



OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF “CASSEROLES” *textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge*

a special issue of *wi: journal of mobile media* • 01 june 2012

It didn't start with Occupy, and it won't end with the student strike! The persistence of anti-authoritarian politics in Quebec

Anna Kruzynski, Rachel Sarrasin and Sandra Jeppesen¹

What we are seeing today in Quebec, and particularly in Montreal, is a public moment of a much more ingrained movement that has been around for decades. If we use the rhizome analogy, we can better understand what is happening. A rhizome is like a root that runs underground: once in a while little shoots pop out above ground, and sometimes an enormous shoot breaks the surface. It is an analogy that suits the description of the anti-authoritarian movement in the province.

We could go back quite far in the history of social movements in Quebec to identify traces of this movement, but let's start with what is now considered as the first large contemporary shoot which erupted through the surface, signalling a shift in the province's political sphere. April 2001, Quebec City: huge street demonstrations took place protesting against the Third Summit of the Americas to negotiate the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Building on a major wave of counter-globalisation protests that first erupted in North America in Seattle 1999, in Quebec City opposition to the FTAA was so widespread that politicians had a massive chain-link fence perimeter built – a perimeter that was rapidly torn down by protestors!

Prior to this pivotal moment, however, several smaller shoots were beginning to poke through the surface of calm in Quebec: 1) in 1997, Complexe G, which houses the Ministry of Education, was blockaded; 2) in 1998, a “commando bouffe” (food commando) was unleashed, where community activists went into the Queen Elizabeth Hotel and served themselves at the lunch buffet, bringing food to hungry people outside; 3) also in 1998, the Conseil du Patronat du Québec was occupied for three days. More recently, in June 2010, another big shoot sprang up, as Montreal activists were involved in the protests against the G8/G20 in Toronto. From our perspective, the Occupy Montreal movement that started in the Fall of 2011 following Occupy Wall Street, and the social justice mobilisation anchored in the on-going student strike, can also be seen as new shoots of this rhizomatic movement.

These moments of public protest represent a turning point in recent Quebec history for several reasons: 1) activists began explicitly targeting symbols of capitalism; 2) many people have been arrested with subsequent politicized trials; and most importantly, 3) they signalled the emergence of an anti-authoritarian movement that is at the heart of what we are seeing today. Indeed, all of these shoots emerged from a shared root, a political culture – a way of thinking, doing and being – grounded in

shared values and principles which can be defined according to three main characteristics.

First, we can identify an explicit critique of the **root causes** of the social problems that we are facing, be it poverty, lack of access to public services, racial profiling, homophobia, gentrification, environmental degradation and the like. This explicit discussion links all of these problems to systems of exploitation – capitalism, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, etc. – that work together, reinforce each other, and disadvantage the majority of the world's population. From the anti-authoritarian perspective, is it impossible to eradicate injustice unless these systems are all dismantled. This is precisely what we are hearing now in the streets when capitalism is named by the Occupy Movement as the source of the loss of our social services, and when students oppose tuition hikes because of the capitalist logic of the commodification of education.

Second, we find an explicit critique of representative democracy and the State, as well as experimentation with new types of political organization based on **decentralised, horizontal direct democracy**. This critique goes beyond denouncing corruption within traditional political institutions, and supersedes the notion that if we replace one political party with another, things will be better. It means that people who are directly affected by a political issue must be involved in the decision-making process on that issue. Anti-authoritarian activists believe that society is best managed closer to home, in smaller circles, in face-to-face deliberation that occurs in spaces such as general assemblies, consultas or spokescouncil meetings, through decision-making by consensus, and through implementation of decisions by member committees. At the core of this movement are two fundamental principles: **self-determination and self-organisation**. CLASSE is an excellent example—albeit not a perfect one—of this kind of organizing: general assemblies are held in departments, CEGEPS and universities, then delegates participate in weekly spokes-council meetings where they coordinate decisions and actions. There are no representatives, no presidents, no leaders, just people working together and experimenting with new, empowering, horizontal, and equitable social relations. People who speak to the media, though perhaps perceived as leaders, are simply spokespeople.

