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Negotiating the Culture of Resistance: A Critical Assessment of Protest Politics

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Introduction Both for those within the movement and the public at large, the anti-globalization movement¹ has become increasingly defined by large-scale protests such as those opposing the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in Quebec City. Such events successfully render visible the strength of the movement, expose an emerging global elite, politicize neoliberal restructuring, and capture the media and public's attention. Yet the privileging of large-scale protest for advancing anti-globalist politics is increasingly being questioned both by those involved in the movement and by the Left in general. Such questioning has become imperative given that elite actions, such as holding summits in relatively inaccessible locations such as Qatar and Kananaskis, are making summit protesting less viable. Often, debates about large-scale protests reiterate a choice between direct action tactics based in protest and more "traditional" electoral politics.² This debate, however, should not be limited to a choice between, or an uncomfortable union of, two possibilities—large-scale protests or elections—because this obscures other options for political action. We believe that placing equity at the centre of debates on protest-based politics produces a different analysis.

In the following, we problematize issues of access to protest-based politics by questioning why some people choose not to be involved with large-scale protests, such as that in Quebec City. We argue that participation is mediated by

“race,” class, gender, sexuality and nationality. These mediations occur in two ways: the first concerns access to the site of the protest, and the second concerns access to the culture of resistance of the anti-globalization movement. However, addressing issues of access within protest-based politics can easily slip into an instrumental treatment of equity issues as a means to “include” marginalized populations. In this case, equity is treated as a tool for movement building. This is not the goal of this paper. By placing equity at the centre of our analysis, we arrive at a position that advocates not a broadening of protest through the “inclusion” of marginalized people, but for the de-privileging of protest-based politics. Large-scale protests should not be abandoned, but de-centred in favour of alternative forms of engagement. In order to illustrate such alternatives, we conclude by citing examples of de-centralized and localized activist communities advancing an anti-globalization praxis that is rooted in, and sustained by, a history of equity struggles.

Protest Participation and the Culture of Resistance Access to the site of protests in Quebec City was mediated by class and nationality. In terms of class, the cost of attending the protest in Quebec City could have been prohibitive for many people; taking the necessary time off work is often not feasible for working class people. For many, including those without work, the threat of a criminal record (potentially resulting in reduced work possibilities) can also be a powerful deterrent. The possibility of a lengthy and expensive ordeal associated with criminal charges and legal defence can be unmanageable for many. Such costs have been recognized and mitigated through the administration of various legal defence funds. For women and single mothers in particular, the provision of childcare may also serve to facilitate access to protests and meetings. Many costs associated with attending the protests were effectively defrayed by the buses and accommodation provided by organizers such as unions, the Council of Canadians, and student organizations. There exists, however, a growing number of non-unionized workers who lack access to the forms of assistance that make protesting feasible for unionized, middle-class activists.³

Nationality and citizenship status also mediate participation in protests. Since the protests in Seattle in 1999, border

control prior to large-scale protests has steadily increased; most notably at the well-publicized incidents leading up to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank meetings in Prague (September 2000), the World Economic Forum in Davos (January 2001), and more recently at the G8 Summit in Genoa. The Summit of the Americas was no exception, as several dozen activists were reportedly detained or denied access at the Canada-US border before both the "Search and Rescue" action at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) in Ottawa, and the protests in Quebec City.⁴ Some American activists circumvented border control by sending their gear to Canadian postal stations in order to pick it up once they had crossed the border. Certainly the most striking response, however, was the Akwesasne border action that was coordinated through an emerging coalition between Traditionalist Mohawks, anti-poverty organizations such as the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP), and anti-globalization activists. Such actions address, with differing degrees of success, access to the site of protest for the mainly American activists, many of whom have the means to travel to these borders in the first place. For the many activists from the South, access to the site of the protest is a pipe dream. While events such as the People's Summit, which brought thousands of delegates from across the Americas, are certainly of great value, they do not constitute mass participation from people from the South at the site of protests in Quebec City.

