

What Happened in New York

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by Starhawk

The weekend of February 15 and 16 marks an historic, global uprising for peace. The number of marches is uncounted: the number of marchers estimated in the range of ten million. There were marches and vigils and protests in national capitals and small towns, in the heartlands of middle America and in small Pacific islands, in the freezing cold of Alberta and in the heat of an Australian summer. Palestinians and Israelis marched together in Tel Aviv: in the U.S. everyone from Republicans to socialists to anarcho-punks shared the streets. And most of these hundreds of events took place with, apparently, fairly minimal governmental repression.

New York was an exception.

New York, the largest city in the country that presumably shines as a beacon of global democracy, refused to grant the organizers of the protest a permit for a march. Only a stationary rally was allowed.

The denial of the march was only one feature in a campaign of harrassment, that included the circulation of a rumor on the day before the rally that the event had been cancelled, a Code Orange terrorist alert that stationed military guards in the subways armed with automatic rifles, the denial of permission to rent portable toilets for the masses expected at the rally, the mysterious rerouting of subways and busses on the morning of the rally, the cut-off of the phones in the United for Peace and Justice office during the rally, and a repressive, heavy-handed and sometimes brutal police presence that penned the official rally behind barricades and prevented thousands from even getting there.

New York has the largest police force in the world: forty thousand strong. When they decide to control public space, they have enormous resources with which to do so, and generally succeed.

But not last Saturday.

On Saturday something like sixty different feeder marches started from various points in the city to march to the rally. Many of them intended to stay within the law by marching on the sidewalk—an activity that does not require a permit.

Some took the streets.

Taking the streets was, technically, an act of civil disobedience, a conscious breaking of

a law that is unjust or unfairly applied. In this case, many of us felt that the law preventing us from marching as a unified whole was violating our constitutional rights to freedom of speech and assembly. And that if we did not defend our public and political space at this crucial moment, that space would rapidly be taken away.

The Performing Arts March and the Labor March were able to take the streets and march to the rally without incident. The police simply stood back and let them go.

The students were not so favored. I was with the students' contingent that gathered at Union Square around ten in the morning. A march from New York University joined up with us, and together we headed out on Fourteenth Street, on the sidewalk until Sixth Avenue, when we swarmed out into the street.

We marched triumphantly up the avenue, in a fast-paced, exuberant mass that was impossible to slow down, though some of us were trying in order to keep the whole crowd of several thousand together.

Around Twenty-first street, the police met us with a line of cops that stretched across the road. We were ordered to get back on the sidewalk or face arrest. The police were being provocative, pushing and shoving us with their nightsticks, and the students were doing an admirable job of restraining themselves from fighting back. Instead, they turned a corner, swarmed onto a side street, ducked through a parking lot at a dead run and came out onto another street. Some of the march was left behind, but it formed another column to go snake-marching through the side streets.

We met up again on Fifth Avenue, but then got pushed onto Twenty-third Street and trapped by a line of cops in front and back. I saw one young man pushed to the ground with five cops kneeling on him, twisting his arms behind his back to cuff him.

The street was crowded with masses of students, and the police decided to run a line of horses through in order to split the crowd and push people back onto the sidewalks. The horses, some of which seemed under only very shaky control, trotted through the crowd, and then the cops announced that they were only going to let people out in small groups, about fifty at a time. Our group got split—half of us were squeezed out and the other half prevented from leaving. The cops forced the groups that left to move on, in order to prevent us massing together again.

Our small contingent marched up to the Main Library, on Forty-second Street, where we met up with some of the lost members of our group, and continued up toward the Rally Zone. The police had barricades on all the streets leading east through the Fifties at Lexington Avenue. People were not being allowed to go through to join the rally.

Many people were upset and angry, but overall the mood was creative and determined. Our group went into a Dunkin' Donuts to pee—and discovered we could simply exit through the side door onto the street behind the barricade. We went on to Third Street, which was packed with masses of people who were simply holding their own rally in the street. There were performers up on kiosks doing skits in giant masks, radical cheerleaders dressed in pajamas with pillows shouting 'Nuclear War—that's not right! Bush and Saddam should have a pillow fight!' Groups clustered around radios to hear

bits of the rally, danced or chanted or simply paced up and down, enjoying the scene. The crowd was diverse, with a good representation of many different races and classes and ages. I saw young students and gray-haired veterans of the peace marches of the sixties, punks and hippies and ordinary citizens, ragged street people and one elegantly dressed woman in a fur coat carrying a sign that said "Justice for Palestine."

