

The Black Bloc in Quebec: An Analysis

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As the dust settles from the massive and hugely successful anti-capitalist mobilization in Quebec, it becomes time to take a look at where the revolutionary anti-capitalist movement stands, some of the lessons of Quebec (for the movement in general, and for black blocs more specifically), what went well, and what didn't go so well. In addition, the events of the 20th and 21st in Quebec, coupled with the uprisings of the oppressed African-American communities of Cincinnati, go a long way towards dispelling several somewhat common claims of the liberal and authoritarian pacifist left regarding black blocs, and more specifically, black bloc tactics and their acceptance, or lack thereof, in oppressed and impoverished communities.

The Media, the Grassroots Effort, and the Local Community

The first important lesson of Quebec is that there can be no understating the importance of a radical movement, such as ours, developing a strong working relationship with the communities in which we will find ourselves. While it is true that the people of Quebec have a proud history of resistance to authority and street-fighting, the massive participation of the local population in the battles of the 20th and 21st cannot be attributed solely to this. Since a large part of the action took place either in the St. Jean-Baptiste neighborhood itself or in the areas directly surrounding it, a large part of the warm welcome that greeted the black bloc and others, which included citizens opening their doors to militants, offering water and vinegar, and often taking to the streets themselves, has to be attributed to the public relations work done by CLAC and CASA, as well as by local anarchists. We must make no mistake about, had it not been for the massive participation of Quebec locals, chances are that the police would have not had too much difficulty controlling, and eventually dispersing, what would have been a group of very isolated militant anti-capitalists.

This leads to another point which, although many feel should already have been clear, until recently was resisted by just as many. This is that we have nothing to hope for from the corporate media, we should expect nothing from them, and we should absolutely not change any of our tactics or messages in order to pander to them. We should instead treat them as the servants of capital, and thus our enemies, that they are. This is not to say that they are not on occasion capable of writing accurate or somewhat positive articles about revolutionaries, as indeed several articles in the Quebec press about the black bloc were quite good. However, it seems that corporate journalists are only inspired enough to research articles and abstain from repeating police misinformation after they are targeted by demonstrators and shown that their lies and misinformation will not be tolerated. Fortunately, this message seemed to be abundantly clear to the black bloc participants in Quebec City, as people made it a point to deny pictures to journalists, stop them from filming, taking their tapes and rolls if they were caught doing so, and targeting any and all media vehicles that crossed their paths. Once more, the massive propaganda effort carried out by CLAC/CASA and Quebec anarchists, distributing tens of thousands of newspapers and fliers, often door to door, was successful in countering the fear-mongering of the police and media, and certainly changed the dynamics of the demonstrator/local citizen interaction, from one of fear, to one of solidarity. This is the clearest example possible that our energies should not, as many liberal leftists seem to think, be directed towards developing a "good" relationship with the corporate media, but to fighting them while at the same time developing our own links with people and strengthening our media outlets and projects.

The Black Bloc: Material Preparedness

It can be said that, despite all the inconveniences and setbacks (which were quite a few), the Quebec City black bloc was one of the most effective in terms of actions performed, its relationship with other demonstrators and locals, the number of arrests suffered, how far it went towards exemplifying to “middle of the road” demonstrators the importance of fighting back, and the image it conveyed of anarchism (which is of course not limited to the black bloc, but it is for the moment our most well known aspect). Once more, the effectiveness of the black bloc, particularly during the course of Saturday’s actions, is not due to sheer luck. It is the result of several very clear factors, some which are definitely positive, some which, while they may sometimes work in our favor, certainly need to be analyzed more closely, and some which are certainly negative.