While there have been attempts to address issues concerning access to the site of protests, attempts to problematize access to the culture of resistance prevalent at anti-globalization protests have been less forthcoming. In most cases, discussions of the movement's culture occur as part of a project of de-legitimation. Often, the conservative press treats protesting youth as though they were simply there to be fashionable or to have a good time—"cultural tourists to the anti-globalization movement."⁵ This common strategy of disqualification paints the protesters as unaware of the issues, uninformed, or even disinterested. Such dismissals of the participation of young protesters need to be addressed. "Awareness" need not always precede involvement, particularly with the prevalence of teach-ins

and other capacity building initiatives that make protests a site of learning. Indeed, the vibrant culture of the movement draws many to the protests. Instead of arguing that this is a "problem," we need to recognize and embrace this as an important reason why people become involved. In this sense, it is necessary to (re)claim the importance of culture. Many of the events surrounding the protests in Quebec City exemplify efforts to this end. Cultural expression in the form of creative resistance at the site of protest has become an important part of the movements' praxis. Some activists have taken to referring to themselves as "summit-hopping riot tourists" in order to appropriate and subvert the very discourses within which they are de-legitimated.⁶ While these examples of cultural reclamation are promising, taking culture seriously also requires that we problematize access to the emergent culture of resistance.

Access to the culture of resistance is mediated through systems of "race," class, gender, sexuality and nationality. Attempting to explain the predominantly white/anglo character of the 1999 protests in Seattle, Martinez interviewed several activists and people of colour who were concerned that the protests would be "dominated by 50,000 white hippies" with whom it was difficult for the activists to relate.⁷ Such sentiments reflect the uneasy relation that many people of colour have with the white-centrism that pervades much of the culture of resistance. This distrust of predominantly white activism, along with the legacy of the insufficient ways in which much Left organizing has historically addressed issues of "race" and racism, is a potential deterrent for people of colour.

Also prevalent in the culture of resistance is a masculinist discourse of war and militarism that may be problematic for women, queers and others. Examples of this discourse abound: the protests in Seattle in 1999 were dubbed the "Battle of Seattle." More recently, there was the "Search and Rescue" action at the DFAIT on 2 April in order to "seize" the FTAA text. Although there is a healthy debate over which sort of tactics are effective and ethical at protest sites (i.e. "violent" vs. non-violent direct action), it is interesting to note that masculinist and militaristic discourses pervade the movement among activists and organizations on both sides of

this debate. Predictably, groups espousing militant tactics use militaristic language. According to the Anti Racist Action account of the events in Quebec City, protesters were “heading off to battle” towards the “frontlines,” armed with sticks “as if to say ‘Yeah, this here is my stick, just try and take it from me copper’” in order to counteract the “psychological war the police and media waged.”⁸ Such militaristic and masculinist statements are common among self-proclaimed militant activists and organizations.

It is not only these “militant” organizations that reproduce militaristic and masculinist discourses, they also have currency in groups that espouse non-violence. For example, Operation SalAMI, one of the main organizers of the Quebec City protests and a group espousing non-violent direct action, also reproduces this discourse in their Strategy Paper that was widely distributed within local activist networks:

A basic principle of “guerrilla warfare” (just an image as we advocate nonviolent means) consists in avoiding a concentration of all our “forces” in a “locked confrontation” at the time and place where the “opponent” is strongest. Therefore, the goal of our first action is to “retake the offensive.”⁹ (emphasis ours)

This type of masculinist and militaristic language should not be trivialized as “mere” images because there are implications attached to the use of such discourses. While protests can be dangerous and people need to be aware of this potential danger, masculine glorifications of this danger can be alienating. Many women, queers, children, the elderly, or those who have lived in regions of conflict, among others, may not feel comfortable or compelled to situate themselves within an environment that is actively framed as a war zone.

Though clearly not completely restrictive, the militarism evident in the culture of resistance can require that some people negotiate masculinism in addition to all of the other stresses inherent in direct action. According to a group of women in the Black Bloc:

We led some of the most daring actions, and helped keep a clear head tactically, keeping our groups focused on collective vs. indi-

vidual goals. Our presence...helped check the machismo that is all too prevalent in militant activism. Though we should also note that it is not women's job to check macho bullshit, that's men's work!¹⁰

This quote illustrates the contradictory ways in which many women must negotiate this militarism and masculinism by operating “within” and also “against” this environment. While asserting their legitimacy based on masculinist terms (e.g., performing “daring actions”), they also felt that they had to be conscious of, if not responsible for, checking men’s “macho” attitudes and behaviours—behaviours that are sanctioned within the militaristic discourses common in the culture of resistance.

