

# Critical Notes on Active Resistance 1996

Richard Taylor



## **Introduction**

Active Resistance, the Counter-Convention, was held in Chicago August 21st-31st, 1996. I was on hand from about the 12th or so, working with the facilities staff and other logistical support, security, and planning one of the workshop subgroups.

There were two aspects to AR. Demonstrations, street theater, and so forth made it partly a protest of the Democratic Convention held in Chicago (shades of 1968). Also, it was intended to be a new step in gatherings, with the purpose of having tangible results and accomplishing something other than just a big party. Because of that connotation, it seems, AR was not officially promoted as an “anarchist gathering”. Part of the programming was in the form of standalone workshops and events, part in the form of a five-day workshop series (the Core) with three tracks; Economics, Community Organizing, and Building Revolutionary Movements. The sum of these intentions is what made it a Counter-Convention, an effort at doing some collective thinking and planning in answer to the collective action of the opposition.

My general observations on Active Resistance are mostly applicable to other scene activities and ways of thinking. I started off as a planner for the Economics Core, but got sick of it within two days and left to take part in the Community Organizing Core. That struck me as a good-faith effort, maybe a little misguided. Also, I was continually involved with security throughout the conference, and I have enough work experience in that area for a more detailed critique.

For the most part, this is not a nice review. The positive things that happened at AR seem to have been covered elsewhere, and I tend to be forced into the critical role anyway because in five years I have but rarely observed the anarchist scene question or evaluate its own actions. If each piece of information had to be “balanced” we would need only one piece.

**Richard Taylor**

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## **General Observations**

I started out being sympathetic to the idea of timing AR with the Democratic Convention, but I eventually had second thoughts. Protest is by its nature reactive, and I think this confused the general attempt to be forward-looking. The convention format has merit, which would have been better explored in relative seclusion. The Spirit of '68 idea was more or less nostalgic. The state of

the world was different thirty years ago; there was a widely unpopular war raging, and there was an existing social movement, not a hypothetical one. People came to Chicago in 1968 because of a high current of political activity that configured their actions, which were not above criticism in any case. The Florida ABC speaker's open call for rioting at the Not on the Guest List march was a throwback to the worst aspect of gratuitous Yippieism.

The brochure and other literature does not make it easy to get a grip on AR. It's written in a buzzword vocabulary, a stylized institutional language (like Pentagonese) which no one speaks. Maybe it's because of spurious ideas about connections between language and thought, or language and institutions. In any case, the effect of this Radspeak is to establish a tighter "narrative" making discussion more ingrown and exclusive, the most obvious example being a somewhat obsessive and poorly argued focus on "collectives".

And there is something incongruous about a continent-wide gathering intent on building a movement of localist or decentralist power- bioregionalism has been a textbook example of this. If decentralism is the way forward, why are large gatherings made up of individuals instead of delegates from regions, localities, and organizations? Or, if movements have to start in a centralized form, is the "decentralist principle" really valuable? The cutting edge, or maybe fringe, of political science seems to be that nation-states eventually must relinquish power both to international and to local levels of organization, since that is where issues increasingly make themselves felt. The challenge is not to centralize or decentralize, but to match levels of organization with levels of issues. So what issues do we see, and where? What are the contours we should follow? Do we really need to discuss non-monogamy or puppet-making on a continental basis? My growing sense is that the big gatherings, as presently conceived and executed, are of little value. I think they serve about the same purpose as church revivals.

Finally, when it comes to produced goods and services, my experience is that anarchist scenesters do not understand the difference between "free" and "socialized". Roughly a quarter of people attending paid nothing in support of the event. The organizers' official position was that those needing "waivers" would be considered on an "as-available" basis. In practice they just left the gates open and sucked up the bills themselves. They were either unable, or more likely unwilling, to uphold their own stated policy. Organizationally, AR reproduced the classic anarchist-gathering mixture of heroism and parasitism, which seems to be more pronounced the larger the event. Clue: it is not the way to a classless society.

## Collectives, Cooperatives, and Alternative Economics Core

The Economics Core, as it was usually called, ran a five-day schedule with topical large-group presentations and sub-groups that further discussed the topics (housing, health care, land, worker co-operatives, community focal points). Michael Albert gave an opening talk on Community Economics.

I bailed after two days, so I cannot give a fully informed account of how it all went. But I will try to explain why I left.

Basically, my experience with it did not accord with the expectations I have of a social movement. The groundswell of interest in the sub-group I briefly attended went along the lines of forming “radical” rural collectives, and seemed to gravitate toward a how-to discussion. I did not see any real examination of how, or whether, projects like this advance either anarchism specifically or the social liberatory project in general. I did not find that it addressed a revolutionary need. To be perfectly crass, it seemed like a discussion of how to liberate small groups of anarchists.

