

Direct Action against Poverty

Feminist Reflections on the Ontario

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Anti-poverty activists who work against poverty by means of protest ought not bear the sole responsibility of critiquing their movement.

La protestation dans la rue est devenue une façon efficace de l'action directe et a pris de l'ampleur dans les luttes contre la pauvreté. La récente protestation de "La Coalition contre la pauvreté" qui a eu lieu au Queen's Park à Toronto, a servi de prétexte à cette auteure pour analyser les genres en relation avec la prise de pouvoir qui est, en général, inhérente à ces protestations.

Direct action is any activity that attempts to expose, challenge, subvert, thwart, or eliminate a source of political discontent. Well-known forms of direct action are usually characterized by large numbers

of people drawn together in public spaces in order to challenge injustice. The strike or the march are classic examples of direct action. Feminist and anti-oppression analysis can identify obstacles in broadening women's participation in activism and direct action in general, and protests in particular. It can also open up space for the discussion of possible alternatives toward a more anti-oppressive method and culture of resistance.

Anti-poverty activists who work against poverty by means of protest ought not bear the sole responsibility of critiquing their movement. Feminists, within and outside of movements that use direct action and protest, must critique the act of protest in order to further engage *all* liberatory movements in a critical awareness and discussion of how difference is still being used, however unintentionally, to divide activists and to exclude others from important movements for social change. I will use a feminist, anti-oppression analysis to discuss gender within the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) protest at Queen's Park in Toronto, Canada, and inclusivity and empowerment at protests in general.

The action

In Toronto on June 15, 2000, in Toronto, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty drew together one thousand anti-poverty activists and people directly affected by poverty. They participated in what was to become known as

a "riot" against Ontario's conservative administration. The demands, captured on placards, shouted over megaphones, and presented in OCAP pre-protest literature, were clear: a reversal of the recent 21.6 per cent welfare cut, a repeal of the Safe Streets Act (which allows police to "remove" the homeless from public places), and a rescinding of the so-called Tenant Protection Act (which grants landlords more power to raise rents above and beyond what the working class and the poor can afford). The strategy to be used at the demonstration was also clearly stated months before. OCAP had decided to attempt to send a delegation into the provincial legislature to directly address the politicians inside.

The protest began with a rally in Allan Gardens, followed by a lively but peaceful street march to Queen's Park, Ontario's provincial legislature. The crowd watched as the delegation approached the legislature only to be turned away by rows of police officers in riot gear, flanked by horses. OCAP spokesperson John Clarke then asked the crowd to try to enter the building anyhow, asking those who wished to storm the building to move to the front of the crowd with their protective goggles and masks on. He specified that those who did not want to participate should stay at the back of the crowd for safety.

Those at the frontlines knocked down and walked over the metal barricades. The police responded with shoves and clubs. A chaotic melee ensued: police clubbed, shoved, kicked and pepper-sprayed any protester within range, whether they were being confrontational or not. Many protesters threw rocks and placard sticks at the police. The more militant of these uprooted and lunged cobblestones, hit horses, later smashed a government building window, and one threw a lone molotov cocktail onto the legislature's steps. Most tried to keep their distance. Police on horses charged into the crowd on numerous occasions.

After much running, screaming, and some bloodshed, eventually the crowd reassembled on the street and marched back to Allan Gardens, followed by a large contingent of police. Once at Allan Gardens, the crowd began to split up. Lines of police from all sides of the park swooped in. Groups of at least three police including undercover police, surrounded lone, unarmed protesters, grabbing and throwing them to the ground, and holding them there by forceful means, such as with a boot on the neck. The force used was obviously excessive; those being arrested generally showed no resistance. Bystanders unsuccessfully

Coalition Against Poverty Demonstration, June 2000

demanded to hear the charges and the police officer's badge numbers, which were obscured or absent on their uniforms. Twenty-two arrests were made.

Where were the women? Where was the colour?

My feminist sensibility, which had been placated by the diversity and the apparent equal male to female ratio during the rally at Allan Gardens and the march to Queen's Park, kicked into full analytical gear when the protesters began defending themselves against police aggression at the front lines. Those who threw rocks and hit horses seemed to be overwhelmingly male. Those who threw larger projectiles—such as bits of a smashed concrete garbage container and uprooted cobblestones—seemed to be exclusively male. At least this is how it appeared from my line of vision—which was limited and chaotic as it would be for anyone being chased by club-wielding police on horses. I saw no specific pattern in terms of what was being done at the protest exclusively by women, but the definitive actions of the day seemed to be dominated by white men and ultimately influenced how every confrontational *and* non-confrontational protester was to be treated by the police.