In masculinist iterations within the culture of resistance, individuals may be called upon to risk their physical safety. Thus for instance, the Operation SaAMI Strategy Paper urged, “Without a concrete and “bodily commitment,” one that can withstand potentially bad weather and a sacrifice in terms of physical comfort, this project [the protest in Quebec City] will be impossible” (emphasis ours).¹¹ Part of the culture of resistance thus includes excitement at the prospect of “putting your body on the line”—a prospect that may seem less invigorating or exciting for those who experience societally sanctioned violence or the threat thereof as a part of daily existence. For women, queers, and people of colour, among others, danger may not be exciting—a fact that makes negotiating this element of the culture of resistance difficult. Additionally and fundamentally, the requirement of a “bodily commitment” raises the question of whose bodies may be deemed adequate for effective opposition: are disAbled (sic) people part of the masculinist iterations of the culture of resistance? Finally, those who experience intensive forms of targetted policing in their own communities—policing that criminalizes behaviour and people as a means to enforce “public order” —may be reluctant to enter sites of protest such as Quebec City. Subjects of targetted policing, including low-income people, people of colour, Aboriginal peoples, street-involved and homeless people, young people, queer people, and people with mental health issues¹² may already be acutely aware of the probability of

police brutality and the monumental failure of existing mechanisms of accountability.

One part of the culture of resistance that requires particular attention is what we refer to as the "hierarchy of radicalism." The concept of the hierarchy of radicalism consists of the tendency wherein certain acts or people come to be defined as more (or less) radical, depending on the nature of their participation (or non-participation). Within this hierarchy, protest attendance is privileged as paramount and protests are often viewed as "the" site of radical acts. Calls to engage ruling elites "uncivilly"¹³ are framed by the hierarchy of radicalism in ways that privilege direct action at large-scale protests at the expense of other ways of acting uncivilly. For many activists, it is as though each protest attended represents a metaphorical badge on a masculine and heteronormative activist uniform. Further, different forms of participation at protests tend to be valued differently within the hierarchy. The central criteria determining this valuation is the level of danger associated with any given act. Those at the "frontlines" are thus able to make claims to a radical status not available to those who may choose to stay in safe zones—let alone those who do not attend. This is problematic because access to the protests is mediated by "race," class, gender, sexuality and nationality both in terms of access to the site of the protest, and, more fundamentally, to the culture of resistance. This lack of access thus becomes re-articulated and naturalized within the hierarchy of radicalism. Those who choose not to go (due in no small part to the mediation of access through "race," class, gender, sexuality and nationality) are not valued as "radical." In this sense, the hierarchy of radicalism has evolved through the operation of existing hierarchical systems of "race," class, gender, sexuality and nationality.

There are, however, attempts to subvert this hierarchy within the movement; for example, efforts to foster creative resistance including performance art, puppetry and spoken word, among others. Radical cheerleading, which is described as "protest and performance...non-violent direct action in the form of street theatre,"¹⁴ exemplifies this type of creative resistance. Radical cheerleading praxis integrates critiques of systems of "race," class, gender, sexuality and

ability while using parody to render their message more accessible. Such forms of creative resistance broaden the ways in which people can perform radical acts, and subvert the hierarchy of radicalism. However, creative resistance and initiatives aimed at increasing protest participation do not challenge the privileging of protest-based political action within the anti-globalization movement. As we have sought to demonstrate, protest politics are problematic within the anti-globalization movement because participation in protest is mediated by “race,” class, gender, sexuality and nationality either in terms of access to the site of the protests, or in terms of access to the culture of resistance – a culture marked by the hierarchy of radicalism. While protest politics are not inherently inequitable, power relations based in “race,” class, gender, sexuality and nationality operate and are reproduced within the anti-globalization movement’s culture of resistance. Problematizing protest politics need not mean advocating a “return” to electoral politics. Instead, we argue for a form of de-centralized anti-globalization praxis that does not privilege episodic summit protests, but rather, one that is rooted in, and lends support to, local equity struggles.