This was hinted at in the program- the Economics Core was subtitled “How We Live.” Its announced goals were “Formation of Cooperatives” and “Formation of Worker Collectives.” Having said that, I do not think I can particularly fault the planning. It simply reflected the interests and concerns of the anarchist scene as I know it. As a matter of fact I was one of the planners for my section. In our preparations, we had made time for a discussion about the accountability of projects to a larger revolutionary politics. In practice, this did not draw the group’s interest. The groundswell, as I said, was toward project issues, and I saw no real opportunity to deflect it. In the topical presentation I gave on Community Supported Agriculture, I mentioned I had chosen my particular subject matter because it does not lend itself to isolationism. I think the group was not impressed.

I understand that AR was put together in part by people who wanted to see an anarchist gathering have some tangible results. I am sympathetic to this, but I think “results” could have been conceived more realistically. The idea that people should come possibly hundreds of miles to “form collectives and cooperatives” was impractical and impoverished. A much better result would have been to develop a greater sense of what is possible, what is necessary, and what is desirable, and return home better prepared to take initiative and seek opportunities.

The frustration I felt with the Economics Core has much more to do with my feelings toward the scene itself than with the actual planning of the Core. Still, I

## Disappointed.

I had hoped that an event which was “about outcomes” would do the followup and evaluation booklet that it intended. These notes you are reading were duly sent to the AZone for incorporation into that booklet, which never appeared. Nor were they published on the web with other AZone reports. My past experience with writing critical reviews is that they are invisible. Once, years ago, I managed to evoke a single frantic denial. The scene is non-cognizant of principled critique and prefers simple blow-by-blow tactical and logistical reviews, or fuzzy emotionalism. Outside of small meetings, it has never answered a basic movement-building question of how to handle dissent. In calling for pieces that were “an articulation of the unspoken consensus”, AR seemed explicitly to refuse that question.

Do you find it hard to see why I would trash AR? If that’s what’s on your mind then you miss the point.

These criticisms are basically the sharp end of an argument against anarchism being characteristically self-absorbed and parochial. Much of what I found wrong with AR reduces to this concern. The brochure states, “In every way possible, we maintain our distinction from the dominant culture.” Is this a political movement or some kind of paranoid ethnic group? I just have no loyalty to anarchism the alternative youth scene. Whether it can be rehabilitated is an open question.

Hypertext version at <http://www.spunk.org/texts/events/ar96/sp001842/ar.html>

rarity vigilance. No one should ever have to do Punk-Rock Daycare. The security arrangements at Rainbow Gatherings might be worth some study. It has been suggested that a limit be placed on the number of hours that a given security staffer may work, the idea being this will compel people to either get involved or go without.

Conversely, I think people should consider it a responsibility to be involved with security in some way even if they lack personal desire for it. If the security service is made up of only certain personality types that are attracted to it, the service as a whole develops that personality. I know. I have been in a volunteer army. When security becomes a subculture, we are asking for trouble. Military historians have noticed that the integration of women tends to diminish the military establishment's social status, which is a promising development, and which should be of interest to us in social control of our own forces. I appeal to people's sense that if there is a need for a security service of some kind, there is also a need to keep it accountable to the people that produce its mandate. Part of the solution is to have the service be as much a cross-section of those same people as possible.

Handling of security matters should be a big reality check. Some people are satisfied with merely critiquing or discrediting authority. But security is not just an overgrown game of cops and robbers or Keep-Away, it is a form of authority involving real questions of power and control of power. How we answer is an acid test.

have some ideas of what a radical social movement should be talking about when it meets to discuss economics.

### **Practical Matters**

There is a longstanding tradition on the left that we take as our starting point people's presently existing struggles against oppressive circumstances. Also, it is virtually definitive of the left that we make our struggle for the good of society and not just of various self-ghettoized fragments.

A conference dealing with issues of economic struggle should at least draw the contours of existing activism or organizing around the given topics- housing, healthcare, etc. In order to realistically strategize anarchists' role in these areas we need to be able to talk about the strengths and deficiencies of what is going on already. From this understanding, we could then determine how to apply ourselves.

### **Theoretical Matters**

Harry Cleaver states that we must learn to use economic knowledge to spy on the battle plans of the bourgeoisie. If we can see and plan further, we can do better organizing and project work.

Before anarchists can "get theoretical", the general level of economics education among us has to improve. Mostly we do not even know the bounds of our collective ignorance. I would suggest beginning with individual or small-group study and developing a broader network through mailing-list or journal media. I doubt continent-wide gatherings have real value for this. Maybe a true purpose for one would work itself out in network discussion.

We should develop familiarity with existing theories, critique them from various possible perspectives, and work toward statements about some modified economic theory compatible with anarchism, or at least with a generally liberatory politics. Talking about an "anarchist model" at the outset is the wrong answer.

