



# **The Limits of “Radical Democracy”: A Gender Analysis of “Anarchist” Activist Collectives in Montreal**

---

Erica Lagalisse  
McGill University

Throughout 2006 and 2007, I researched a variety of activist collectives in Montreal. I closely participated in two different collectives, a Zapatista solidarity collective and an activist house cooperative, in addition to interviewing and interacting with activists from a variety of other collectives that collaborated with and/or overlapped with these two. Some groups, like the Zapatista collective I treat in detail below, were activist collectives with an explicitly anarchist, anti-capitalist orientation. Others, like the house co-op I also focus on, were rather unified around a more liberal, environmentalist agenda. However, both of these groups, like the others I researched, shared a commitment to “radical democracy” in their internal processes and as an ultimate, broader goal for society at large.

While the anarchist-minded activists were more consistently committed to a struggle against “all forms of domination”, many of the house “co-ops” were as well. Nonetheless, within these collectives there were common patterns of domination along lines of race, class, gender and sexuality that are found in broader society – as might be expected. This essay focuses primarily on the axis of gender; however, I keep gender’s intersection with other axes in analytical view by highlighting how dynamics among men and women were informed by other forms of social privilege. In this essay, I illustrate some common patterns of gendered domination within the collectives, as well as some common patterns of fending off critique of the same.

The fact that the two collectives I describe ethnographically were similar in their nominal espousal of "radical democracy", yet fell short in similarly gendered ways, suggests that activists and researchers alike should be on the lookout for similar differences between theory and practice in other such movements. In spite of these two collectives being different in many ways (one being anarchist and anti-capitalist, the other liberal and environmentalist), particular gendered patterns were evidently similar between them. This is in itself analytically important: Many of these patterns promise to be possible, if not probable, in diverse autonomist social movements, regardless of their radicality. The different dynamics between collectives are also no doubt meaningful; I highlight these differences within the ethnography and discuss them in my conclusion.

## Historical and Ethnographic Context

In what follows, I provide a brief explanation of the recent history of the "alter-globalization" movement (sometimes known as the "anti-globalization" or "grassroots globalization" movement). This is the context in which "anarchism" has recently returned to currency, imbued with new meanings, and it is within this history that the collectives I studied and their governing logics emerged.

The alter-globalization movement might arguably be traced to the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico which began in 1994<sup>1</sup>, on the day NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) was to come into effect. The Zapatistas' use of internet media to make their struggle known, and to call for a global mobilization against neo-liberalism, resonated strongly among diverse activist groups all over the world (Khasnabish 2008). Their engagement with diverse forms of oppression resonated with many anti-capitalists who had become disillusioned with "old" class-based politics, yet who saw the limits of "new" rights-based identity movements (Day 2005; Graeber 2009). The Zapatistas' particular "autonomist" approach also signaled a new anti-capitalist relationship to the (Mexican) state. As opposed to the "old" anti-capitalists that sought a "dictatorship of the proletariat", the Zapatistas sought to "change the world without taking power" (Holloway 2005).

All of these aspects particularly appealed to diverse contemporary autonomist, anarchist, and anti-authoritarian movements all over the world, which by nominal definition are against "all forms of domination" and critique the hierarchical state form as oppressive, unnecessary, and part of the world capitalist system. For all of these reasons, when the Zapatistas organized the "Second International *Encuentro* (Gathering) for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism" in Barcelona (1998), over 3000 activists from 50 countries arrived. A significant portion of these activists self-identified as "autonomist" or "anarchist" (Juris 2008). Many of these people were North Americans and Europeans whose movements combined the ideals and rhetoric of Western anarchist traditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with organizational forms of feminist movements responding to the authoritarian New Left, i.e., consensus decision-making, a focus on "means matching ends", and the ideal of participatory rather than representative democracy (Dupuis-Déri 2005; Lamoureux 2004; Masson 2003; Katsiaficas 2001). At this Zapatista *Encuentro*, the activists present syncretized all of these ideals with those of

---

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the uprising of the EZLN (*Ejército Zapatista Liberación Nacional* – Zapatista National Liberation Army) see Harvey (1998).

the Zapatista movement in their organization of the People's Global Action (PGA) network.

The PGA network, born at this meeting, proliferated into many regional Direct Action Networks (DANs) that in turn coordinated a series of large-scale mobilizations against the WTO (World Trade Organization), IMF (International Monetary Fund), FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas), and other neoliberal initiatives, the first large demonstration taking place in Seattle in 1999. Montreal had its own regional network of the PGA, called CLAC (*Convergence des Luttes Anti-Capitalistes* or Convergence of Anti-Capitalist Struggles), which organized a significant demonstration against the FTAA in Quebec City in 2001 (Graeber 2009). Many of the activists among whom I conducted my research, whose ages ranged from 20 to 35 years, were politicized in this context or shortly thereafter. The genealogy of the Zapatista collective in the anti-globalization movement is quite explicit; some of the collective's members had been involved in the Montreal PGA network since that time, and current widespread interest in the Zapatista movement can be traced to this era. Members of the Zapatista collective identified as "anarchist", others as "autonomist" anti-capitalists.