De-centring Protest Politics: Local Equity Struggles and Global Networks Before proceeding further, it is necessary to note that large organizations can play an important role in an equitable anti-globalization movement. The widespread dissemination of information concerning the effects of global restructuring requires access to mainstream media that smaller activist and affinity groups often lack. The Council of Canadians (COC), for example, fosters public awareness of the FTAA’s effects on education, health, and food security through a highly visible media campaign. Organizations such as the COC demystify the complex technicalities of trade agreements and create the basis for popular, cross-class opposition to neoliberal trade regimes. Larger, nationally based organizations often have the fund-raising capacities required to engage in lengthy research projects that explicate the particularities of global restructuring as it affects groups and communities differently. One such example is the National Action Committee on the Status of Women’s “From Local to Global Research Project.” Starting from the conviction that

“the recent trend called ‘globalization’ is an extension of already existing arrangements,” the research project aims to specify the ways in which “inequalities based on gender, class and race are intensified and altered by the acceleration of international capital’s mobility.”¹⁵ While organizations such as the COC and NAC have useful organizational capacities, there are trends in localized activist communities that may have more potential for advancing equity within the anti-globalization movement.

Much attention has been paid to the formation of affinity groups, which are groups of about five to 15 people who act in solidarity before and during protests.¹⁶ Such groups are often based in protest politics, and too often are as short-lived as the protests themselves. There are other forms of local de-centralized organizing that may be more sustainable than affinity groups, and may have more potential for advancing equity. The Akwesasne border action provides one local example of coalition building that situates the FTAA within a history of imperialist exploitation and resistance long familiar to indigenous communities. On 19 April, Mohawk Traditionalists used temporary control of the border crossing that straddles a Mohawk reservation to create a point of entry into Canada for anti-FTAA activists en route to Quebec City. This action indicates emerging networks between anti-poverty, anti-globalization and First Nations activism. Such coalitions, although they are often fraught with tensions and power relations, thus serve to locate capitalist globalization within a history of “already existing” arrangements of imperialism, colonization and exploitation. Conceiving capitalist globalization within this history potentially fosters recognition of the equally long history of resistance carried out by many communities, including First Nations, in forms other than large-scale protest. Equity is advanced through an understanding of resistance as both historical and diverse in form. This acknowledgement challenges inequitable systems of valuation that privilege large-scale protests as the primary site of radical acts, such as the hierarchy of radicalism.

We might also look towards developments in AIDS activism for an anti-globalization praxis that is rooted in, and informed by, local struggles. Many organizational networks forged largely by queer communities in the two decades since

the emergence of AIDS have mobilized against the threat to generic HIV/AIDS medications under the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). For example, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), founded in 1987 in response to inadequate US government funding of HIV/AIDS treatment and research, has expanded the scope of its activism in order to foreground the ways in which the AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa and other regions is exacerbated by trade agreements which restrict the cheap production of life prolonging drugs. As a chapter-based organization that receives no funding from governments or pharmaceutical corporations, ACT-UP is a vocal adversary of the FTAA. An open letter produced by ACT-UP Philadelphia states that:

Because the FTAA threatens so many human rights on so many issues, many anti-globalization activists are not yet aware of the FTAA's grave implications for people with AIDS worldwide. So we'd like to provide all anti-FTAA activists, speakers, road shows and organizers with information about this issue in hopes that our movement's opposition to the FTAA will address its massive threat to the 30 million people living and dying of AIDS right now in the third world...¹⁷

ACT UP simultaneously mobilizes against many levels of the AIDS crisis—including hostile landlords and employers, health care providers, insurance companies, various levels of government, and more recently, against the legitimacy of transnational pharmaceutical corporations and the investment regimes that support them. ACT-UP's intervention in the anti-globalization movement derives not simply from a perceived need to demonstrate solidarity with other organizations and activists at protests. Rather, their anti-globalization activism is sustained by an organizational history of localized, equity seeking AIDS activism that has come to inform their analysis of the global pandemic.

