

Something Did Start in Quebec City

North America's Revolutionary Anti-Capitalist Movement

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When thirty-four heads of state gathered behind a chain-link barrier in Quebec City this past April to smile for the television cameras during the Summit of the Americas, it was the tear-gassing outside that garnered all the media attention. Those on both sides of the fence jockeyed to put a spin on the meaning of the massive chemical haze that choked the old city for over two days. The “insiders” claimed that as duly elected leaders of so-called free countries, they were attempting to democratically bring “freedom through free trade,” and as such, those on the streets were merely troublemakers without a cause or constituency that needed to be dealt with accordingly. The “outsiders” asserted that those hiding behind the fence were the real source of violence — the tear gas exemplifying what nation-states are willing to do to protect capitalism and the dominant elites — and thus, a certain level of militancy was necessary to tear down the “wall of shame” that many saw as separating the powerful from the powerless.

What got lost in the smoke, however, was the substantive transformation that this particular direct action represented. For Quebec City's convergence, more than anything else, ushered in an explicitly anti-capitalist movement in North America — one spearheaded by anti-authoritarians (by and large, anarchists). That was our real victory in Quebec. But what caused this sudden sea change?

Serendipitously, one fence; self-consciously, two groups.

It was this movement's collective “good luck” that law enforcement officials and politicians determined on a fence as the heart of their strategy to counter the protests. “It didn't start in Quebec,” one could say; last June, in Windsor, Ontario, similar trade discussions went off without a hitch behind chain-link, and barbed wire served nicely to make Davos, Switzerland, an impenetrable fortress this past winter for the World Economic Forum. The state-sponsored prophylactic in Quebec City did in fact ward off unwanted intruders: the summit meetings went on, generally unimpeded. Thus, if the fence had remained merely a physical barricade, it could have been counted as a security success.

Unfortunately for Jean Chrétien, George W., and their cohorts, the ten-foot fence became a larger-than-life symbolic divide, in essence demanding, “Which side are you on?”

The contrasts could not have been sharper. Closed meetings and secret documents inside; open teach-ins and publicly distributed literature outside. The cynical co-optation of “democracy” via a gratuitous “clause” as a cover for free-floating economic exploitation versus genuine demands

for popular control and mutual aid in matters such as economics, ecology, politics, and culture. The raising of glasses for champagne toasts versus the rinsing of eyes from chemical burns.

All of the recent direct actions have, of course, also focused on targets that were figurative to a certain extent. Indeed, the symbolic value of these spectacular showdowns is an essential ingredient in the fight to win the majority of minds over to one perspective or another. But previous focal points, such as the World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund, have shown themselves to impart somewhat ambiguous messages. The debate stirred up has often centered on how these institutions can potentially be reformed, how the social “good” they do can be salvaged from all the harm they inflict. Besides, some contend, what would replace them? It’s proved difficult to move beyond questions regarding the single institution being protested other than to fall back on the buzzword “globalization.” And “globalization,” while suggesting a wider critique, is just as ambiguous — in no way necessarily underscoring systemic forms of domination that cannot be reformed.

Things were very different in Quebec City. From the vantage point of those on the outside, the fence served no purpose. It not only exemplified a lack of commitment to free expression on the part of the nation-states represented inside but also a further circumscribing of the possibility of freedom itself, and those political leaders trying to allege otherwise were merely revealing their hypocrisy. Hence the heightened level of militancy, illustrative of a movement increasingly intent on fundamental social transformation, directed at tearing the fence down. Yet the fence was crucial for those gathering behind it, too. Beyond providing a literal sense of security, it functioned as a stand-in for the attempt to control the debate around the Summit — as well as protect the implementation of — the neoliberal agenda across the Americas. Hence the fiercely fought battle on the part of the police and military in Quebec City to hold the line.