## Community Organizing Core

This Core section ran five presentations with repeat schedulings of the first two, which allowed people to pick up in the middle. Activities included brainstorming the basics of anarchism (always an exercise in heterogeneity), outlining the basics of organizing, trying to impact organizing theory using these basics, and drafting model organizing proposals.

### Remarks drawn from my small group's evaluation.

- ❖ Several people felt that the activities of the small groups were not productive or well explained. They would like to have seen more structured or thematic small group topics, such as the project drafting on the last day.
- ❖ It was also felt that the speakers should have had both more time and more structure in their presentations. One of the presenters (Tom Knoche) mentioned that he was not sure what he was supposed to talk about.
- ❖ The exercises on “language-building,” which I apparently missed, were seen as helpful.
- ❖ People would have liked to have seen more concrete and less abstract themes presented, an example being tactics for politicizing a campaign or neighborhood.
- ❖ Also, people seem not to have understood what the “mainstream model” is.

### My own reflections.

I pretty much concur with the points on presentation raised by others in my small group.

Overall the Core had hoped to achieve a “dynamic tension” between anarchism and organizing, but I would have to say it did not.

The sessions seemed to pose anarchism as a theoretical protagonist which was somehow to inform community organizing. One of the small group exercises asked us to use a major element of anarchism to rewrite two pages of statements about community organizing. The second page came from an article by Tom Knoche. At first I thought both pages were his, and only later did I learn that the first page was from the Midwest Academy (a “mainstream” group). Except for its paragraph on internal organization, which is not a defining point, there was nothing in the Midwest Academy page that an anarchist should find deficient or

People doing shift work must know that there is a person, or chain of persons, responsible for keeping them informed and ensuring that they have what they need for their duties. This should be a designated person, not an at-large one. Part of an officer's job (that is what this amounts to) is to protect his or her unit's resources from extraneous demands.

Aside from organizational purposes, the effect of this on morale is invaluable. Trained people did not often sign up for shifts, and I think this can best be seen as a morale problem. Outsiders and insiders alike felt that security was run as an autocracy, with a few individuals that knew what they wanted to do and the rest being drones that did shift work.

A few simple measures would improve internal organization.

- ❖ Separate security heads for separate operations. The “chain of trust” has to work in reverse, too. There should have been one person whose duties did not extend outside AR security.
- ❖ Regular meetings or bulletins. There should be an opportunity for updates, questions, new problems, new procedures and so forth to be brought before the whole staff. The diversion of equipment would certainly have come up at such a time.
- ❖ Walk-through inspections of every shift. Inspections allow people to touch base and bring up problems or needs particular to that shift, and are especially important if there are problems with communications gear and no regular meetings.

### III. Structure and Social Control

A number of people at the conference expressed concern that in our search for ways of providing security we not revert to or reinvent a hierarchy, especially not a paranoid hierarchy. We know that the defense of the common good, “reasons of state”, and so on are often used as mere fig leaves. I do not know how to answer this concern decisively.

Think about what the security service is not. It is not and cannot be the “first line of defense” against antisocial conduct or external opponents, as police propaganda would have it. That's like saying the fire department is the first line of defense against fire. Organized force is one of the last lines of defense, the first line being individual awareness or conscience, the second being informal social control or peer coercion. We should look into lower levels of involvement, something along the lines of mass briefings on crime prevention or counter-terrorism, that will build individual awareness and watchfulness. Remember “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty”? We should build at least some tempo-

tion going around during a crisis, and nothing can really be done about that fact. But what we can do is designate the security staff as a preferred information source, ie Rumor Control. At the very least, they will be able to say that the facts are not yet in.

Once the first wave of the crisis had passed, all organizers and available security staff should have met to determine the status of facilities and people, sort out Rumor Control, and plan the next several hours if necessary. There was a lack of communication and organization which resulted in a group of several people being lost in the shuffle. A status meeting would have figured out what was wrong and what to do.

The relocation went smoothly, considering the lack of a contingency plan. Transportation and a new building were arranged on very short notice, late in the evening.

However. People wanted to party instead of keep their heads down. At the fallback location, alcohol mixed with a generally irresponsible attitude. Noise and flame displays(!) risked drawing attention. I became instantly disgusted but didn't know what to do. Nothing in my experience covers it. The only explanation I have is that these were psychologically fragile people who had collapsed into denial and infantilism. I almost walked out, but before I quite realized it I had signed up for a guard shift. At the time I referred to it as Punk-Rock Daycare and I will never do it again.

The next day, the security staff escorted people into the previous building to recover their possessions. Some wanted to go to an off-limits floor because they had hidden items there. When asked why, they replied it was necessary because people were stealing in the usual areas of the building.

