

Anti-authoritarians in Quebec: united by political culture
Discussion paper

Collectif de recherche sur l'autonomie collective (CRAC)
October 19th 2011

How to cite:

This is part of a more substantial article that is currently being written. If citing this document, please use the following formula:

Breton, Émilie, Anna Kruzynski and Rachel Sarrasin (paper proposal accepted, publication expected in spring 2013). Une culture politique antiautoritaire au Québec (provisionary title), *Lien social et politiques (Radicalités et radicalisations – la fabrication d’une nouvelle “norme” politique ?)*.

For more than five years, CRAC has worked to document anti-authoritarian groups and networks in Québec using an action-research approach¹. We have focused specifically on groups and networks who have been working to create alternative institutions and spaces, which we call collective autonomy. This refers to organizing practices, spaces and workshops where knowledge and skills are shared, self-managed cooperatives or communities (for work or living), etc. We are also particularly interested in feminist and radical queer struggles and their interactions with current organizing work. CRAC's interest lies in what can be called contemporary anarchism, which we have chosen to designate anti-authoritarian². We use this to refer to activists who refuse all illegitimate authority, favour direct action strategies and advocate organizational forms characterized by spontaneity, autonomy, direct democracy and the decentralization of power.

In our work, we began by conducting a survey of anti-authoritarian groups which had emerged in Quebec during the 2000s. We then conducted interviews with around 100 organizers involved in approximately ten groups and networks. These interviews led to the publication of several monographs, each one focusing on a different group or network studied. Monographs on the anarchist feminist group *Ainsi squattent-elles*, the eco-radical group *Liberterre*, the Pink Panthers - Montreal (a queer group), and on self-managed gardens have been completed and we are in the process of publishing texts on the following groups and networks: *Convergence des luttes anti-capitalistes* (CLAC), Q-TEAM (a queer group), Ste. Emilie Skillshare (a space for creation and queer sharing), the radical feminist network, and a network of (pro)feminists organizing in anti-racist and anti-colonial groups.

¹ CRAC's research action approach is characterized by the fact that the people conducting the research are themselves involved in the groups, collectives and networks studied. In addition, other members of these groups, collectives, and networks participate in all steps of the research; from the formulation of questions to validating analysis and shaping texts. Finally, CRAC is itself a collective based on anti-authoritarian and (pro)feminist affinities committed to prefiguring liberatory practices internally.

² We prefer to use the term anti-authoritarian for diverse reasons expressed by participants in our research. These include a refusal of labels, a refusal of dogma, and a desire to break with negative connotations associated with certain ideological terms. However, we sometimes slip in “anarchist” and “libertarian”, which we see as synonyms designating the same political reality.

In parallel, we are developing a transversal analysis; an analysis which highlights themes running across all the groups and networks studied. This led to the drafting of three texts reflecting the preliminary results of an analysis of the interviews. These texts also served as tools to prepare for a visioning weekend held in February 2011 with sixty activists from diverse groups and networks. These three texts addressed the following themes:

- ★ Anti-authoritarians in Québec: united by political culture;
- ★ Vision of social change: anarchism as process; and
- ★ Intersectionality, anti-oppression and front-line struggles.

After the visioning weekend, we re-worked these texts, integrating the results of our collective discussions. The analysis presented here is thus the subjective result of this entire research experience: it is offered in order to share our interpretations and thoughts, but without any pretence of being the sole truth or the only vision.

About data security

All documents from our research and those containing personal information (signed consent forms, field-notes, etc.) are kept in a secure location which can only be accessed by our main researcher. Our thoughts on transversal analyses are made public through academic articles, public texts and tools for the movement, to the extent that they are based on previously known information or which reveals nothing allowing individuals or groups to be identified in a precise way.

