

## Quebec City: Beyond Violence and Nonviolence

I had a hard time coming back from Quebec City. I know because, almost two months later, I still have the map in my backpack. In part it was exhaustion, tear gas residue, and the sense of having been through a battle in a war most of my neighbors are totally unaware of. But deeper than that is my sense that something was unleashed in that battle that can't be put back, that underlying the chaos, the confusion, the real differences among us and the danger we were in, was something so tender, exuberant and wild that I don't want to let it go, something that smells and tastes and feels like the world I'm fighting for.

How we achieved this sense of sweet unity on the street is a mystery to me. In the lead-up to the action it often seemed that every single group involved was either actively disagreeing with some other group or ignoring their existence. The conflicts were mostly around issues of tactics, in particular the question of nonviolence. Quebec City was the first time since Seattle that a major antiglobalization direct action in North America was organized by groups that were committed to a "diversity of tactics" rather than to an explicit set of nonviolence guidelines.

I admit that I came into the preparations for the action uneasy about the concept of 'diversity of tactics.' I'm fifty years old: I've been an anarchist and an activist since I was in high school back in the streetfighting days of the sixties. I've also been an advocate for nonviolence for many, many years, in part because of what I experienced in the sixties and seventies, when mostly male dominated militant groups moved to clandestine actions, sectarianism and armed struggle that left their base of support far behind. I experienced the nonviolent direct action groups of the eighties, with their commitment to feminist process and nonhierarchical structure, as far more empowering, effective, and liberating. My fear about 'diversity of tactics' was that it would open a space for people to do things that I thought were stupid and wrong. That, in fact, proved to be partly true--at least, people did do things I would never have agreed to. But what surprised me is that it didn't seem to matter in the way I thought it would.

I thought people would only come to a mass action if it had clear nonviolence guidelines, but people came to Quebec City anyway. I thought high levels of confrontation would lose us popular support, but we had the strongest support ever from the local people, many of whom joined us or opened their homes to give us water, food, and access to toilets. I thought people new to direct action would be terrified by the level of conflict we

experienced. But our cluster included many people who had never been to an action before. The first day, yes, some were terrified. By the second day, more were ready to go to the wall. By the third day, they were demanding better gas masks for the next one.

There's an ethic and a strategy about nonviolence that's clear and easy to understand: that violence begets violence, that if we resort to violence we become what we're fighting against, that a nonviolent movement will win us more popular support, gain us legitimacy, heighten the contrasts between our movement and what we oppose, and perhaps even win over our opponents. That's a powerful and persuasive set of values, that I've held to for many years. But they're not the only values I sympathize with. Some advocates of nonviolence assume the high moral ground in any argument, and to see those who disagree with them as unethical. In Quebec City, 'diversity of tactics' meant respecting that those who employ other tactics do so not out of a lack of principles, but out of their own politics and values.

High-confrontational struggle has its own principles: that a high level of confrontation is appropriate in the situations we now face, that people have the right and responsibility to defend themselves against police violence, that many people are already angry and mostly not saintly and a political movement needs room to express that rage, that active self-defense can be empowering and may also win people to our cause, that to bring down an economic and political system that worships property, property must be attacked.

And there is also an ethic behind 'diversity of tactics' that the phrase itself does not convey--that people should be free to make their own choices, that a nonauthoritarian movement doesn't tell people what to do, and that we should stand in solidarity even with people whose choices we disagree with.

I can't do justice to any of the positions in a few sentences, and they by no means represent all of the debates in the movement, especially when it moves beyond North America with our particular political cultures and histories. But I think it's worth the trouble to try and articulate what they are. The debates have continued since Quebec. Some people are now hailing 'diversity of tactics' as the new watchword and while others call us to get back to Gandhian nonviolence.