While angry white men on *both sides* of the line were escalating the confrontation, creating the tense and violent political space wherein the powerful racist and sexist attitude of the police could become manifest, the majority of people living in poverty in Canada are women.

I wish to focus here on the confrontational tactics specifically displayed by mostly white male protesters. This is not to say that tossing a rock at a fully-protected and armed police officer is comparable to a police officer charging after unarmed protesters on horses and indiscriminately hitting them with electric batons. This is also not to downplay the devastating fact that the police had every opportunity to react in a civil manner but instead chose to react with violence that produced injuries far more serious, numerous, and underreported than their own. This is to ask why the frontlines and the most confrontational actions were so male-dominated even though the feminization of poverty is such a prominent reality in Canada.

Did anybody else notice gendered disparities? "Stitch," a 26-year-old female gymnastics teacher from Guelph, has frequently risked arrests at protests by engaging in non-

violent civil disobedience. At the OCAP demo, Stitch was among the frontliners who first walked over the police barricades. She guesses that the male to female ratio at the rally and the march was probably more equal than that at the front-lines and in specific confrontational actions, where men seemed to dominate. "It would be a safe bet to say that probably men were doing most of the rock-throwing," Stitch ventures.

Stephan Pilipa, an OCAP staff member, offers a slightly different interpretation. He guesses that women constituted roughly half of the demonstrating crowd, and possibly more than half at the frontlines. He recalled a few specific instances where he saw women engaging in the same or a greater level of confrontation as the men, yet couldn't offer any general comparisons.

Pilipa tells me that of the 22 protesters arrested that day, about eight or nine were women—but the women received more serious charges than the men, such as participating in a riot, as opposed to assaulting a police officer. Whether this can be attributed to sexism amongst the charging officers—the sort of sexism that punishes aggressive women not only for their alleged crime but also for their deviance from "femininity"—or to a higher level of militancy amongst the women arrested, can only be left to speculation.

Kheya Bag, student activist and queer woman of colour from Guelph, participated in the demonstration and was close enough to the frontlines to glean some observations about the possible patterns of oppression and exclusion at work at the protest. Like Stitch and myself, Bag noticed that primarily men—*white* men—most noticeably "squeegee kids" and homeless folks, constituted the majority of the crowd at the frontlines and were the most confrontational of the protesters. A seasoned direct action activist, Bag finds it typical at most protests for white men to be the most confrontational of the crowd. These three interpretations combined strongly suggest that women were present at the frontlines, and to some extent participated in confrontation, but not nearly as much as white men

This points to a second category required in an anti-

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oppression analysis of direct action: that of race. There have been many comparisons made by scholars and activists alike between current social movements and demonstrations and those of the 1960s. One aspect of these comparisons has concerned the racial composition of demonstrations. In the 1960s, the Vietnam war united white movements and movements of colour because the threat of the draft and the injustice of the war threatened and horrified all people without discrimination. This

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followed a cross-racial precedent that had been set by the civil rights movement. In the late 1990s, the common criticism of movements for social change that primarily rely on direct action is that they exclude and patronize people of colour in two ways. The first gross error is overlooking how the issues at hand may affect people of colour differently from how they affect typically white, middle-class activists. The second blunder is failing to critically consider whether or not direct actions and protests are accessible, effective and meaningful for anyone other than the white, middle-class activists. Current

protest movements in North America—especially at the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle and World Bank and International Monetary Fund protests in Washington—have been consistently accused of reproducing dominant forms of oppression in both ways.

The OCAP protest, which dealt with specifically localized issues of poverty and homelessness, was in some ways different in composition and dynamics from these larger anti-capitalist and anti-globalization protests. Bag, while commenting that white men dominated the frontlines and the confrontational actions, qualifies that the crowd was otherwise more diverse—especially in terms of class—than the overwhelmingly white and middle-class anti-globalization protests she has attended, such as in Washington. She further qualifies that the violence of white, male protesters was far outweighed by the even whiter, more male-dominated and more violent police at the protest. “Sure, most of the violence was coming from white men—white men dressed up like cops,” she says. The racial and gendered composition of specific areas and action at the protest can be understood by identifying some race-, class-, and gender-specific barriers to broad participation in protests.

Risks and barriers

There are some obvious barriers to women’s participation in protests recognized by everyone with whom I

spoke. Finding childcare, and covering the cost of transportation are barriers that are, at least in the organizational stages of direct action, lessened by OCAP’s provision of both childcare and bus tickets at their meetings. Risking the frustration of an unsupportive partner, dependent, or family member, taking time off work, and finding the general time and energy to attend meetings or protests are larger obstacles to women’s participation that can not be as easily overcome. However, Pilipa does point out that the organization’s paid staff do much of the time-consuming outreach and logistical work that already over-worked and over-tired women may be loathe to undertake on a voluntary basis. It is rare and refreshing to see any organization willingly assume part of the responsibilities traditionally designated for women in order to promote their participation at least on an organizational level. Although this is only an incremental improvement, it does make it possible for over half of OCAP’s general membership to be female, and for equal gendered proportions within the executive membership.