The anti-authoritarian movement in Quebec

This paper aims to sketch an overview of the entire anti-authoritarian movement in Quebec. Specifically, it will look at the political culture which unites the different groups and networks which make up this movement; their vision of a better society, their strategies of struggle as well as their every day practices. We acknowledge from the outset that our representation of the movement is not perfect. In the first place, our view of the anti-authoritarian movement is only partial and is not impartial: not all groups which could claim to be part or are part of this movement have been studied. Moreover, while our aim has been to offer the broadest and most complete portrait of the movement possible, we realize that this text probably most closely reflects the reality of urban communities generally, and, in particular, that of Montreal. It is also important to situate this portrait of the anti-authoritarian movement within the broader panorama of social movements and community groups in Quebec, with whom anti-authoritarians are in constant interaction. Nevertheless, CRAC believes that this exercise in representation of the movement offers an interesting overview of the diversity of anti-authoritarian struggles³.

³ In fact, this allows us to develop a general picture of the multitude of anti-authoritarian initiatives in Quebec. Even if the links among the various groups are not always in evidence, and if divisions and occasional conflicts can occur between some groups, and while there are still important challenges in the construction of a sustained power in relation to the dominant system, we believe that highlighting the commonalities of experiences of resistance can help address some of the issues which anti-authoritarian groups and networks face, such as overwork, lack of time and health concerns that affect numerous individuals. It is not about idealizing the struggle; but the

Multiplicity of groups and networks

We propose thinking of the diverse anti-authoritarian initiatives in Quebec as forming a movement composed of different levels of organization. On the first level, the fabric of the movement is made up of all the overlapping groups and collectives which organize around different issues. For the most part, these groups and collectives consist of 5 to 20 people who come together around political, identity-based, affective, geographic or other affinities. At a second level, these networks are collections of all the groups, collectives and individuals struggling on interconnected issues and which have, depending on the case, more or less direct and more or less sustained links to each other. According to CRAC's research, the following networks make up the anti-authoritarian movement in Quebec:

- anti-racist/anti-colonial/anti-imperialist network;
- network opposing state violence;
- international solidarity network;
- trade unionist, labour, poverty and inequalities network;
- urban planning network (note: some view this term as too narrow and technocratic; alternative proposals are community-based activism, local organizing, "commune of communes");
- ecological network (note: for some, the term ecology does not give enough place to the social aspect of environmental struggles; the term should put the accent on transformation of our ways of life);
- radical feminist network;
- radical queer network.

In this broad movement of anti-authoritarian organizers, we note points of encounter where different networks come together in their struggles. These points of encounter represent thematic intersections among struggles and links between the groups which make up these networks. For example, anti-racist/anti-colonial/anti-imperialist and radical queers networks regularly work on campaigns together, notably around migration issues and Israeli apartheid. Another illustration of such intersections is the urban planning network, which works on many issues in common with the network opposing state violence; for example, the struggle against racial profiling in various neighbourhoods. Connections between groups and networks are reinforced by the circulation of organizers, who often move around like "free electrons" in the movement, pulled into various issues by a cause they hold dear, a need expressed by the movement, or a specific project.

Moreover, the different networks work together at specific moments, according to their reading of the political context, on common campaigns, or around issues that rally people. These moments of temporary convergence or more permanent coalition transcend all networks. They can be viewed as moments and/or spaces which unite the different actors in the movement. The networks also share common resources which support them in their work. These resources help to consolidate the links within a network as well as between the different networks which form the anti-authoritarian movement.

mere fact of being aware that other organizers with the same political perspective can ease pressure and remove obstacles.

Temporary convergences around street protests

Some moments of convergence are temporary and fluid, often initiated by a call to organize a common campaign launched by one or more groups/individuals. Some examples of such moments are the 2001 Summit of the Americas; the 2004 Status for All march; the 2007 Prosperity and Security Partnership summit (PSP) in Montebello; the 2007 *Guerre à la guerre* mobilization; the 2010 No Olympics on Stolen Native Lands coalition in Vancouver; and the 2010 protests against the G8 and G20 in Toronto. Other events offer annual and recurring moments of convergence, such as the March 8th conferences and protests (on the initiative of the Women of Diverse Origins committee); the March 15th anti-police brutality and anti-capitalist May 1st demonstrations.

