

Now What?

L.A. Kauffman

December 2000

Throughout the interminable U.S. election mess, the various radical listserves I follow were pointedly quiet about the whole affair. But even without much discussion about the tussles within America's ruling class, there's been a sense in which we outside-the-system types have been on hold, waiting to see which of the two evils would prevail.

Now finally we can move on to pressing matters, like the tantalizing inauguration protests already being planned for January 20 in Washington, D.C. There's never been such a legitimization crisis in our lifetimes. Or such a sterling opportunity to show our disaffection with the many faces of plutocratic rule: the disenfranchisement of African-American voters in Florida; the role of big money in elections; the corporate domination of our political system; and the insult of having an idiotic twerp and serial executioner installed as president.

Meanwhile, activist preparations are well underway for "the next big thing," the Summit of the Americas meeting next April in Quebec City, where the heads of every state from Canada to Argentina (minus Cuba, of course) will gather to negotiate a free-trade agreement aptly called "NAFTA on steroids."

Yes, everybody agrees that we shouldn't just engage in protest tourism, jumping from big action to big action. But, based on how much buzz I'm already hearing about Quebec, I suspect that won't stop many American activists from showing up for the next Carnival Against Capitalism.

The border police, on the other hand, are likely to stop all the Yanks they can. We learned during the September 26, 2000 actions in Prague that the FBI had almost certainly turned over a list to Czech authorities containing the names of every person arrested at the WTO protests in Seattle, the A16 IMF/World Bank actions in D.C., and the protests outside the Republican and Democratic Party Conventions. Any of these folks who tried to go to Prague were turned away at the Czech border.

On the subject of police repression, the preponderance of charges against the arrestees at the Republican Convention in Philadelphia have now been dropped. You'll recall that people were charged with all kinds of crazy things, like "possession of an instrument of crime" for using a cell phone, and were held on bails as high as \$1 million. This clampdown was clearly intended to have a chilling effect on activism – particularly on the very dangerous-to-the-authorities alliance in Philly between movements of color working on criminal injustice issues and the predominantly white movement against corporate globalization.

The prosecutors have been able to make very few of the R2K charges stick, and the City of Philadelphia should be facing lawsuits up the wazoo for its over-the-top civil rights violations. That said, several felony cases are still pending, including that of ACT UP/Philadelphia's Kate Sorenson, and the activists' legal defense effort still needs financial and other support. (Links to R2K Legal and much more at the end of this message.)

Meanwhile, with the loathsome George W. Bush on the way to the White House, New York City activists are losing sleep over a nightmare (though not too likely) scenario: Rudy Giuliani for Attorney General. Brrrr.

New York City's Direct Action Network celebrated the anniversary of the Seattle World Trade Organization protests with a packed-to-the-rafters evening of events at CHARAS/El Bohio Community Center in the Lower East Side.

The main subject of discussion there – and in many movement circles these days – was race, particularly the tendency of white activists to view our movements as THE movement. People were asking: Who sets the radical agenda, and who defines radicalism? Why is DAN so white, and what should be done about it?

Some people suggested that DAN needed to diversify its membership if it were to be an effective radical movement. Others, myself included, disagreed, questioning whether the recruitment model is the best way to tackle racial disparities in the movement.

Attempting to recruit people of color into a pre-existing white organization, after all, means inviting folks in AFTER the group's character, culture, and mission are largely set. Not surprisingly, activists of color tend to opt instead for developing their own organizations and leadership.

It seems to me that white activists in groups like DAN, instead of defensively castigating ourselves for the whiteness of our organizations, should be interrogating what that whiteness means: how it shapes our political visions; what sense of entitlement it gives us, and how that affects our actions and our relationships with others.

That means acknowledging whiteness as a key component of who we are, rather than obliviously viewing racial identity as something that only people of color have. It also shifts the emphasis of whites' anti-racist work away from recruitment to learning how to build productive alliances with movements of color, alliances that respect their autonomy and leadership.

On a more whimsical note, the day after the "DANNiversary," there was a festive anti-corporate parade through the East Village led by Reverend Billy, the New York performance artist and activist who has created the pranksterish "Church of Stop Shopping."

These days, there is no shortage of corporate chain stores to visit in New York's erstwhile bohemia. We stopped at either three or four Starbucks – I lost track – plus two Gaps, a McDonald's, and a Barnes & Noble.

"Today we're pretending," explained a Reclaim the Streets flier, "that these mega-corporations are giving up and leaving the neighborhood voluntarily." The leaflet included critiques of each chain: Starbucks, for instance, buys its coffee from countries where human rights and environmental laws are routinely flouted. Moreover, it continued, "In the U.S., Starbucks chokes off locally owned competitors by oversaturating neighborhoods with stores. They also removed the nipples from their Mermaid."

There was no strategic objective to the event. In classic RTS style, it was expressive and disruptive instead. On occasion, that character annoys me, when it seems that RTS is merely agitating for the right of downwardly mobile white kids to party in the street at will. But this time, I thought it was great.

After we freaked out two Starbucks in succession – the manager of the first one locked the door to keep us out, but a big crowd made it into the second one – the Reverend Billy parade triggered something wonderful to behold. The police felt obliged to send reinforcements ahead of us, to guard the next chain stores we would meet. Soon cops were flanking the entrances to Starbucks number three, and then Barnes & Noble, on one of the biggest shopping days of the year. Said my friend Eileen, “Well, that certainly clarifies the relationship between the chain stores and the neighborhood.”

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Issue #13 of Free Radical

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