Organizational networks that draw links between police actions at protests such as Quebec City, and targeted police campaigns carried out against marginalized communities are desperately needed. Too often, the issue of police brutality in anti-globalization discourse is treated as a recent develop-

ment. Accounts of police actions in Quebec City that are cited as evidence of an emergent “police state” constitute a negation of the histories and experiences of those who experience police surveillance and violence in their own communities. As one activist states, “targetted policing and militarized policing are two arms of the same machine... that manages ‘difference’ as disorderly and which criminalizes dissent.”¹⁸ Some activists and organizations are recognizing the importance of policing and “crime” within a neoliberal law and order regime. Take for example the following cheer performed by Radical Cheerleaders:

Homes! Not Jails!
They keep on raisin’ our bails
They call us dangerous criminals
Give us mandatory minimals
You know that it’s political when the system always fails.
Homes! Not Jails!
Especially for young black males
Targeted by the stereotypes
And reinforced by the media hype
It’s a violation of human rights
Let ‘s get them outta there!¹⁹

Through this cheer and others like it, Radical Cheerleaders draw attention to the relation between the criminalization of dissent and the targetted policing of racialized communities. Increased and strengthened organizational ties between anti-globalization activists and local activist organizations such as the Toronto Committee to Stop Targeted Policing would be helpful in sustaining a critical opposition to police actions both in communities and at anti-globalization protests.

Conclusion Emergent coalitions of indigenous communities with anti-poverty and anti-globalization activists, the intervention of an AIDS organization in anti-FTAA activism, and organizations critiquing and mobilizing against the continuum of police violence speak to the potential for a decentralized and localized anti-globalization praxis that is more sustainable than one based on sporadic protests. Given

that the privileging of protest-based politics in the anti-globalization movement is problematic, both in terms of access to the site of protests and the culture of the resistance, these trends could shift the form of political action in important directions if equity is at the centre of our analysis.

Notes

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1. While the term “anti-globalization” is certainly problematic in that the movement more precisely opposes corporate globalization or neoliberal restructuring and organizes on a global scale, the term is used here for the sake of brevity and clarity, given that this is the name under which the movement is most commonly known.
2. See for example, Robert Sheppard, “Protest or Politics? The NDP Faces a Rough Ride on the Road to Renewal,” *Maclean's* (12 March 2001).
3. Trish Salah, “Memo To: Toronto Queers,” *Xtra!* (3 May 2001).
4. DeNeen L Brown, “Canada Getting Set for Summit of the Americas: Quebec City Expects Globalization Foes,” *The Washington Post* (14 April 2001).
5. Leah McLaren, “Nightclub Buzz Is—Free Trade: Twentysomethings are Planning to Invade Quebec as Protest Becomes Cultural Event,” *The Globe and Mail* (7 April 2001).
6. The J25 Mobilizing Network, “Who Are We?,” www.j25.org/who.htm.
7. Elizabeth (Betita) Martinez, “Where was the Color in Seattle? Looking for Reasons why the Great Battle was so White,” *ColorLines* 3/1 (2000) http://www.arc.org/C_Lines/CLArchive/story3_1_02.html.
8. Anti-Racist Action, “Against Fascism, Capitalism and the State! A Communiqué from Anti-Racist Action on the Battle of Quebec City.”
9. Operation SalAMI, *Strategy Paper: Mobilizing & Resisting Against the Summit of the Americas and the FTAA*.
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12. Toronto Committee to Stop Targeted Policing, “An Evaluation of Community Action Policing,” (August 2000). <http://www.interlog.com/~command/targetp.htm>.
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14. The Victoria Chapter of the Radical Cheerleaders, “Who We Are,” <http://www.geocities.com/radicalcheerleaders/about.htm>.
15. http://www.nac-cca.ca/policy/resphs1_e.htm.
16. Naomi Klein, “The Vision Thing,” *The Nation* (10 July 2000).
17. ACT-UP Philadelphia, “USA: The FTAA and the AIDS Crisis in the Global South,” Open Letter (15 March 2001). <http://www.corpwatch.org/bulletin/2001/0011.html>.
18. Salah, “Memo To: Toronto Queers.”
19. Radical Cheerleaders, <http://www.gascd.com/cheer.html>.