These moments of convergence are generally the most visible protests of the anti-authoritarian movement; its public image, on the radar of media and public opinion. Public understanding of the anti-authoritarian movement is often limited to this. However, while the movement appears from time to time on the public stage during large-scale protests, it continues, often behind the scenes, to mobilize around diverse struggles on a daily basis.

Permanent coalitions

Other coalitions bring groups and collectives working on different issues together around common positions, encouraging networks on a more permanent footing. The *Convergence des luttes anticapitalistes* (CLAC) 2010 and the People's Global Action (PGA) Bloc are two examples.

Shared resources

The anti-authoritarian movement has shared resources, both temporary (TAZ, temporary autonomous zones) and permanent (PAZ, permanent autonomous zones), which can facilitate and consolidate organizing in different ways. These resources belonging to the movement support the work of different networks by creating infrastructure which activists can make use of and in which they can hang out. This encourages formal and informal encounters among organizers, thus facilitating networking, sharing of knowledge and analysis, etc. These resources are an attempt to break with the dominant economic logic by relying on self-determination, self-organization (do-it-yourself) and recuperation and by limiting interactions with the capitalist market.

- ★ **Infrastructure and "services"**⁴: allow decreased dependence on money and facilitate access to community organizing spaces and many collective resources (the "common good" of the movement!) - such as the anarchist library, the anarchist bookstore, bicycle repair

⁴ This term carries connotations and is subject to debate; for this reason, and for lack of a better term, we put it in quotation marks. We do not mean to evoke the form of clientist relationship implied by capitalist logic. Rather we mean services in the sense of some activists self-organizing to offer them and other activists then benefitting from them, without there being hierarchical relations between them.

workshop, home-brewing, silk-screening and button-making workshops, venues for shows, computer workshops, collective housing, social centre, bartering, childcare, etc.

- ★ **Tools for creation, production and distribution:** reduces dependence on "cultural industries" and mainstream sources of information; allows creation, self-directed learning, entertainment on the basis of alternatives to capitalist logic - such as bands, creation of art, web-based independent media centres, journals, reviews and zines, radio programmes, informal networks for poster and distributing flyers in different neighbourhoods, etc.
- ★ **Self-managed work:** allows experimentation with different ways of working; sometimes even permitting control over the means of production; on the margins of the social economy, allows the production of goods and "services" adapted to needs - such as, café/bar/restaurants, publishing houses, computer tech support, organic farming with community-supported agriculture (CSA) programme, research collectives, art production collectives, etc.
- ★ **Training, networking and exchange events:** the Anarchist bookfair, forum against police violence and impunity, Back-off, Ya basta!, BDS conference, expozine, queer between the covers book and zine fair, Radical Queer week, 'autonomous days', etc.

Shared political culture

CRAC believes that, despite the absence of a clear and explicit ideology shared by the whole movement, anti-authoritarian groups and networks currently active in Quebec form a whole around the articulation of a contemporary anarchism. This contemporary anarchism is defined by a political culture rather than a common ideology; it is a "collective identity built around a way of being, thinking and doing" (Uri Gordon, dans *Anarchy Alive*, p.14). In other words, despite the differences and diversity which characterize the movement, people who identify with it are political subjects who say "us" when talking about this movement and when they speak about it, they are generally speaking about the same thing.

The political culture spread by the anti-authoritarian movement in Quebec is characterized by:

1. Taking political stands

- ★ Taking a stand against all forms of oppression/domination/illegitimate authority: the state, capitalism, patriarchy, racism, colonialism, imperialism, fascism, anthropocentrism, heteronormativity, ableism, etc.
- ★ Support for certain positive values: social justice, equality, mutual aid, solidarity, spontaneity, autonomy, freedom, democracy, respect for diversity, creativity, etc.
- ★ Positions in favour of self-determination and self-organization (that is, collective autonomy).

