

"Vision of social change: Anarchism as process"

Collectif de recherche sur l'autonomie collective (CRAC)

Discussion paper

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For the last five years, CRAC has worked to document anti-authoritarian groups and networks in Québec using action-research. We have focused specifically on groups and networks mobilizing to create alternative institutions and spaces, which we call collective autonomy; that is, on organizing practices (internal as well as external), spaces and workshops to share knowledge and skills, self-managed cooperatives and 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 is interested in what can be called contemporary anarchism, which we have chosen to designate anti-authoritarian¹. This refers to activists who refuse all illegitimate authority, favour the use of direct action strategies and advocate organizational forms characterized by spontaneity, autonomy, direct democracy and the decentralization of power.

We began by conducting a survey of anti-authoritarian groups which emerged in the 2000s. We then conducted interviews with about 100 activists involved in approximately ten groups and networks. These interviews led to the publication of several monographs, each one 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 (space for creation and queer sharing), the radical feminist network, and a network of (pro)feminists organizing in anti-racist and anti-colonial groups.

In parallel, we are working on a transversal analysis; an analysis which highlights themes running across all the groups and networks studied. This led to us to draft three texts reflecting

¹ We prefer to use the term anti-authoritarian for diverse reasons expressed by participants in our research: a refusal of labels, a refusal of dogmatism, the desire to break with negative connotations associated with certain terms, etc.. However, we sometimes slip in "anarchist" and "libertarian", which we understand as synonyms designating the same political reality.

preliminary interview results. These texts also served as preparatory tools for a visioning weekend held in February 2011 with sixty activists from diverse groups and networks. The three texts address the following themes:

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

This paper examines the second theme.

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, Anna Kruzynski. Our reflections on transversal analyses are made public (through academic texts, public texts or as movement tools) to the extent that they are based on previously known information and do not reveal anything that would allow individuals or groups to be identified in a precise way.

Social change according to the anti-authoritarian movement

In a first text, called "Anti-authoritarians in Quebec: united by political culture," CRAC presents a portrait of the movement highlighting the fact that all its groups and networks share a political culture inspired by a contemporary anarchism. The characteristics of this anti-authoritarian political culture are:

- taking stands on various issues and defending political principles and values;
- a decentralized form of organizing based on direct democracy;
- direct action strategies which promote respect for the diversity of tactics.

What emerged from this exercise in representation was the fact that the movement as a whole is "greater than the sum of its parts." Without there necessarily being explicit consultation among groups and networks, everyone seems to be "paddling in the same direction." Starting from this fact, we can further investigate this "direction" in which the movement is headed.

In this text, we will look at the issue of social change as it is envisaged by the anti-authoritarian movement. In the course of the interviews it conducted, CRAC asked organizers about their vision of a better world. While some people had clear ideas on the topic; others did not. Some were sceptical about the feasibility of various ideas proposed (e.g., federations at multiple levels, from local communities to regions to the whole planet). Some were concerned about the uncertainty and the lack of credible alternatives; others were less concerned, feeling that what was of real importance was organizing together in the here and now. Similarly, some of the alternative projects that were proposed focused on specific aspects of the political and social organization of an ideal society, while others were a lot more general and tried to encompass all issues.

While all anti-authoritarian groups and networks are fighting to "change the world," there are different tendencies in strategies to be adopted to achieve that change. Between a position which favours precise goals and one which shuns pre-established plans, there is an intermediate vision employed by most groups and networks in the movement.

Collective autonomy as alternative

CRAC would like to argue that an alternative common to all groups and networks of the anti-authoritarian movement is that of a society founded on collective autonomy; that is, on self-determination (the possibility of taking part in decisions which affect us) and self-organization (the possibility of controlling human action). The forms of self-determination and self-organization promoted by the movement are collective, based on mutual aid and guided by an "ethical compass."

If this is our starting point, it perhaps becomes unnecessary, or even undesirable, to further develop a common vision of social change as a movement. Of course, we all hope for a "revolution"; the advent of a tipping point of power, and toppling of the current system. The goal of this *revolutionary moment* is embedded in the movement and is an important source of motivation in our struggles. In parallel, we can see that the movement is engaged in a *revolutionary process*, expressed in a political culture and built every day. In recognizing the strategic importance of these two aspects of a strategy of conflict - disruption and construction - we grasp the full complexity of power relations established by the movement. This argument is not about defending an idealized or simplistic vision of change, but taking stock of gains achieved through daily struggle.

Anarchism as process

The project of collective autonomy project is realized on the ground, from experiences lived by the collectivities which practise self-determination and self-organization. The way of organizing can thus differ from one region or locality to another, according to the decisions taken by those directly affected, based on their social positions, their own realities, their reading of the political context. Respect for diversity, a fundamental value of anarchism, is thus central to this alternative.