In the run-up to the Quebec City mobilization, many expected the Quebec black bloc to be the largest yet. Evidently, it did not turn out to be so, mainly due to the border issue. However, the relatively small numbers, definitely never more than 500–600, were balanced by the level of preparedness and commitment of many of the participants, and the support of the locals.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the Quebec black bloc is without a doubt to a very large extent due to how well equipped it was. Many people had the basic gas masks and goggles, but a great deal also were equipped with helmets, shields, padding, heavy duty gloves, bolt cutters, ropes, grappling hooks, and not to mention the abundance of batons and hockey pucks. The fact is, it was very probably the best equipped black bloc in North American history. Evidently, this allowed people to resist tear gas attacks better, stand up to rubber bullets, bring down the fence in different areas with great speed, and in some cases even hold their own in hand to hand, or baton to baton, combat with riot police. This all served to embolden the black bloc, and others who were present, and allowed for scenes such as those that took place during breaches in the perimeter with black bloc participants chasing riot policemen or on the highway overpass with dozens of people charging police lines.

The one nagging question is: Despite several important setbacks, such as the arrest of the Germinal affinity group on its way to Quebec with a lot of material, and all the people, including most of Ya Basta! that were stopped at the border with quite a bit of material as well, what would have happened had it all arrived safely in Quebec City!? Hopefully, this question will be answered this October in Washington DC, where for most people at least, there will be no border to cross. It is clear that Quebec City marked an important step forward for black blocs in terms of material preparedness for action, and this is a trend we can only hope to see continued in the future.

The Black Bloc: Tactics, Empowerment, and “Other People.”

The Quebec City black bloc can also be seen as having been clearly successful in dispelling the common claim of liberals, authoritarian pacifists, and others who oppose militant street tactics. This claim, which we have all most likely already had to listen to, is that the actions of the black bloc are somehow the result of the alienation of middle or upper class youths who, due to the boredom of their lives or some misplaced sense of rebellion, seek cheap thrills at demonstrations, but that they are actually alienating to those who suffer repression on a constant basis and in the end counter-productive.

However, the fact is that oppressed communities, such as the African-American community of Cincinnati most recently, are not afraid to resist their oppressors by taking to the streets and

fighting back. Militant tactics are not alienating, but rather empowering, serving to demonstrate that there is no need to kneel down and beg when faced with repression, as the power of the people, when not pacified by reformism and the avenues of the state, is infinitely more powerful.

This was again made clear by the willingness of the people of Quebec to take to the streets to fight alongside the black bloc and other demonstrators, as well as their healthy dislike of police. While the situation of the French speaking people of Quebec has certainly changed dramatically over the last several decades, a large section of the Quebecois youth, and of the population in general, still identify themselves as oppressed, primarily due to the question of national liberation. In any case, the fact is that they took to the streets *en masse* and resisted alongside the black bloc and other demonstrators. All this despite the fact that repression after riots and street battles is often swift and heavy in Quebec, and nobody is more aware of it than the locals.

The vast, and still growing, support for the black bloc and its tactics was also made abundantly clear simply by the fact that almost anywhere the bloc went in Quebec, it was met with cheers, clapping, and all sorts of encouragement, whether from fellow demonstrators or from locals. Of course this was to a large extent due to the fact that almost everybody's energies were focused on the perimeter fence, which few people had qualms about destroying. However, even the militant tactics (molotovs, stones, direct confrontation) were overwhelmingly greeted with cheers.

There was however one glaring exception. This occurred when the black bloc severely damaged the CIBC bank offices, destroying virtually every window and setting fire to the inside. As soon as the action began several people from SalAMI began putting themselves in the way, some physically interfered, many booed, and one even pepper-sprayed somebody in the black bloc. Many are claiming that this is proof that the only reason that the bloc had so much support was that property damage was kept to a minimum, but that this incident shows that it is not an accepted tactic.

This is simply false, and it is important to show it as such. While the black bloc focused primarily on the fence, there was still quite a bit of property damage. Several banks, a Shell gas station, a Subway restaurant, quite a few media vehicles, and at least one police vehicle. All of these actions took place in very crowded areas, and the only time they drew any significant negative response was with the SalAMI authoritarians, who had refused to work with CLAC/CASA precisely due to the issue of diversity of tactics.