The genealogy of anti-authoritarian principles and consensus decision-making in the house co-op was more complex, with roots in the student cooperative movement,<sup>2</sup> as well as the anti-globalization movement. Many of the co-ops were too young to have participated in the direct action movements at the turn of the millennium. However, some of the co-ops identified with anarchism, an affinity that can be traced to the increasing circulation of anarchist discourse since the anti-globalization movement. As mentioned above, while co-ops envisioned the housing collective as an experiment in "building conscious community" based on the ethic of participatory democracy – a social project – many of the political activists who lived in the house could be better characterized as "environmentalist" than "anti-capitalist" activists. They focused their energies on "green" lifestyle reforms, rather than on the capitalist system as inherently destructive to the environment, and did not link social and ecological justice. Some of the co-ops participated in a range of eco-activist and anti-capitalist collectives, such as the bicycle activist movement Critical Mass Montreal<sup>3</sup>, movements against neighborhood gentrification, mobilizations against Canada's war in Afghanistan, the local Food not Bombs collective<sup>4</sup>, as well as the Zapatista collective described in this essay. The co-op included a large loft-space that was often used as a venue for film screenings, workshops, benefit parties for the local anarchist library, and other events organized by local autonomist, anti-capitalist groups, including the Zapatista collective. Both the Zapatista collective and the co-op espoused autonomist principles, the ethic of radical democracy, and practiced decision-making by consensus.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Co-op forms part of a cooperative-network called the North American Students for Cooperation (NASCO), a "meta"-co-op that provides guidance and a frame of reference for participants in a variety of co-ops across the continent. Many of the unifying principles among members of this co-op, and some of their terminology, i.e. "conscious community", are related to this particular co-op culture. However, by no means are co-ops in this tradition necessarily consensus-based; the culture within the Co-op must be seen as a hybrid form.

<sup>3</sup> Critical Mass is a bike parade that tours the downtown core on the last Friday of every month at rush hour, occupying all lanes of traffic, to draw attention to the lack of priority normally given to cyclists. There are Critical Mass rides in major cities all over the continent; Graeber (2009) devotes a section of his ethnography to this movement.

<sup>4</sup> Food Not Bombs is an anarchist/punk collective that collects food from dumpsters to cook meals every Sunday to feed the homeless, punks, and anyone else who shows up to the park to eat. There are FNB collectives in major cities all over the world.

## Methodology

I embarked upon this research project with a history of experience among these social movements in Montreal. My decision to research my peers' and my own activism was inspired by my familiarity with both the compelling and problematic aspects of our praxis and my desire to articulate a constructive critique in this regard. I knew that turning my "home" into the "field" would involve both psychological and ethical challenges<sup>5</sup>, but I also knew that my insider/outsider positioning as both activist and researcher would allow a unique opportunity to usefully research this activism (Spalter-Roth and Hartmann 1996). After all, anarchist activists tend to be extremely critical of "the establishment" and are not inclined to trust any academic they do not already know. I proceeded according to the tenets of feminist participatory research methodology put forth by Maguire (2008): "development of critical consciousness of both researcher and participants; improvement of the lives of those involved in the research process; and transformation of fundamental societal structures and relationships" (418). During the research process I worked to identify participants' own perceptions of significant problems in our activist practice (Maguire 2008:422), and ultimately concentrated on the themes I did based on the fact that many of my peers – granted, mostly women – felt it was important to do so.

The central site of research was originally the Zapatista collective of which I was already a member. I was living in the co-op at the time as well, and some of the co-ops suggested I also write about the co-op. Initially I resisted this venture – conducting research among friends and fellow activists in the Zapatista collective would be challenging enough, doing the same in my own house at the very same time posed to turn my entire life into the "field," which meant I would be working all the time. However, my ethnographer's eye could not help noticing the parallels between group dynamics in both collectives, which itself appeared significant, and ultimately I gave in. In the case of each site, when I decided to do this research I explained that I would be constantly conducting participant observation research, but would protect the privacy and anonymity of all individual activists and co-ops in my writing.

As a member of these two collectives, I interacted with many other activist collectives that overlapped with my own. These research sites were secondary, in that my fieldwork among them included less intense participant-observation and a less systematic set of interviews. However, the significant amount of contact with activists in these other groups allowed me to distinguish certain patterns among collectives versus the idiosyncracies of my own. As this secondary material echoes activists' experiences in the main sites, I devote a section to it after the two ethnographic sections based on the co-op and the Zapatista collective.

All the quotations I offer in this essay come from my field notes rather than recordings. They were either collected during the course of my participant observation and written down that same day, or else scribbled down during conversations and interviews. One of the challenges in researching activists – particularly the more radical anarchist, anti-capitalist ones – is a wariness among them that recordings and photographs evidencing their participation may be used against them if they were to fall into the wrong hands. Thus,

---

<sup>5</sup> Dyck's work articulates these wonderfully (see Pp. 43-4 in particular). Indeed, all of the pieces in the edited collection of which Dyck's chapter forms part (Amit 2000) speak to aspects of my experience, and are highly recommended to anyone who wishes to embark on a similar venture.

although audio recordings, videos and photographs can bestow a certain legitimacy to research findings, the very fact that they may constitute indisputable “evidence” is the reason I could not and would not pressure activists to offer them. For the same reasons, pseudonyms are used for the names of individual activists and collectives that appear here. In any case, names are irrelevant as the purpose of my research is not to critique any particular person or collective’s practice, but to speak to certain discourses, logics and practices common among them. I use the generic names “Zapatista collective” and “co-op,” rather than the specific names of these collectives for the same reason, and here note to my reader that these particular collectives no longer exist at the time of writing and/or their membership has completely turned over since my field research.

## The Co-op

All decisions at the Co-op that affected the collective as a whole were made at weekly house meetings. There was always a facilitator, minute-taker, and sometimes a “vibes-watcher” at these meetings, where decisions were made by consensus. I will not go into the specific consensus decision-making strategies used in the house in detail, except to say that the use of a speaker’s list, “go-arounds” (where each person speaks in turn around a circle), “twinkling” (a waving of the fingers to designate agreement non-vocally), and other *esoterica* of contemporary consensus decision-making described in David Graeber’s *Ethnography of Direct Action* (2009) were used in the co-op, although, as I have mentioned, the co-operators only overlapped partially with anarchist direct-action activists such as those described by Graeber.

Weekly meetings were the venue to remind co-operators to sign up for cooking shifts on a big chalkboard and negotiate the monthly rotation of chores. Any decision related to renovations, the trading of rooms, the recruiting and admission of new co-operators, the biannual orders of bulk dry goods (flour, beans, etc.), were likewise made at collective house meetings. Co-operators could invite guests from out of town, friends and lovers to the house as they wished, but if the guest was to stay for more than a few days, or the social event was to be large and/or noisy, it had to be proposed at a house meeting for approval.