Third – last but not least – the movement isn't constrained to one mode of expression but rather, we consider a rainbow of possibilities when it comes time to take action. This **respect for a diversity of tactics**, which has been at the heart of many controversial debates, is the result of over ten years of work by anti-authoritarians to get this principle accepted by mainstream social movements. This principle does not rest on the idea that anything goes in any given situation, but implies that the debate about the legitimacy of various tactics must occur within the movement, and should be decided for each situation by the people taking action themselves. Certainly the media should not make this decision for us. Indeed, we have all witnessed on many occasions how the mainstream media, along with State politicians, tend to create an

image of the “good” versus the “bad” protestor in an effort to divide and conquer. This strategy has been used again against the current student strike activists. However, for the first time, movement “leaders” – or spokespeople – for the most part, have not denounced tactics such as economic disruption, contributing to the maintenance of a certain unity and a strong sense of solidarity within the movement.

The political culture described above is not consecrated into a platform or rulebook. Its values and principles are organic, spontaneous, and constantly evolving. To return to the rhizome metaphor, what happens underground or unseen between moments of eruption of big shoots is what builds the strength and collective empowerment of these important moments. People are working every day, in their communities – based on neighbourhoods, workplaces, shared identities or even just friend groups – to consolidate a burgeoning organisational interface that forms an **anti-authoritarian commons**. In order to reduce dependency on the capitalist economy, the movement sets up self-managed autonomous “services” – based on a mutual aid model – to satisfy specific needs identified by communities, such as alternative media, bike repair, autonomous libraries, collective kitchens, or childcare collectives, to name but a few. To control the means of production, the movement organizes self-managed cooperatives such as restaurants, book publishers, information technology providers, organic farmers, electricians, etc. Finally, in order to reduce dependency on mainstream media and cultural institutions, the movement has its own journalists, essayists, and researchers, as well as its own information sites, communication networks, radio shows, zines and newspapers. It also creates its own cultural institutions, such as the anarchist theatre festival, cabarets, video-making collectives, music venues or silk-screening spaces. And, because one cannot separate the private from the public spheres of life, anti-authoritarian principles are also fundamental to how kinship is practiced in the movement: in collective houses, intentional communities, party networks, etc.

Digging below ground level, we can see the anti-authoritarian roots underlying and nurturing the many smaller and larger shoots that have begun erupting over the past ten years. We can see what the mainstream media and public opinion might not notice, such as the links between what otherwise may appear as fragmented groups and collectives is an organisational interface that prefigures the kind of political, social and economic institutions we are building not just for tomorrow but also for today. This **anti-authoritarian commons** is part of a political alternative based on the two core principles of collective autonomy – self-determination and self-organisation – where people are taking things in their own hands instead of leaving them to a corrupt and disconnected corporate and state leadership. This is what is now happening in neighbourhoods all over Montreal where we hear pots and pans banging rhythmically in solidarity with the student strike and against the Liberal government, and where people are starting to organize in popular assemblies. These actions and assemblies are the spreading rhizomatic sprouts of alternative political institutions.

In 2001, we used to say, “It didn’t start in Seattle, and it won’t end with Quebec.” Perhaps now we might proclaim, “It didn’t start with Occupy, and it won’t end with the student strike.” The student strike has now evolved into a national and perhaps even international social movement that goes beyond the original opposition to the tuition hike. For this shoot to become a full-grown, mature, fruit-bearing plant – or even a wild forest! – let’s hope more and more people will engage in this politics of proximity inspired by an anti-authoritarian political culture.

Note

1. The use of they/we in this paper indicates that we are making this contribution as participants in the anti-authoritarian movement, and, within this movement, as members of a feminist research collective called the Research Group on Collective Autonomy (*Collectif de recherche sur l'autonomie collective* or CRAC) that is documenting and analyzing the movement. Using a prefigurative participatory action research (PAR) methodology, we have interviewed 120 activists since 2005, in nine different groups and networks, each of which has participated or is participating in the production of a monograph, from writing to validation to lay-out and public launch. CRAC is affiliated with the School of Community and Public Affairs, Concordia University. Website: www.crac-kebec.org. Contact: info@crac-kebec.org. CRAC members authoring this article are: Sandra Jeppesen, Assistant Professor, Interdisciplinary Studies, Lakehead University, Orillia; Anna Kruzynski, Assistant Professor, School of Community and Public Affairs, Concordia University (anna.kruzynski@concordia.ca); Rachel Sarrasin, PhD candidate, Political Science, Université de Montréal.