My sense is that many people coming to Quebec wanted something that was not fully described either by 'nonviolence' as it has come to be practiced, nor by 'diversity of tactics'. I'm talking about people who know there is no set-in-stone definition of what constitutes violence, or right and wrong. Who want an action that's real, not just symbolic, but don't equate that with

throwing rocks at fully armed riot cops. Who understand that an effective action means we're going to face a higher level of confrontation and repression, but who would rather deescalate police violence than heighten it, given a choice. Who wanted to see the fence go down and cheered when tear gas canisters were thrown back toward the police lines, but who also know that we're in danger whenever we dehumanize another group of people, even cops. Who don't necessarily want to sing "We are a gentle angry people" and hand out flowers to the dear policemen, but who do want to remember that under the Darth Vader outfits the cops are human beings who are capable of changing and whose class interests are actually with us rather than with our opposition. And who believe that however the cops might be behaving in the moment, setting them or any human being on fire is wrong. People who are willing to risk arrest or injury when necessary, but who would rather succeed in an action and get away with it than go to jail or be martyred. Who don't see suffering as transformative, but are willing to suffer if that's what it takes to change this system. Who will act in solidarity with others they may not agree with rather than leave them to suffer alone. Who want to take actions that are powerful, visionary, creative, and empowering. And there were many moments, interludes, clusters of such actions in Quebec City, from the breaching of the wall to our River Cluster spiral dancing in the midst of the tear gas.

I'm not suggesting some middle ground between the Gandhians and the Black Bloc. I'm saying that we're moving onto unmapped territory, creating a politics that has not yet been defined. And to do so, it might be time to leave Martin and Malcolm arguing around the dinner table with each other and Emma, Karl, Leon and all the rest, and step out into the clean night air. The debate around 'violence' and 'nonviolence' may itself be constricting our thinking. The term 'nonviolence' itself doesn't work well from a magical point of view. Every beginning Witch learns that you can't cast a spell for what you don't want--that the deep aspects of our minds are unclear on the concept of 'no.' If you tell your dog, "Rover, I can't take you for a walk," Rover hears "Walk!" and runs for the door. If we say 'nonviolence' we are still thinking in terms of violence.

I'm old enough to have seen a lot of revolutions fail or go wrong. In fact, for someone of my generation to even dare the word 'revolution' is like someone who has been really badly hurt in an affair daring to risk love again. I'm willing to take that risk--the risks of being let down, disillusioned, betrayed, and maligned as well as the ongoing risks of being jailed, gassed, beaten, thrown around and generally stomped on the street--but not merely to change who holds power in this system. I want a revolution that changes the very nature of how power is structured and perceived, that challenges all systems of domination and control, that nurtures the empowerment of

individuals and the collective power we can wield when we act together in solidarity. As an anonymous writer on the Crimethink website put it, "The revolution isn't some far-off single moment...it's a process going on all the time, everywhere, wherever there is a struggle between hierarchical power and human freedom."

I don't yet have a catchy name for this approach to political struggle. For lack of anything better, I've been calling it 'empowered direct action.' And it's already evolving in our movement.

The goal of an empowered direct action is to make people believe that a better world is possible, that they can do something to bring it about, and that we are worthy companions in that struggle. And then to bring to life that world in the struggle itself, to be the revolution, to embody and prefigure what we want to create. Empowered direct action doesn't simply reject or restrict certain tactics: it actively and creatively searches for actions that prefigure and embody the world we want to create. It uses symbols skillfully but is more than symbolic: it gets in the way of the operations of oppression and poses confrontational alternatives. Empowered direct action means embracing our radical imagination and claiming the space we need to enact our visions: it's magic defined as 'the art of changing consciousness at will.' It challenges the structure of power itself and resists all forms of domination and all systems of control. It undermines the legitimacy of the institutions of control by embodying freedom, direct democracy, solidarity, and respect for diversity in our organizations and our actions. And it starts with clarity of intention before we get around to diversity of tactics. That is, before we decide what tactics to adopt we need to know what we're trying to do.

## **What we're trying to do:**

- Make people believe that a better world is possible, that they can do something to bring it about, and that we're the fun sort of folks they want to do it with. Build the movement.
- Undermine the legitimacy of the institutions of global corporate capitalism. Expose their hypocrisies and lies. Make visible the violence inherent in their structures and policies. Interfere with their ability to function. Link the global issues to local issues and strengthen and support local organizing. .Pose alternatives that are creative, attractive and sane. Heighten the contrast between our vision and theirs.

- Claim space outside the logo-ized, corporatized, media-colonized realm--whether that's Reclaim the Streets taking back public space, Witches creating ritual space in the midst of a battle, the Zapatistas establishing enclaves in Chiapas, forest defenders staking a claim to an old growth forest, Ya Basta! pushing through police lines without attacking, the MST in Brazil resettling families on unused land, protestors pushing down the wall in Quebec City, adbusters, billboard alterations, banner drops, or the thousands of other creative ways we find to do it.
- Encourage defections from the ranks, both from within the corporate institutions and the ranks of those who are drafted to do their dirty work, like the police and the military who are acting against their own class interests when they repress us.
- Create the alternative society. Live the revolution. Build the support networks we need as a movement, and in local communities, both to wage this struggle and to begin exploring just and sustainable ways to feed, house, cloth, shelter, care for and employ ourselves.