Most co-operators were very keen on the ethic of consensus, but had little experience in meeting facilitation and group cooperation; often the meetings were *de facto* dominated by the strongest personalities and co-operators with the most seniority, which translated into informal authority. As in many other consensus-based groups, while sometimes the efforts at inclusive participatory decision-making were successful and left everyone feeling important, accepted, and “part of a community”, other times meetings were clearly steered by a minority, and the informal hierarchy left other co-operators grumbling.

Reflecting the systems of privilege in society at large, the informal hierarchy within the co-op was racialized, gendered, and classed. Beyond personality and seniority, those who consistently dominated house meetings were white, middle class men and/or one middle class man of colour. Only three people of colour (out of 36 co-operators in total) lived at the co-op during my stay, and veiled racism was common. In terms of class background, the vast majority of

co-ops came from middle – and upper-class families (although this was not their self-identification – one co-oper identified as “working class” simply because her family *worked*). Interacting forms of social privilege would manifest themselves in terms of interrupting, speaking frequently, and for longer periods of time. Those with less social privilege and its related sense of entitlement generally did not assert themselves as much. As such, group dynamics at the co-op reflected how privilege is expressed in the space and time one feels entitled to, as well as bearing and gestures that are self-assured or reserved, commanding “presence” or denoting “insignificance” (Bourdieu 1984:474).

Class interacted with gender at the co-op inasmuch as women from privileged backgrounds encouraged working class women who were less “shy” to speak up about shared gender concerns, but later denied any grievance of their own; they thus protected their relationships with powerful men in the co-op while the outspoken (working class) women were targeted as problematic. “Shyness” vs. outspokenness can be understood as a function of classed dispositions (*habitus*), as can the “veiled” nature of racism expressed among many co-ops (Bourdieu 1984). Both may be understood in terms of the etiquette and generally careful presentation of self performed by middle- and upper-class persons who are socialized to be image-conscious, and to apply these skills as a strategy to navigate social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984; Goffman 1959).

Alongside the division of voice in co-op meetings, there was a division of labour in the co-op itself. Patterns of race and class in this division of labour were not as outstanding as those of gender, although subtle differences may have escaped my focus. It was abundantly clear, in contrast, that women did more housework than men. Although chores were formally divided equally, in practice some co-ops did not complete their chores as thoroughly or consistently as others. There were women as well as men who “slacked off,” although men more so, and more often. It was women who would pick up the slack, either because they tired of living in a messy space sooner than the men, and/or because they were more motivated by the duty to “chip in” on an everyday basis. Sometimes this would amount to a woman co-oper entering a dirty bathroom and deciding, on the spot, to spend a half an hour completing the entire chore of cleaning the entire bathroom, relieving the one responsible from doing it for another week. Sometimes it was much more subtle and piecemeal. For example, a woman co-oper once stumbled across a box of jars left carelessly on the floor and took the five seconds necessary to pick it up and put it back in the cupboard. I had seen a man step over that same box four times that afternoon. I later asked him why he had not picked up the box and put it away – “The kitchen isn’t my chore this month” he replied. “It wasn’t (the woman’s) chore either, why do you think *she* picked it up?”, “I dunno, guess it was bothering her. Beats me.”

An elevation of “natural” and “back to the earth” values common in the eco-minded co-op intersected with a devaluation of conventional femininity in some interesting ways. When a male co-oper wanted to use the bathroom, yet a woman co-oper was currently inside using the mirror to put on makeup, he would sometimes argue that his desire to take a shower at that precise moment superseded her right to the bathroom – she was “just” putting on makeup, and besides, “that stuff is killing the earth” and using it is “buying into mainstream culture.” I never heard a woman take similar aim at men’s aerosol shaving cream.

While incidents such as these, and other derogatory comments about women who wore skirts, heels, jewelry, and so forth were common, at the same time men co-ops were generally drawn to women visitors who, while perhaps not wearing heels, nonetheless embodied mainstream notions of feminine beauty and enhanced these features. The most blatant example of this was when one well-dressed, blonde, and particularly buxom woman stayed in the house for a week and the men trailed after her in parade-like fashion the entire week, attentive to her every comment and desire. When some of the women co-ops pointed out this differential "hospitality" and its contradiction with some of the men's stated philosophy regarding "mainstream" beauty standards, the men scoffed at their "jealousy."

The co-op was a very public space. We often held community events, workshops and parties there and as a consequence the space was widely known. People often passed by and visited even when no particular event was happening. Both men and women became acquainted with many new friends and lovers in this way. Some men, however, were particularly aggressive in sexually pursuing co-op visitors. Others of us in the co-op did not notice this pattern until a handful of women visitors told women co-ops, much after the fact, that they had not come back to the co-op after being hit on aggressively during their visit. This upset some of the women living there, but their attempts to criticize this behaviour were largely silenced.

There were four house meetings during my time at the Co-op where women brought up the issue of gender within the house. At the first of these meetings, the main complaint of the women who raised the issue of gender was the fact that they did more housework than the men. Some also cited frustration about male co-ops who made particularly sexist remarks, who were dismissive of women when they spoke, and those who objectified women visitors. Male co-ops at this meeting complained of being "attacked" and the remainder of the meeting was spent discussing these men's feelings of persecution. Men alternated in suggesting that the women who brought grievances to the meeting were upset due to "personal" or "psychological" problems, had "personal issues" with particular men in the house, or were "taking out on them" anger whose true source lay elsewhere, perhaps in intimate relationships they were having with other men outside the house.

Subsequent to this meeting, the women co-ops, including myself, called for a special house-meeting specifically to discuss sexism in the house. Almost all of the women attended, but less than half of the male co-ops showed up. At this meeting also, three of the four men present usurped speaking time by discussing how the very existence of such a meeting constituted a "personal attack" on the men in the house. The women who had called the meeting were accused of "having issues with men" and thus "conspiring" against them. There was no further discussion of gender at house meetings for six months, at which time the subject was brought up by a new co-op who had not attended the first round of meetings.