We went on to Times Square, where an unpermitted convergence had been called, and drummed and chanted on a corner as the police rapidly erected barricades, squeezed the crowd together, and refused to let people in or out. We eventually moved out, encountering people furious with the cops' heavy-handed tactics. One young woman was sobbing into her cell phone in a panic because she was separated from her mother and couldn't get back across the lines, and outraged because the police had pushed her. We soothed her, and helped her find her mother. Later that night, we narrowly missed getting arrested with a group of about two hundred who were simply marching on the sidewalk as people had been doing, legally, all day—and were trapped and surrounded by the cops and not let go. Overall around three hundred and fifty people were arrested—most simply trying to get to the legal rally.

If the police had issued a permit, had given the organizers a rally space in Central Park as they originally requested, had allowed and supported a legal march, people would simply have gathered and marched, as they did in hundreds of cities around the world, and not required horse patrols or riot squads. One official march, and a big rally in an open park, with no streets to be blocked or potential targets for vandalism, would have been easier and cheaper to control. Instead, the police set up a situation guaranteed to arouse frustration and anger among a crowd so huge that no amount of force could have controlled it had it turned aggressive. In one area a few people did push through barricades and a fight resulted. Had that happened all along the lines, we would have seen a street battle that would have rivaled the storming of the Bastille.

And if violence had broken out, it wouldn't have come from militants or anarchists or principled believers in armed struggles of liberation, all of whom agreed that this was a moment for a peaceful protest. It would have most likely come from a few ordinary people pushed one foot too far who simply lost their tempers and lashed out. The police were extremely lucky. Had the crowd rioted, all their barricades and gear and horse brigades couldn't have stopped it.

No one wanted that to happen -- not the organizers and not any of the political groups involved. For those of us who advocate nonviolence, who fondly believe we can train people to stay calm under provocation and who exhort people to peaceful forms of protest, it's important to understand that the crowd's restraint didn't come from any commonly held guidelines or philosophy. It was too huge and diverse to have one. Nor did it come from exhortations from the stage or from leadership—most of the crowd never got near enough to the stage to hear anything.

In the face of truly uncalled-for police harrassment, ordinary people kept their cool. The cops kept control, truthfully, only because people let them.

Some of that compliance came from fear—the police do have clubs, pepper spray, big horses and weapons. They can also draw on the full power of the state to punish

anyone who challenges them.

But rage and frustration can overcome fear and caution. The protest remained peaceful because the crowd itself wanted to protest for peace peacefully, and because people tacitly agreed to respect the authority of the police and not challenge that control.

That tacit agreement rests on the people's belief that in some way the authority in question is legitimate. In a democracy, legitimate authority stems from the people, not simply from possession of the might and means to apply brute force. A small elite might gain control of the weapons, the money, the police and the military, but the more it resorts to brute force to keep control, the more it loses legitimacy. I saw that happen, over and over again, on the streets of New York. Every person denied access to a legal rally, every person shoved or bullied lost a bit of that belief.

Belief in the legitimacy of the authorities is the etheric glue that holds the social system together.

That glue can dissolve. In New York, it held, barely, but next time it might not.

The authorities don't much fear the mere expression of dissent. And they don't truly fear small factions engaging in more extreme acts that marginalize and isolate them. But they would be wise to fear the loss of their own legitimacy in the eyes of the masses. The Bush administration was not elected, and its authority has been shaky from the beginning, propped up only by the shock and fear unleashed by the attacks of September 11.

What may finally constrain the warmongers is simply the possibility that the people will become ungovernable if the government continues to disregard our will. If, against such huge opposition, the Bush administration goes ahead with its aggressive, pre-emptive war, they will destroy the legitimacy they depend on for control and unleash the kind of social unrest that makes governments fall.

Dirty tricks, disinformation, repression and fear could not keep people from taking the streets of New York. In the face of injustice and enormous provocation, people responded with restraint, with passion and joy, and discovered our collective power. And that's what happened in New York. The challenge before us now is to nurture, consolidate, and decide how we will use that power: to stop the war, to address the huge economic, ecological and social problems the war distracts us from, and to gain the reality, not the just the myth, of democracy.

Starhawk is an activist, organizer, and author of *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising* and eight other books on feminism, politics and earth-based spirituality. She works with the RANT trainer's collective, www.rantcollective.org that offers training and support for mobilizations around global justice and peace issues.

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