The widespread hatred of the wall and all it embodied meant that those who took a leadership role to bring it down — the libertarian anti-capitalists — stepped not only into the limelight but gained the respect and admiration of other demonstrators, much of the local populace, and a healthy cross section of the broader Canadian public. Sympathy — for the first time in this North American branch of the new global movement — was largely on the side of those seeking revolution. No longer the pariah or the parvenu at this direct action, the anti-authoritarian contingent was able to come into its own as a strong and visible force, rather than a marginal, marginalized, or even feared element.

To a great extent, credit must be given to two key organizations: la Convergence des luttes Anti-Capitalistes (the Montreal-based Anti-Capitalist Convergence, or CLAC) and le Comité d’Accueil du Sommet des Amériques (the Quebec City-based Summit of the Americas Welcoming Committee, or CASA). For starters, it was a brilliant stroke to stake out a nonreformist posture not only in CLAC’s name but in the very theme for the summit weekend as well: the Carnival against Capitalism. An opposition to capitalism was openly front and center, both during the many months of organizing leading up to April and at the convergence itself. It was, moreover, an anarchist-influenced version of anti-capitalism. As nuanced by CLAC/CASA’s short lists of organizational principles, a rejection of capitalism included a refusal of hierarchy, authoritarianism, and patriarchy, along with the proactive assertion of such values as decentralization and direct democracy. There was no mistaking the message at this direct action.

This brand of anti-capitalism, in turn, served as the substantive and radical tie that bound Quebec City’s many direct action participants together. Those people organizing toward and/or coming to the direct action events could bring along their varied concerns and identities, but they

were clearly doing so under the rubric of anti-capitalism. A sense of unity was achieved — not through a shapeless tag such as “mobilization,” nor by watering down demands until they lose their rebellious edge, nor by ignoring particularity itself. As articulated by CLAC/CASA’s “Basis of Unity,” “anti-capitalism” created a defined and uncompromising space for the multiplicity of individuals who see themselves as part of a revolutionary project.

Crucial in this necessary yet delicate balancing act between a striving for unification and individuation was the strategically smart phrase “diversity of tactics” in CLAC/CASA’s statements of principles. Many have written elsewhere that this principle allowed for heightened militancy in Quebec City, or that it diffused the often poorly formulated and argued “violent” versus “non-violent” debates that seem to fracture this movement internally. Each claim rings partially true, yet both miss the forest for the trees. The diversity of tactics notion helped to unmask the anti-capitalism element, and in showing its full face, revealed how influential (and even appealing) it is as a force in this new global movement.

In the recent past, there have been thousands of libertarian anti-capitalists at North American direct actions, but they remained separated — and thus largely hidden — by dress, role (such as medic, media, or communications), age, ideological tendency, strategic notions, and so on. Anti-authoritarians “converged” together at mass direct actions, but sadly, the “Revolutionary Anti-Capitalist Bloc” was generally seen as synonymous with the black bloc — meaning that a radical political outlook appeared to have minimal support. The blame lies not with the black bloc or the fact that many anarchists choose to wear other colors. Instead, the problem has been the inability to combine this spectrum of anti-authoritarian styles under a transparently radical canopy.

The full line in CLAC/CASA’s “Basis of Unity” statement on a diversity of tactics altered that equation. It reads: “Respecting a diversity of tactics, the CLAC [or CASA, respectively] supports the use of a variety of creative initiatives, ranging from popular education to direct action.” By embracing on an equal footing “education” and “action,” thereby also breaking down the supposed theory versus practice divide, the conflation of “militancy” with “radicalism” was shattered. One wasn’t a revolutionary because one was a priori a militant; and this indirectly affirmed that not all revolutionaries can afford to take the same risks — just compare a healthy eighteen year old to wheelchair-bound octogenarian. (As a corollary, it showed that being militant doesn’t necessarily make one a revolutionary, either. There were plenty of disgruntled Quebecois youth on the streets each night during the convergence intent on mischief and it’s highly doubtful that they shared CLAC/CASA’s principles.)