This third meeting where gender was discussed was not a house meeting *per se*, but rather a workshop about sexism in general, organized as part of one of our "skill share weekends." The majority of women co-ops attended, along with two prospective women co-ops. Three men co-ops (again less than half), attended. At this workshop, the men were less hostile as the discussion focused on sexism in general, rather than on specific incidences within the house. Still, they maintained a defensive posture; they argued, for example, that sexism is not a problem in Quebec, which is "a matriarchal society." One

man embarked on a dramatic confessional about how he used to see women as potential sex partners and nothing more, and now felt very guilty about it. He even started to cry. While this was in some ways an improvement on his previous defensive and accusatory stance, this meeting, like the others, still ended up focusing largely on men's pain as a consequence. Also, it may be noted that the confessional appeared somewhat disingenuous in retrospect as this same man, having discovered his new feminist self, continually encouraged the women of the co-op to liberate themselves by walking around the house naked (men often walked around partially clothed but women did not; when certain men were present they even brought their clothes with them to shower so as to avoid walking across the common space in a towel. They complained among themselves about not feeling safe in the space in this respect).

During the aforementioned meeting, a few men acknowledged gendered conflicts within the house, but in the months following they nonetheless failed to confront other men who either did not do their chores, sexually objectified women visitors, or routinely made sexist comments during meetings. Rather, they would say nothing in public and then visit women co-ops in their rooms following such difficult meetings and offer hugs and massages as consolation. As such, they did not challenge gender privilege in the house, but rather exploited related conflicts in order to engage in physical contact with women. One woman pointed this out and was said to be not in touch with the "spirit of community" which involved "challenging boundaries". Discussions of the "boundaries" of gender were displaced in favor of challenging women's physical boundaries.

In between meetings, women often discussed among themselves their common problems with men in the house. More than once, however, women charged each other with "gossiping" during or after these exchanges.<sup>6</sup> They justified accusations of "gossip" by arguing that it is more virtuous to criticize someone to his/her face than behind his/her back, a point with some merit. However, when women did raise such issues in mixed meetings, especially as lone individuals, they were silenced – some sort of collective solidarity, which entails previous communication, appeared necessary. Furthermore, women's arguments against "gossip" appeared disingenuous as women tended to accuse each other of "gossip" solely in the presence of men, to the end of aligning themselves with male power at the expense of other women, whether consciously or not. It is important to note this internalized sexism and competition among women. Just as in any social hierarchy, systems of vertical reciprocity compete with horizontal reciprocity, constituting a challenge to solidarity among those oppressed.

The fourth meeting during which the issue of gender was raised was a regular house meeting. The discussion came to focus primarily on one co-oper in particular, partially because many women co-ops, including myself, had had particularly negative experiences involving this individual, but – I suggest – also partially because the other men were more comfortable discussing one errant individual than a systematic privilege they all shared. Some men co-ops who now identified themselves as "anti-sexist allies" volunteered to approach this man on their own and give him a "talking to" – after all, it was clear he would not respond to women challenging him; in the past he had said

---

<sup>6</sup> They were no doubt unaware that "gossip" once meant "friend", only acquiring its gendered and derogatory connotation during the European witch hunts (Federici 2004; the reference to "gossip" is found on p. 186.)

those of us who had were “just feminists who were trying to lynch him”. While we accepted the men’s offer to intervene – at the time it appeared generous and useful – in hindsight it was a dead end. Whatever the “allies” said to this man, it did not change his behaviour. Furthermore, men’s charges earlier in the year, that the problem of “sexism” was no more than “personal conflicts” between particular men and women, appeared to be affirmed in locating one problematic man and focusing on women’s conflicts with him in particular. In fact, the men who were the “anti-sexist allies” had also been protagonists of much sexist behaviour during the year, and the fact that they had “helped us” by talking to this one man made it all the more difficult to subsequently confront them about their own privilege.

The gender relations in the house contributed to women moving out of the Co-op sooner than did the men. Of those who had lived in the co-op for 4 years or more (3), none were women; for 3 years or more (5), 40% were women; for 2 years or more (11), 46% were women; for 1.5 years or less (25) 56% were women; and for 0.5 years or less (10), 70% were women. While not all of the women who moved out of the co-op did so primarily due to gender dynamics in the house, many specifically cited this as a factor. As a consequence of this gendered pattern of turnover, men co-operators added to their male privilege the informal authority of seniority.

One could argue that it was difficult for women to challenge these contradictions in the co-op because many co-operators did not have even a nominal commitment to feminism. Even those who were developing their identities as anarchists did not have an integrated critique of gender. In the Zapatista collective and other anarchist collectives I researched, most activists at least formally agreed on the importance of feminism, anti-racism and radical analyses of hierarchy and power along a variety of axes. However, even among the more radically politicized activists in these other, more explicitly anarchist, collectives, women activists had difficulty advancing critiques of gendered power within collectives and in the world at large. Male activists similarly dismissed feminism, albeit with different, more “sophisticated” justifications. They sometimes referenced feminism as racist, or acknowledged a nominal respect for feminism but found reasons to discount particular women’s concerns on a case-by-case basis. Many of the gender dynamics in the more radical collectives were disturbingly similar.

## The Zapatista Collective

The Zapatista collective in which I participated in 2006 and 2007 had a shifting core of a dozen people, half originally from Mexico, half born in Quebec. A few dozen others would rotate in and out of meetings and attend larger events. Our goal was to help build resistance against neo-liberalism “from below and to the left (*desde abajo y a la izquierda*)”, as proposed in the Zapatista’s Sixth Declaration from the Lacondon Jungle<sup>7</sup>.

We organized demonstrations to raise awareness of social movements and their repression in Mexico, and held film screenings on related topics. We organized speaking events in English, French and Spanish, and benefit shows to support political prisoners in the neighboring states of Chiapas and Oaxaca,

<sup>7</sup> A full English version of the Sixth Declaration of the Lacondon Jungle (*La Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacondona*) is available at <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/especiales/2>, accessed February 26, 2009.

