activists in the six months after J18 forced many of their core activists underground. Also, the anarcho-ecologists, who felt their environmentalist agenda had been hijacked by social activism, reasserted their influence, as against those who oriented to the labour movement.
This turn by the inner core RTS ?leadership? represented a fear of a democratic mass movement to which they might be accountable and a fear that ?Marxist? organisations, with their centralised organisation methods, might speedily outmanoeuvre them.

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