The diversity clause, in essence, acknowledged that an opposition to systemic domination such as capitalism and nation-states could and should take many forms if a majoritarian movement is to be built. The principle did not make room under the anti-capitalist banner for militants; they were there already. What the diversity of tactics stance did do was create a welcoming space for those many more anti-authoritarians who perceive themselves as less militant. It widened the margins not of militancy, in other words, but of what it means to reject capitalism as an anti-authoritarian.

Thus, Quebec’s anti-capitalist bloc was not one little contingent among many. It was the direct action bloc itself — precisely because it allowed anyone who subscribed to CLAC/CASA’s nonreformist stance to march together regardless of how they dressed (or didn’t), whether they carried a black flag or a puppet, or whether they wished to avoid arrest or tear down the fence. This was tangibly facilitated, to cite just one example, by the three-tiered color coding of events

to indicate varying possibilities of arrest risk and militancy. As the “Crimethinc. Eyewitness Analysis” observes, this “served the purpose ahead of time of making everyone comfortable [by] setting their own level of involvement and risk.” Instead of 500 or 1,000 people as at past direct actions, then, the ranks of the two anti-capitalist bloc marches during the convergence swelled to 5,000 or more — perhaps the largest in North America in recent memory.

What the diversity of tactics principle translated into was a diversity of people. But this commitment to inclusiveness was only one of the ethical parameters spelled out in the rest of CLAC/CASA’s “Basis of Unity.” As such, rather than an assertion of difference for difference’s sake — potentially implying a diverse movement emptied of content — what emerged in practice was an explicitly radical movement that was diverse. One could argue that the convergence of anti-capitalists in Quebec City wasn’t diverse enough, of course. Yet it provided the first real guide of how to go about nurturing inclusiveness and unity in a way that is at once qualitative and sincere, and moreover, that allows the particular and universal to complement rather than crush each other as part of a social movement.

To return for a moment to the heightened level of militancy in Quebec City, perhaps the diversity of tactics phrase encouraged a somewhat more confrontational stance. But that pales in comparison to the catalyst exerted by the fence and police tactics as reasons why many people choose to go one step further than they ever thought they would during the direct action. Suggestive of this is a photo that appeared in the 22 April 2001 issue of *Le Journal de Québec*: sporting a Ralph Nader for President T-shirt, a young man lobs a tear-gas cannister back at the police line that just shot it indiscriminately into the crowd.

Care must nevertheless be taken not to let the diversity of tactics principle morph into a code for “anything goes.” As noted by L. A. Kauffman in her recent essay, “Turning Point,” already “in certain radical circles ... the militant acts at the front lines are being seen — and celebrated — in isolation, as part of a growing mystique of insurrection.” These direct actions are not yet, and perhaps will never become, insurrections. Viewing them as such could lead to the use of tactics that would be potentially suicidal for this still-fledgling movement — as the historical examples of the Weather Underground and Red Army Faction show. Without a bit more definition to the diversity principle, and a way to make people accountable to any parameters decided on, the anti-capitalist movement is wide open to stupidity or sabotage — or at least more than it needs to be.

At the same time, it is a positive sign that the diversity of tactics phrase has worked its way into the call for an anti-capitalist bloc in D.C. at the World Bank/International Monetary Funds meetings well in advance of the actual protests this October. For where the tangible commitment to diversity of tactics really shown was in the months of organizational and educational work prior to Quebec City’s convergence. Here, the tired bumpersticker phrase, “Think Globally, Act Locally,” took on renewed meaning in CLAC/CASA’s efforts. While they brought teach-ins to numerous cities across Canada and the United States, and put out their politics on the World Wide Web, the real key to their strategy was the attempt to win over the summit “host” city itself (where many CASA members live and work). Rather than merely organizing a weekend-long direct action, CLAC/CASA used the global and continental issues raised by the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas as a wedge into their own communities, as a way to develop radical resistance for ongoing struggles long after the tear gas clears. These Canadian-based organizers, in short, never lost sight of the need to link the global to the local, and to do such community

work openly as radicals. They thereby succeeded in one of the more difficult tasks: bringing anti-capitalism home.