Mexico. As part of the local PGA network, we participated as a contingent in larger demonstrations and co-organized a variety of events along with other local anti-capitalist collectives. We agreed not to take funding from institutions (in order to be "autonomous") and to prefigure radical democracy through collective decision-making. We rotated responsibilities and made decisions by consensus. Collective members considered the organization of direct actions and cultural events as terrain in which to develop alternative forms of social relations avoiding "all forms of domination", manifesting a "revolution of everyday life".

As in the co-op, there was a different gendered pattern of voice within collective meetings. In the Zapatista collective, the amount of time taken by men and women to speak was more equal, but men carried more influence in making decisions. Also, there was a pattern of crediting men for women's ideas. When women would propose ideas for actions, strategies for accomplishing them, puppet or banner ideas, witty slogans, and the like, these proposals were often followed by one of the men proposing the exact same thing, merely reiterating what she had just said, yet the idea would go down in the meeting record as having been his. Both men *and* women in the collective would later reminisce about our collective's accomplishments saying "That was such a great idea you had!" to the man who had repeated a woman's proposal.

As most activists in the collective had a nominal commitment to egalitarianism and inclusion of "difference", the importance of including women's "voices" was often invoked; however, this was usually in the context of preparing for radio interviews, speeches at demonstrations and other public performances. This attention to women's "voices" thus appeared to be related to a certain preoccupation about public image rather than concern about women's particular perspectives and experiences within the collective – when women would criticize gender dynamics in the collective, which happened in and out of meetings, these "voices" would often be dismissed. Furthermore, the invitation and/or pressure to represent the collective in radio interviews, while presented as an "honour," merely amounted to more labour for women members, who already performed more of the mundane tasks within the collective.

There was a gendered division of labour within the collective, whereby women performed the operational tasks without equal power in decision-making. These tasks included minute-taking at meetings, email communication, translation and layout of flyers and posters, and the social labour of facilitating meetings, mediating conflict and welcoming new members. Women were more likely to volunteer for such tasks. New female members were particularly keen to take on such responsibilities in order to gain the respect of the group. In addition, even when tasks were divided relatively equally during meetings, afterwards they were often delegated by way of private phone calls. When the moment of truth was approaching (be it a press conference, demonstration, or other event), those scurrying around to procure a megaphone or paper plates were often women.

A valorization of masculinity was present in the Zapatista collective, but not in the same way it was in the co-op, corresponding perhaps to cultural differences among the two groups of activists and the fact that these two collectives were involved in different forms of activism. Male activists in the Zapatista collective sometimes shared experiences of physical bravado, of being on the "front lines," defending the "barricades," and so on, in a gendered

game of one-up-man-ship that was exclusive to those activists who contributed to the movement in less sensational, more invisible ways, often women.

The male members of the Zapatista collective never expressed, at least in my presence, that their women peers were “selling out” by wearing makeup or jewelry. On the other hand, the epithet *fresa* (literally “strawberry”; Mexico City slang, variously indicating “preppy/hipster/conservative/yuppie/snob”) was more often applied to dressed-up women than men, suggesting a gendering of race and class privilege (inquiries as to why the word “strawberry” is used yield various guesses, the two most often repeated are that 1) strawberries are an expensive luxury food that bourgeois people eat, and 2) strawberries are red, the color that light-skinned people blush). The less hostile attitude towards feminine gender presentation in the Zapatista collective may have had to do with cultural differences between these activists, which were largely of Mexican origin, and the co-ops, who reflected a white, middle class, Anglo-American notion of women’s liberation appearing to stem from aspects of “second wave” and liberal feminism. Notably, some of the feminine Mexican women in our group felt they were judged as lacking political consciousness not by men within the collective or without, but rather by many white Quebecois women in the anarchist scene who adopt a “punkesque” androgynous appearance.

The gender dynamics in the Zapatista collective were comparable to those in the co-op, albeit with some differences. Also, as in the co-op, women in the collective resisted male power in a variety of ways. They spoke among themselves about what to do, criticized sexism in meetings, and organized workshops concerning the struggles of Oaxacan and Zapatista women as a sub-collective when men were not amenable to these initiatives. The ways that men in the collective resisted critique of gendered domination were also similar to those employed in the co-op, albeit with some differences.

One of the most common ways that men in the Zapatista collective dismissed gender concerns, which never occurred in the (hegemonically white) co-op, was by saying that feminism was imperialist. The history of feminism has indeed been marked by racism. It was disturbing to see, however, that critiques of white feminism originally put forth by women of colour were adopted by men, both white and of colour, to entirely dismiss gender as a concern (certainly not the intention of feminists of colour). Consider the following collective debate, during which women’s attempts to discuss gender, although *specifically in its intersection with other axes*, was resisted nonetheless.

In a meeting leading up to a Zapatista *encuentro* in Chiapas, our collective could not come to a consensus as to whether patriarchy should be included in the *agenda de resistencia*. So far there was no specific mention of gender in the transnational Zapatista statements of unity and adherents of Zapatista collectives both in Mexico and beyond had suggested this was a problem. All Zapatista collectives around the world were to discuss this proposal and weigh in, either in person or by email, during the upcoming Zapatista *encuentro* that winter.

While some women insisted that a critique of patriarchy should be integrated, one man called it “a first world issue” and said that we should rather align our collective’s priorities with those of movements in the South; another said that “patriarchy existed before capitalism so it’s a separate issue”; another said he

did not want to be "part of a social movement that supported rich white women just so they could have poor indigenous women working for them." Some women attempted to explain how neo-liberalism relies on racialized women's underpaid labour, but again the reference was made to the rich white bourgeois women with indigenous servants. Some women suggested a phrasing whereby capitalism "preys on the marginalized" (who was marginalized in the first place, and why, would be left unspoken). Other women continued to argue that women are oppressed "in a particular way," this time making specific reference to the triple burdens of poor indigenous women: "Yes, but that's because they are *indigenous*" was the response. We went back and forth a while longer and finally managed to agree on the phrase "patriarchy is a form of exploitation within capitalism and it is urgent that we recognize it". In the end, we never sent off our input to Chiapas, however; the meeting had been so tense that no one seemed to want to broach the subject ever again.