## **What empowered direct action might look like:**

We'd start not with debates about tactics but with clarifying our intention. What would victory look like? Is it the political gains we make, the delegitimizing of the institutions? Or is it actually shutting the meeting down, or disrupting it? How important is a tactical victory to the political victory? Is there a possibility of inspiring dissension in the ranks of our opposition? (Dissent within the military was a huge factor in ending the Vietnam War, for example.) Are there ways we can embody an alternative in the moment of protest itself? How do we make the action have real, not just symbolic, impact?

In those initial discussions, we'd look for dialogue among as wide a spectrum of groups as possible, with no single organization or group preempting the turf. We'd actively seek a diversity of race, class, and gender as well as diversity of political philosophies. We'd understand that no one group or tactic gets to own or define the movement, and that there are times when we want to organize together, and need to compromise and negotiate, and other times we might want to organize in parallel but separate structures.

We'd encourage the formation of clusters or blocs as well as affinity groups. (I prefer 'cluster' as 'bloc' sounds more fixed and static.) Clusters--groups of affinity groups--might develop their own unique goals and tactics within the framework of the action, focusing on a specific issue, target, or style of action. For example, in Quebec City the Medieval Bloc brought the catapult. Our cluster became a Living River to focus attention on water issues, practice fluid and mobile street tactics, and bring the Cochabamba Declaration to the action.

We'd encourage the development of a spectrum of targets, tactics and strategies that encompass many levels of risk. Mobile street tactics as well as blockades. Art, music, dance, puppets, ritual, street theater, processions, parades, all the things we already do as well as things we haven't thought of yet. Diversions and surprises. Humor. Doing the unexpected. Never being boring, tedious or stereotyped. We'd do our best to orchestrate our different approaches, to negotiate time, space and targets, to make them most effective.

We'd also understand that the more confrontational the tactics, the more clear the message needs to be, and the more we need to be sure we have a base of support for the tactics we employ.

We'd accept that we can't necessarily make our actions safe. We don't control the police, and their response has escalated even for clearly nonviolent actions when they are more than symbolic. But people can face danger if they have preparation and support, and choices we make in an action can increase or decrease the risks in the moment. We'd provide trainings and preparations that teach a spectrum of responses to crisis situations, prepare groups and clusters to act together, spread effective street tactics, prepare people for jail and for solidarity actions, and teach de-escalation as a tool and an option, not a moral imperative. We'd encourage the formation of affinity groups, and also develop many other forms of support.

We'd set up ongoing networks of support for those who end up in jail, fighting legal battles or who get hurt, physically or emotionally, in actions.

Instead of decreeing a set of guidelines telling people what not to do, clusters and groups would state their intentions for what they do want. For example:

"We will carry out this action in a manner that prefigures the world we want to create, and act in the service of what we love."

"We will use means consistent with our ends."

"We will act with respect for this community, for its homes and enterprises, and in a way that encourages all to join us."

"We hold open the possibility that those who are currently our opponents may change their allegiance and join us."

"We will protect and care for each other in this action, and act in solidarity even with those whose choices differ from ours."

Or, as Scott Weinstein, one of the medics in Quebec, suggests: "We will creatively target the agents of repression and capitalism - and ensure our tactics do not endanger our sister and brother activists. We will attempt to defend our spaces such as the convergence center and the neighborhood from any police take-over or trashing. We are warriors for global justice - and our greatest weapon is our solidarity for each other and the planet. Therefore this action is not over until each of us is safely out of jail, (and the planet is liberated)."

In many ways, Quebec City embodied these ideas. But what didn't quite happen in Quebec City is what many of us dreamed of---masses of people swarming the fence, taking it down in so many places at once it couldn't be effectively defended, flooding the area around the Congress Center and utterly stopping the meeting. What is so tantalizing about the action, in retrospect, is the sense that it could have happened--that with only a little more coordination, a little more trust, a little less fear on everyone's part, we could have done it.

And we will.

In solidarity and long term commitment to a world of liberty and justice for all,

-- *Starhawk*

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