2. Strategies of action

- ★ Recourse to direct action strategies; that is, refusal of all illegitimate authority and action without intermediaries.

- ★ Respect for a diversity of tactics; a diverse spectrum of action from popular education to civil disobedience, maximizing respect for life and the rights of the oppressed.
- ★ A dual strategy of a) disruption in order to destabilize or delegitimize the established order and b) the construction of economic, political, social and cultural alternatives on the ground, based on lived realities.
- ★ Recognition, according to need and the political context, of some front-line struggles, as a matter of survival and improving the conditions of life of people and communities living multiple oppressions.

It is important to note that some anti-authoritarians support struggles for reforms or so-called strategic demands which will improve, in the short-term, the conditions of life of the most deprived or of people who are struggling for survival (for example, demanding status for a non-status person threatened with deportation; facilitating name-changes for trans people; improving access to public transportation for people with physical handicaps, defending the right of abortion and the rights of sex workers, etc.). The conditions of life of people who experience these oppressions are directly affected by various state and institutional mechanisms. In such cases, demanding rights or reforms is seen as part of a global struggle aimed at recognizing the multiplicity of forms of oppression and fighting all of them by creating, each time, small cracks in the system.

3. Forms of organizing

- ★ A way of working consistent with these political positions and strategies of action, based on principles of self-determination and self-organization (collective autonomy), decentralization, non-hierarchy and direct democracy.
- ★ Concretely, in daily action, organizing is carried out in affinity groups or collectives, with other anti-authoritarian groups or even mainstream groups in more or less formal regional or global coalitions (at neighbourhood or city level, for example).

In organizing at the regional, continental or global levels:

- There is no recruitment in the traditional sense; growth is rather a matter of horizontal expansion and constant building of connections. Networking structures used by groups and collectives are flexible and decentralized, while still allowing for communication and coordination.
- Instead of platforms and large, structured organizations, various groups, collectives and networks converge around shared principles, while maintaining their autonomy and specific identity (e.g. CLAC, People's Global Action, and 'banners' like No one is Illegal and Food not Bombs).
- We can thus speak of the links of solidarity that cement anti-authoritarian networks together – "the ties that hold anarchist networks together begin from the primary affinities of face-to-face groups and collectives, extending through a dense web of personal connections and virtual nodes to form an international context for cooperation and solidarity," (Uri Gordon, *Anarchy Alive*, p. 16-17)⁵. People work together because they

⁵ We have adopted some ideas developed by Uri Gordon, but decided not to use his concept of "tribe" to refer to the anti-authoritarian movement. As used in anthropology in particular, the term does not seem to us an appropriate characterization of the nature of anti-authoritarian affinities. It is also historically claimed by some

see in each other a certain political familiarity; feel that they share the same analysis and political practice.

- At the micro-level: organization based on the closest affinities, small local groups
 - many speak of their gang, their crew; some refer to their intentional family or community - the closest friendships and trust exist at this level.
- At the meso-level: creation of regional coalitions with other civil society groups; other kinds of affinities develop when organizers from different places and backgrounds work together (e.g. to organize a counter-summit) - a special feature of this solidarity is the tendency to bond together with others who appear to be part of the anarchist gang - a feeling of identifying with others, of reciprocity and mutuality based on cultures of resistance and shared visions of social change.
- At the macro-level: when organizers meet outside their regional networks, affinity is confirmed with reference to diverse cultural indicators of political orientation or background. Links are formed with similar communities in other regions and countries.

In sum, the anti-authoritarian movement is united by a political culture, a way of being, thinking and doing that allows individuals, groups and networks to recognize in each other a certain proximity among themselves while still valuing the diversity of initiatives. This global vision of anti-authoritarian struggles in Quebec highlights the fact that the whole of this movement is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, without there necessarily being any explicit consultation among the different groups and networks, everyone seems to be "paddling in the same direction."