During my time with the group, women members would periodically get fed up and challenge the men about the gendered division of labour and voice within the collective, the fact that their practical and creative contributions went unrecognized, and men's hostility to feminism. The men would often charge these women with letting their "personal feelings" "get in the way of the movement", or labeled them *protagonista* – a common derogatory epithet in the Mexican anarchist scene meaning someone who does not contribute to the struggle for the common good, but rather for personal glory. Some of the women in the collective would always side with the men in these exchanges. As in the co-op, when women spoke together outside of meetings about gendered concerns, men called this "conspiring" and both men and women called it gossip (*chismes*). Some men in the collective dismissed this sort of "conspiratorial" activity as the sort of thing "lesbians" do, who are often "separatist *hiembristas*" (an inverse of *machista*), thereby denouncing feminism and queer women at once.

Thus, despite our group's nominal espousal of prefigurative politics and a "revolution of everyday life", a classic liberal/Marxist political economic divide between "private" and "public" spheres continued to inform a triage of what is political. Women gradually dropped out of our collective due to a variety of gendered problems that were dismissed as "personal". Their frustrations within the collective that led to them leaving were not perceived as political but rather their "private" issues to be dealt with on an individual rather than collective basis. Over the year a clear pattern emerged whereby young women between the ages of 20 and 25 would join and participate only to burn out a few months later and be replaced by new enthusiastic peers. Meanwhile, the same group of men would continue, adding to their gender privilege the prerogatives of seniority, as was the case in the co-op.

At the last collective meeting I attended, some of the women, including myself, challenged others in the collective about all of these patterns. We pointed out all the women who had left the collective, conjecturing the reasons why, and directed criticism to the men in the collective. This line of questioning was quickly overshadowed by a diatribe on the part of one man against another, accusing him of being a manipulative *machista* jerk who obviously had "major issues with women". This other man had indeed caused many women, including myself, particular frustration, but by no means could the collective's problems be reduced to the machinations of this one man. Some of us attempted to cut in and say that it was not fair to blame only one person, that all the men and also the women had some responsibility in the way everything

had unfolded during the past year. To no avail. Our conversation had been definitively re-routed to a discussion of whether or not this one man was a Machiavellian sociopath, at the expense of our conversation about gendered privilege within the collective that all men shared. Considering that the prosecuting man had not before demonstrated concerns about sexism, but that like the others, consistently scoffed at women's grievances, his relentless indictment of the other man as a sexist *machista* at this particular moment can be, I suggest, best understood as a maneuver (conscious or not) to protect himself and other men in the collective from critique. And, in fact, this largely worked. The issue was depoliticized/personalized and, significantly, no one, (myself included), noticed in time to challenge this effectively.

## Other Collectives, Similar Stories

The co-op and the Zapatista collective were the two groups in which I was able to qualify activists' perceptions with my own participant observation within the collective. The following information comes from conversations I had with women activists who were in other collectives and/or my own experience at a single event organized by another group. Many of the dynamics that were evident within my own collectives were cited by these other activists as well and appeared in these events.

During various conversations, women of three different collectives stated that the subject of honouring "women's voices" is raised according to the convenience of men, for the purpose of avoiding work or improving the collective's image, rather than due to a concern with the content of the "voice". Men brought up women's voices in this selective way, they said, and "want credit for being anti-sexist anarchists," but when women bring up women's concerns "we are labeled as 'divisive' or charged with 'attempting to seize power' or 'take control'...". Many women were angry that anarchist discourses of non-hierarchy were instrumentalized to silence women who attempted precisely to draw attention to hierarchy.

Many women related stories of their own or of other women they knew who had experienced physical abuse or sexual assault by someone, within the activist scene or beyond, and who, when they shared this information with male activist friends or collective members, were told that this was a personal issue. One was told that such "conflicts" should not "get in the way of the collective's work". Another woman, when she tried to mobilize her male friends to help her confront a man who had mistreated her, was told to let it go and get a therapist instead. Yet another, in a similar situation, was told that "only the oppressed know best how to organize in their own interests" and therefore "you women should form a collective to deal with this". Among activists who otherwise call for solidarity and coalition politics, this application/conjugation of "emancipation of the workers by the workers themselves"<sup>8</sup> must be seen as rather selective. Another woman, who pointed out that a collective member beat his wife and that they should confront him about it, was told that it was not their business. One man said that another's physical abuse of his ex-girlfriend was justified because she "used him then dumped him."

---

<sup>8</sup> This famous phrase comes from the "Sonvillier circular" distributed by Bakunin and his allies in 1871 during the split of the First International.

Women in many collectives also discussed their frustration with the "hyper-masculinity" valorized in the anarchist scene. They described anarchist men as having an obsession with "riot porn" (visual media of men battling police in a variety of ways at a variety of barricades) and a bantering one-up-man-ship among anarchist men comparing macho risk-taking behaviors (which sounded very familiar to me). The more confident women activists complained of men glorifying these (public) activities and not recognizing all the "behind the scenes" work that they do, the work that "keeps the movement alive".

Other activist women did not express such a secure sense of worth in their various contributions and said they felt shy to speak in meetings and assemblies because they "didn't have as much experience," even though they had spent years involved in activism; they were referring to the experience "on the front lines" that is valorized in the anarchist milieu. An example of this was evident at a film-screening and presentation by George Katiaficas in May 2007 in an anarchist house-co-op (not my own). The group of activists present began the evening with a "go-around" during which the first five men who introduced themselves took the opportunity to list the various demonstrations, riots, jail-time, and barricades they had experienced. When it came time for the women in the circle to speak (who formed less than a quarter of the total crowd), each began with apologies for their lack of experience, sacrifices and commitment to the movement. None of the women participated in the discussion following the presentation (except for me), and afterwards two of them told me that they were too shy to speak because everybody else was so "hardcore".