A few examples suffice to illustrate the scope of their community activism. For instance, they asked Quebec City inhabitants to “adopt a protester,” which meant agreeing to house and hence have relatively intimate contact with an anti-capitalist out-of-towner during the convergence. CLAC/CASA’s massive leafletting effort in Quebec City, on the streets and door to door, included handing out thousands of copies of a four-page bilingual tabloid that tried to debunk fear-provoking stereotypes and urged townfolks to “unite in one big anarchist contingent on A21.” The anti-capitalist organizers worked in and with grassroots neighborhood associations, and helped ensure that a no-arrest zone was strategically placed in the residential neighborhood abutting the fenced-in summit meetings to create a sense of security for the locals as well as nonlocals. After the convergence, members of CASA pitched in to help other city residents decontaminate the urban parks affected by tear gas.

This community organizing campaign — slipping into public relations at times — put a positive human face to the negative media (and state/police) portrait of anarchists and gave locals some of the knowledge they needed to begin to judge (and hopefully reject) capitalism for themselves. It probably convinced numerous Quebecois to participate in the days of resistance (or at least provide water and bathrooms, as many did), and much more than that, built a solid foundation of support, sympathy, and trust in the community for longer-term projects. The fact that Laval University gave several of its comparatively luxurious buildings in Quebec City over to CLAC/CASA for such things as a convergence center, sleeping facilities (housing over 2,500 people), and rallying point for the two anti-capitalist marches is testimony to these two groups’ grassroots efforts. As were the signs in local shopkeepers’ windows: “We support you.”

CLAC/CASA have proved that it is possible not just to bring thousands into your city but to also work closely with the thousands already there to radicalize and mobilize them for the convergence and beyond. Given that the cities where summits and ministers meet constantly rotate — from Seattle, Washington, D.C., and Ottawa, to Prague, Genoa, and even Qatar — many anti-capitalists will probably get their chance at “hosting” a convergence and could therefore view it as an opportunity to link global concerns to on-the-ground local struggles. Left in the wake of summits and direct actions could be not a small, weary group of anarchist organizers but a large, invigorated radical milieu along with the foundations for resistance attempts in numerous cities across the global.

For it is not a matter of community organizing versus splashy direct actions but how to balance the two so they reinforce, complement, and build on each other in a way that escalates a revolutionary movement globally — as the efforts of CLAC/CASA has shown. While journalist Naomi Klein has been an insightful commentator on this movement, she is wrong in dubbing direct actions as “McProtests.” Putting aside the fact that each direct action is not alike but borrows from, rejects, and/or transforms elements of previous actions — that is, there is often a generative, creative process at work — as Quebec City exemplified, mass actions also afford moments of real gain that would otherwise not be possible if resistance and reconstruction were merely parochial affairs. And they give people hope.

The real task of social transformation has only just been glimpsed, of course. Quebec City’s convergence felt revolutionary, yet it was by no means a revolution. CLAC/CASA members, like other libertarian anti-capitalists globally, are a long way from helping to turn the places they live into free cities in a free society. At least to date, it also appears that they have done little work,

much less published thinking, on what a reconstructive vision might look like, as well as how to move toward it in their communities and this movement. Rather than just a Carnival against Capitalism, a carnival for something might have better provided the utopian thrust necessary to sustain and give direction to the difficult struggle ahead.

Nonetheless, by working locally and globally, by nurturing diversity in the arms of an explicitly anti-authoritarian politics, CLAC/CASA, with the help of a flimsy fence that became a mighty symbol, motivated thousands who came to and live in Quebec City to hoist the anti-capitalist banner onto center stage. Something did start in Quebec — a distinctly radical movement in North America. Now the hard work of self-consciously shaping and building that movement must begin.

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