Clearly, there is a security need which has gone unrecognized and unaddressed. We seem to have focussed exclusively on external opponents and neglected the reality of internal antisocial conduct, both of the predatory and self-destructive types. There is a strand of anarchism which simply says that without state power, people self-organize harmoniously. This is wishful thinking, characteristic of 19th-century naturalist philosophy, and, like certain other anarchist hand-me-downs, must be dispensed with.

## II. Internal

The role of the security heads was ambiguous. They seem to have considered themselves responsible for the Chicago area at large and did not have definite allegiances to one operation or another. This showed itself most clearly in a diversion of communications gear from AR security to clinic defense.

objectionable. I was truly at a loss to see the point of the exercise, and my small group, probably most small groups, wound up bogged down in almost etymological scrutiny. We couldn't figure out what the problem was supposed to be.

In fact, theoretical overlap between anarchism and community organizing is substantial already. The things people often find objectionable in community organizing are its opportunism, concessionism, and lack of success at transmuting its theoretical principles into reality. (Do anarchists have special insight into this? No.) Thus the Midwest Academy can say, "Empowerment is a process by which people learn the value of united action through real-life experience, and build the self-confidence of the individual", and at the same time promote an Alinskyist doctrine that the purpose of action is to "make officials do their jobs". This does not necessitate rehabilitating their definition of empowerment.

I am more or less satisfied with community organizing as a tactical form, as far as that goes, and I fail to see the need to "develop an anarchist model." On the contrary, it would be much more fruitful to use the immense practical experience of organizing to critique traditional anarchist blunders which I will not enumerate except to say that self-ghettoization and purism would probably top any list. One point raised during the sessions is that communities need not be geographically based. Although formally true, this line of thinking has the potential to lead straight back to the ghetto. Many people seemed to think of community organizing as something to do within the "anarchist community." It's a community, isn't it? We're organizing, aren't we?

This may result from not understanding the community organizing model. Its geographic component is a feature we should never discard, because one important basis for political power is control of the land itself. The geographic component will also force us to take questions of local political development, alliance, and strategy seriously.

Ultimately I think the relationship between anarchism and organizing is a relationship of strategy and means. We should use the means as a component of the strategy, not micromanage the strategy into the means. For reasons I have yet to learn, this ideological micromanagement has been a consistent feature of the anarchist grouping I have come to know.

## For Improvement

Overall, one very valuable improvement would be just to present the community organizing model more thoroughly.

❖ A history of the major trends in community organizing, with some commentary on the social conditions of their emergence, would be very useful. Parallel to this should be a history of anarchist attempts at organizing, however

slight they may have been.

- ❖ There should be discussion of concrete and tactical organizing issues, for example coping with the hazards of opportunism and purism.
- ❖ If we adopt the convention that development pertains to the aspirations of groups, we can talk about connections between organizing work and development work. This is an entry point to democratic planning of social decisions, as opposed to merely forcing or rejecting alternatives authored by elite power.
- ❖ A major problem with much “mainstream” organizing or activism is simply its refusal of politics and classic political concepts such as liberty. Instead of an “anarchist influence” let’s keep it simple and try to introduce the discourse to which anarchism owes its intellectual roots.

Whatever progress can be made on these questions will benefit not only us, but everyone who sees fit to try and organize. As anarchists, we will do ourselves more good by providing leadership on questions of general concern than by theoretical parochialism.

## Security

Although Active Resistance was my first experience working political event security, during four years in the military I did a variety of security-oriented tasks which I think prepare me to comment on what happened at AR.

Two easy areas to discuss are the relationship of the security effort to the event in general, and its internal conduct. There is a third area encompassing both which does not admit of simple conclusions.

### I. General

The overall performance and effectiveness of security was fair. It did what it set out to do, and responded to a situation (imminent police raid) that caught it by surprise. Organization and training were for the most part adequate, but could be improved.

### Capabilities

A security staff must provide certain services and have certain skills. The first aid training was a good start. Since much of our time was spent just answering questions, we should make it a point to study event programming and local geography. We also need a CopWatch-type knowledge of such things as search warrants, lawful stops, legal observer activity and so forth. Also we should know what counts as a “bona fide” security contractor, what our legal boundaries may be, etc. It has been suggested that the security staff have dedicated cars and bicycles, as well as communications gear.

### the Raid

This was an incident of several police committing an assault/battery and improper entry and search at a facility known as the Ballroom. Together with the disposition of other police forces, the raid prompted the AR staff to vacate a sleeping facility and move about sixty occupants to another location.

The raid itself was facilitated by a most classic security gaffe- failure to maintain a perimeter. Cooking and partying going on at the back approach to the building made that area seem safe when in fact it was not. As much as anyone else, I was complacent about it. In the future we should be more conscientious and consider the realities of having people outside a boundary that may have to be sealed suddenly.

Early on, there were all sorts of false stories to the cumulative effect that every facet of AR had been neutralized. There are always rumors and bogus informa-