This implies that anarchism is not a "fixed state" but a process; a permanent and open-ended revolution. For example, even if global capitalism falls, different communities and regions will have to decide together the foundations of their future political, economic and social organization. Respect for diversity and freedom of association, central to anti-authoritarian political culture, means that ways of being, thinking or doing cannot be imposed on others. There will always and necessarily be differences, debates, conflicts, and repositionings. Tension between people or groups with different needs and aspirations is part of the human condition - finding a balance is thus a process, a struggle. As Cindy Milstein writes, "this struggle is exactly where anarchism takes place."

Guided by an ethical compass

This vision of change is based on an underlying concept of human nature as neither fundamentally good nor fundamentally bad. Cooperative or competitive tendencies which develop among humans result from the influence of their surroundings and their socialisation. Mutual aid, revolt and desire for freedom number among other sources of influence on human behaviour. The tension between these poles is thus constant.

An anti-authoritarian ethical compass unites individuals, groups and networks in the movement and continually guides them: we can thus talk of "unity in ethics" (Chris Dixon's concept, taken up by Cindy Milstein). The challenge is to never lose sight of this ethical compass, by which proposed strategies are assessed for their consistency with anti-authoritarian values and principles. As Cindy Milstein writes, "Ethics shape how people pragmatically struggle for social change." (p. 48). She continues, "Anarchism, then, brings out an egalitarian ethics out into the world, making it transparent, public and shared. It maintains an ethical orientation, while continually trying to put such notions into practice, as flawed as the effort might be." (p. 49). For example, if a library comes under threat in a community, anarchists will suggest a form of organizing by public assembly and direct democracy, in order to live the experience of self-determination and self-organization with as many people as possible, in the here and now. The process of transformation underlying this approach relies on the idea that people who come into contact with this ethical compass will understand and, ideally, integrate it into their daily lives. In this way, the people involved in this kind of building approach are (qualitatively) transformed and their relations with others change. It is a way of progressively bringing about social change.

Strategic implications

From this perspective, the anti-authoritarian movement does not aim to get everyone on board a pre-fabricated project. Rather, the idea is to encourage people to think and act for themselves, guided by liberatory values and principles. This means that our main work is based on "contaminating" people around us by supporting or organizing spaces in which self-determination and self-organization can be practiced. In this way, our movement should not only be evaluated according to the relations it has with the authorities, or, for example, its capacity to challenge capitalism. This aspect of disruption is of course important, but, at the same time, our gradual path towards greater collective self-determination and self-organization must also be taken into account.

This dimension of the anti-authoritarian movement's strategy of struggle aims, in some ways, to create "the structure of the new society inside the shell of the old" (preamble of the IWW constitution). It relies on the constant application, in the here and now, of collective autonomy: within our groups and networks of struggle; in our every day activities; in our communities; by creating and consolidating anti-authoritarian spaces and institutions (shared resources). Each of these initiatives and experiments has the potential of generating cracks in the dominant system.

However, the shell of the dominant structure is resistant. It is thus imperative to also attempt to engender cracks in the hegemonic system by organizing campaigns which can disrupt the established order at propitious moments. This means being ready to act when an opportunity

arises; for example, a leaders' summit or moments of crisis in the system (war, conflict, important social debates, etc.). The objective is to attempt to destabilize the proper working of the system, while at the same time consolidating alternative practices and supporting self-determination and self-organization initiatives within mobilizing communities. These different aspects of struggle - disruption and construction - together constitute what many contemporary anarchists call a "dual power" strategy².

The practice of collective autonomy thus implies respect for a diversity of tactics according to situations and needs. Because some people live multiple oppressions which affect the conditions of their lives every day (e.g., domestic workers earning a miserable wage in a wealthy household) and even survival (e.g., refugees threatened with deportation; homeless people living in the street during the winter; trans people who are beaten up), it is strategic to support front-line struggles, even if that means in some cases demanding an intervention by the very state that we want to abolish (this is further examined in the third text). This does not make the state an ally of the anti-authoritarian movement: to maintain itself in the face of opposition, the state always deploys its repressive apparatus. It is thus important for the movement to examine this question in its strategic reflections.

² “... in the radical socialist tradition, dual power refers to a situation in which the oppressed create an alternative center of popular power, one based around mass democratic assemblies and or workers’ councils in opposition to the sites of ruling class power – the government, the army, the courts. Situations with two contending centers of power cannot endure; one side or the other must ultimately displace the other, as history has repeatedly shown” (David McNally, 2011, *Global Slump*, PM Press, p.165).