Women also noted that conventional femininity was itself attributed to a lack of political analysis. Women who wore make-up, dresses or who otherwise groomed themselves in conventionally feminine ways said they were judged negatively for it, i.e. were assumed to have no activist experience or background knowledge of radical social history, and were patronized as a consequence. I will note here that I finally had this experience myself once when I showed up at an anarchist punk party uncharacteristically dressed in a skirt and lipstick (I was coming from a wedding). When I tried to join in conversations, people – both men and women – looked at me suspiciously. I didn't figure it out until someone paused while telling a story, looked directly at me, and took a moment to explain what a squat<sup>9</sup> was. "Why would they think I don't know what a *squat* is?" I thought to myself, and then realized that they were responding to my outfit.

The Zapatista collective was not the only place where critiques of white feminism originally put forth by women of colour were adopted by anarchist men to dismiss gender as a concern. I participated in or witnessed a variety of such exchanges, and heard of other similar instances in my conversations with others. It appeared that white men anarchists often mobilized this argument when dealing with white women, while men anarchists of colour mobilized this argument against both white women and women of color. Only once did I hear of a time when a white man dared to argue with women of colour in this way. Consider this final example:

In 2006 a network of collectives organized a speaking tour of two Oaxacan activists who had participated in the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (*Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca* – APPO)<sup>10</sup>. Activists in

---

<sup>9</sup> In case the reader does not know: a squat is a dwelling occupied illegally.

<sup>10</sup> For deeper discussion of the APPO movement, see Sánchez 2008, Vásquez 2007, Osorno

these collectives relayed in providing translation, driving and accompaniment of the two activists, Juan and Magdalena, during their tour across Quebec and Ontario. On more than one occasion, Juan did not let Magdalena speak except to offer salutary greetings in Zapotec<sup>11</sup> before and after his speeches. When some of the organizers became concerned and suggested we speak to Magdalena about whether she would like to speak more, some men involved said we should not interfere, as we must not disturb “cultural norms.” Activists’ concern about the marginalization of Magdalena’s voice was cast as “white feminism” and dismissed. As a result, this woman of colour was silenced in the name of anti-racism.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I briefly reiterate the recurring gender dynamics that were evident in the collectives I researched and the similar challenges activists encountered when they attempted to critique them.

The patterns evident among collectives included: Differential access to voice within formal collective meetings, a gendered division of labour in the collectives, a valorization of masculinity (traditionally masculine gender presentation, dress, and forms of bravado) and the mobilization of a public/private dichotomy that depoliticized women’s social experiences and particular oppression, including male violence. In one collective (the co-op) the sexual objectification of women was also a problem. All of the above resulted in a clear pattern of women leaving these collectives at disproportionate rates. Patterns that ensued women’s attempts to critique the above included: Men characterizing women’s collective action as “conspiracy”, both men *and* women characterizing women’s collective action as “gossip”, and men’s mobilization of the public/private dichotomy to argue that women’s “complaints” were due to “personal” grievances. In one collective (the Zapatista collective) heterosexism was combined with sexism, as feminists were maligned as lesbians and vice versa.

In the two main collectives, as well as others I researched, the rhetoric of being an “anti-sexist ally” was made amenable to protecting male privilege and/or the pursuit of sexist activities. Men employed this discourse and/or self-identified as anti-sexist “allies” at select moments as a way of either 1) selectively positioning women’s voices in public communications (i.e. tokenizing women in the interest of maintaining a collective’s egalitarian image), 2) pursuing intimate relationships with women, or 3) encouraging critique of one (particularly) sexist man at the expense of reflecting on collective responsibility and male domination as a social system – sometimes one may be sacrificed for the sake of the collectivity.

Within the collectives that concerned themselves with racism and imperialism (i.e. the Zapatista collective and some other anarchist groups, but not the co-op), women’s attempts to put forth gender as an axis of concern were sometimes dismissed as imperialist. Some forms of feminism do continue to be marked by racism as well as a failure to appreciate the intersection of gender exploitation – and privilege – with many other axes of oppression. Within my own study we see how a certain version of white, middle class feminism, and a variety of punk anarchy-feminism, alienated feminine women,

---

2007; for women’s role and participation, see Stephen 2007.

<sup>11</sup> An indigenous language of Oaxaca, Magdalena’s first language.

including but not limited to women activists from Mexico. Many of the feminist activists in the Zapatista collective and other groups, however, attempted to problematize gender as one vector in the matrix of imperialist, capitalist neo-liberalism, and yet their feminism was dismissed as bourgeois and imperialist nonetheless. While anarchist feminists aim to build a feminist solidarity across difference in their local and transnational activism (recall the speaking tour of activists from Oaxaca), anarchist men dismissed feminism as "white" and an outmoded identity politics, as if it demands homogeneity among women. Chandra Mohanty, whose challenge to the unified category of "women" has become classic (1997), has recently written that "difference" has been embraced over "commonality" to the detriment of *feminist* anti-capitalism, saying that this misreading of her work "occurs in the context of a hegemonic post-modernist discourse that labels as totalizing all systemic connections, and emphasizes only the mutability and constructed-ness of identities and social structures." (2003: 225). It is disturbing to consider how some anarchist activists seem to exemplify this trend.