Black Bloc Spectators?

That we live in a spectator/consumer oriented society is no news to most people. However, with the recent rise in acceptance of the black bloc and its tactics a phenomenon that is most likely the result of this spectator society seems to be spreading to the black bloc. It was true in DC during the inauguration, and it was certainly true in Quebec. Whether it is something to be criticized, accepted as inevitable, or encouraged remains unclear (at least to this writer), but it certainly needs to be addressed. Quite simply, this is the phenomenon of the "black bloc spectator." People who dress in black, march with the black bloc, chant, etc. Yet, when conflict begins, be it unarresting, property damage, confrontations with police, or whatever else, they disappear, or watch safely from the back. Examples of this would be the people who ran as soon as the first line of police appeared in DC during the inauguration or those who disappeared when the fence was torn down on Friday the 20th in Quebec. In both cases after events such as these,

the blocs numbers were halved. Of course some of this is due to other factors, such as dispersal, being lost in a crowd, etc., but a fair number of people in the black bloc seem to be there simply to add to the numbers.

This does have its advantages however. The first is that the larger the mass of people, the more the cover for those doing direct actions. Secondly, regardless of to what extent one participates or not, being in a black bloc is in itself a risk that one has taken and implies a certain level of commitment, and it is very possible that those who are shy about taking part in direct actions are so only out of inexperience, but will eventually learn from watching others.

Yet, the disadvantages of having many “spectators” within the bloc are also clear. Among others they include giving people who are doing actions a false sense of security and making large cohesive actions more difficult to carry out. However, the greatest disadvantage is that going to a black bloc without being prepared to assume the possible risks and consequences is to a large extent irresponsible. The black bloc is a tactic, and like any tactic the people carrying it out have to meet certain criteria in order to make it effective. If one is not willing to deal with heights, one should evidently not enter an affinity group doing banner drops from buildings for example. Likewise, if one is not prepared to fulfill at least one of the functions generally expected from people in a black bloc if the need arises, then it is probably a bad idea to be in one.

A clear example of this is the effectiveness of the black bloc on the 21st. While relatively small, fluctuating between 50 and 200 people for most of the day, it was composed primarily of people who were prepared both mentally and materially for the risks associated with being in a black bloc. This resulted in people staying tight, avoiding arrest, being mobile, and accomplishing many very effective actions.

Being a tactic, the primary concern of any black bloc should be effectiveness. If a black bloc is not effective, whether it be at getting a message across, heightening visibility of anarchist or revolutionary presence in a struggle, or performing specific actions, then it serves no purpose. It is not meant to be an all are welcome free for all. This is something that the German autonomes understand (precisely the reason why each line is composed only of people who know each other, to weed out cops and tourists), and it is probably something we in North America should begin to think about.

Anarchism is about freedom, but it is also about personal responsibility. If one is not willing to accept that as a participant in a black bloc one is, amongst other things, responsible for looking out for the safety of others (i.e being willing to perform unarrests) and having other people’s backs when they need it, then you are not acting responsibly.

Conclusion

Despite the inevitable shortcomings and setbacks, it is fair to say that Quebec City marked a step forward for the revolutionary anti-capitalist movement, and certainly for the black bloc. It is becoming clearer and clearer that we are riding a wave of popular discontent, coupled with interest about (and open minds towards) anti-authoritarian alternatives to capitalism, that North America has not seen in many years. What we need to begin looking at now is how to better structure ourselves in order to be more effective in future actions and in order to defend ourselves from the inevitable repression of the ever more threatened state, how to continue to build our links to other communities, and how to begin laying the groundwork for a new society. In

short, how to build an effective, grass-roots, anti-authoritarian movement towards a classless, stateless society. The infrastructure is to a large extent already in place, it is a matter of using and expanding it intelligently.

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