As a final note, I wonder how contemporary anarchism replicates the concern for "process" emergent from feminist critiques of the authoritarian Left but, ironically, without the gender critique. Is it possible that anarchist activists are retroactively claiming as "anarchist" the "process" that feminists movements developed, just as activist men reiterate women's proposals during meetings? My point is not that contemporary anarchism's "true" genealogy is feminist; much feminism is not anarchist at all. We should be wary, however, of the effacement of feminist genealogies that do exist, given: 1) the apparent tendency of (anarchist) men to claim women's ideas as their own, 2) how some anarchist men seem to consider feminism as necessarily bourgeois (i.e. having nothing to offer anarchism), and 3) the frequency with which I heard "anarchist" ideals deployed to shut down gender as an appropriate axis of analysis and action (i.e. women who raised gender concerns being accused of "taking control"). Obfuscating the feminist contributions to anarchist theory and practice makes this easier to do. Perhaps we need a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of Peggy Kornegger's "Anarchism: The Feminist Connection" that retains its best, timeless points but replaces the outdated "second wave" spots with discussions of feminist "solidarity across difference" and "politics of affinity"<sup>12</sup> – two other concepts that emerged largely out of feminist debates but are now often heralded as anarchist. (I invite someone to write this.) That being said, new pamphlets and new genealogies would help, but likely not suffice to solve the problems I describe in this essay. For that, much more needs to be done. Much recent research of new anarchist movements has focused on the compelling new political imaginaries and radical possibilities within these movements. I share this optimism, but believe these radical possibilities will remain just that – potentialities – unless activists and scholars both engage in the messy business of (self)criticism of actual practice alongside our discussions of inspiring new political philosophies. Male domination is evidently an ongoing concern in these "radically democratic" movements and it is surely not the only sort of power at play.

---

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Haraway (1990)

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Sally Cole and Francis Dupuis-Déri for their direction and support in this research project, without which this article could never have been written, as well as the three anonymous reviewers at *Altérités* who commented on an earlier draft of this essay. The field research that forms the basis of this paper was supported by the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council of Canada; a grant from the *Fonds Québécois de Recherche sur la Société et Culture* allowed me the time to write up this particular piece.

## References

- Amit, Vered  
2000 *Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World*. New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre  
1984 *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. New York: Harvard & Routledge.
- Day, Richard  
2005 *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*. Toronto: *Between the Lines*.
- Dupuis-Déri, Francis  
2005 *L'altermondialisme à l'ombre de drapeau noir. L'anarchie en héritage. In L'altermondialisme en France: La longue histoire d'une nouvelle cause*. Éric Agrikoionsky, dir. Paris: Flammarion.
- Dyck, Noel  
2000 *Home Field Advantage? Exploring the Social Construction of Children's Sports. In Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World*. New York: Routledge.
- Federici, Sylvia  
2004 *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New-York: Autonomedia.
- Goffman, Erving  
1959 *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City. New-York: Doubleday.
- Graeber, David  
2009 *An Ethnography of Direct Action*. New-York: AK Press.
- Haraway, Donna  
1990 *A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s. In Feminism/Postmodernism*. L. Nicholson, ed. Pp. 190-233. New-York: Routledge.
- Holloway, John  
2005 *Changing the World Without Taking Power*. London: Pluto.
- Juris, Jeffrey  
2008 *Networking Futures: The Movements Against Corporate Globalization*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Katsiaficas, George  
2001 *The Necessity of Autonomy*. *New Political Science* 23(4):547-555.
- Khasnabish, Alex  
2008 *Zapatismo Beyond Borders: New Imaginations of Political Possibility*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

- Lamoureux, Diane  
2004 Le Féminisme et l'altermondialisation. *Recherches féministes* 17(2):171-194.
- Masson, Sabine  
2003 Féminisme et le Mouvement Altermondialiste. *Nouvelles Questions Feministes* 22(3).
- Mohanty, Chandra  
1997 Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *In The Women, Gender and Development Reader*. V. a. Nalini, ed. London: Zed Books.
- 2003 *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Osorno, Diego Enrique  
2007 *Oaxaca sitiada: la primera insurrección del siglo XXI*. México, D.F.: Grijalbo/Random House Mondadori.
- Sánchez, Sergio de Castro  
2008 *Más allá de la insurrección: Crónica de un movimiento de movimientos (2006-2007)*. Ediciones ¡Basta!
- Stephen, Lynn  
2007 We are brown, we are short, we are fat... We are the face of Oaxaca': Women Leaders in the Oaxaca Rebellion. *Socialism and Democracy* 21(2):97-112.
- Vásquez, Víctor Raúl Martínez  
2007 *Autoritarismo, movimiento popular y crisis política: Oaxaca 2006*. Oaxaca: Diálogo.

## Résumé/Abstract

Basé sur une ethnographie de collectifs anarchistes de Montréal, cet article montre comment, malgré un engagement théorique envers la « démocratie radicale » et l'égalitarisme, une division du travail, des discours et des priorités axées sur le genre traversent l'organisation de ces groupes. L'activisme anarchiste contemporain est une synthèse des critiques de l'État formulées par les mouvements anarchistes de la fin du XIXe siècle et du début du XXe siècle et des formes d'organisation anti-autoritaire prônées par les mouvements féministes des années 1970s et 1980s (processus de prise de décisions consensuelles, attention particulière à « l'harmonie entre les moyens et les buts »). Néanmoins, la revendication par les féministes d'une « politique de la vie quotidienne » semble avoir été fétichisée dans les systèmes formels de procédures qui gouvernent les réunions dans la sphère publique. Si certains aspects procéduraux du féminisme ont été institutionnalisés, les relations entre les sexes demeurent de l'ordre du privé et ne sont pas remis en question.

Mots-clés: anarchisme, féminisme, « genre », mouvements sociaux.

Drawing on ethnographic research among activist collectives in Montreal, Quebec, this paper illustrates how two contemporary "anarchist" movements are characterized by gendered divisions of labour, voice, and priorities despite a nominal commitment to "radical democracy" and egalitarian values. Contemporary anarchist activism synthesizes critiques of the State drawn from late 19th and early 20th century anarchist movements, with anti-authoritarian organizational forms developed by feminist movements in the 1970s and 1980s (i.e. consensus decision-making, a focus on "means matching ends"). However, the feminist call for a "politics of everyday life" appears to have been fetishized in systems of formal procedures that govern meetings within the public sphere; process-oriented aspects of feminism have been institutionalized in these new movements, while gender relations remain private and un-interrogated.

Key words: anarchism, feminism, gender, social movements.

*Erica Lagalisse  
Department of Anthropology  
McGill University  
erica.lagalisse@mail.mcgill.ca*