Although childcare and bus tickets help women attend meetings, they will not eliminate the various hassles of attending a protest, including risking arrest and abuse. Some were capable of surmounting obstacles to attend the protest, and it is important to examine some factors behind their decision to participate in confrontational tactics at the frontlines.

Pilipa applauds the actions of the few exceptionally confrontational women he could recall, praising them as “courageous,” “spectacular in energy,” and “effective.” He recounts how women within leadership roles in OCAP are often frustrated by the biased assumption that women are nonviolent, an assumption to which they react with outrage, indignation, and a greater resolve to “fight alongside their brothers.”

Stitch agrees, and suggests that the women seen at the frontlines and engaging in confrontational tactics are most likely have already been through the process of defying feminine stereotypes and unpacking their socialization as women. This makes sense in light of Pilipa’s identification of many women at the frontlines as women from the punk scene, female “squeegee kids,” and activists. It also makes clear that those who *were not* at the frontlines probably largely included women who live in poverty, who don’t belong to these counter-cultures, and who haven’t yet had the opportunity to unpack their gendered socialization and defy the illusion of feminine passivity while surrounded by like-minded folks. This probably also includes abuse survivors who are struggling to escape violence in intimate relationships, much less violence in public spaces of protest.

Pilipa and Stitch both believe that direct action provides an opportunity for people who live in poverty to finally confront and challenge the same police who frequently harass, threaten, and beat them. However, Bag counters this by commenting that people of colour expe-

rience police brutality in ways and settings different from most white people, just as women experience violence in ways and settings different from most men. This sheds some light on why there were not more people of colour at the frontlines and engaging in open confrontation. “People of colour are easily targeted by cops in a crowd of mostly white protesters, and have to put up with cop brutality enough as it is within their own communities,” explains Bag. People of colour’s awareness of their specific vulnerability to police brutality can be traced to the legacy of 1960s activism in which people of colour often bore the blame and contempt for disruptive actions that were often instigated by white activists. Because racist oppression continues to shape and permeate society today, it remains true that at the end of a direct action, white activists can walk away safer than a person of colour ever could.

Likewise, there are stark contrasts between the reality of an activist who may not live with the poverty and injustice they are protesting and the reality of a person who understands these “problems” as their immediate, inescapable experience. These differences translate into what Bag calls “tricky dynamics” in anti-poverty activism. An anti-poverty activist with a home who has thrown rocks at police during a protest is not as vulnerable to police retaliation as is a homeless person who may not have even participated in the protest.

For women of colour, the risks of participating in direct action protests are direr than those faced by white women or men of colour, especially if she lives in poverty or is among the working poor. The obstacles are often greater as well: the ongoing effort to survive and support any dependents is often a more pressing priority than trying to take the day off work or finding childcare to attend an anti-poverty protest and potentially be beaten or arrested. Compare this reality to the reality of a white, middle-class female student such as myself whose greatest sacrifice would be a lost day of schoolwork, potentially some time in jail, and bail that my parents could afford to pay. Then the demographics of protests in general, especially at the frontlines, sadly make sense—direct action protest, as is commonly organized in North America, is a risky activity that the privileged can afford, whether that privilege be white privilege, class privilege, male privilege, or any combination thereof.

When women, the poor, and people of colour do engage in frontline confrontation—as a few definitely did at the OCAP protest—their treatment by police and the judicial system is affected by systemic racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and homophobia. Pilpa tells me of a prominent female activist of Chilean origin who was treated with especially excessive force by the police, and who, at her bail hearing, was told by a judge that *just because people riot in Chile does not allow her to riot in Canada*. He further tells me of a seventeen-year old queer woman who was put in leg irons by the police and *purposely placed in the male-only quarters of a juvenile*

detention centre, where she was threatened with assault.

Such treatment is not only a reaffirmation of what activists should know has always existed—the institutionalized oppression that purposely serves to dehumanize, demoralize, and intimidate political dissidents. It also demands that organizers of direct actions seriously ask themselves if they are doing enough to prepare and support marginalized people who do engage in confrontational tactics. They must ask themselves if, at the end of the day, women, folks living in poverty, queer people, people of colour, and other marginalized people are again left vulnerable to and disempowered by the oppressive and violent operations and assumptions of an entire system. If this is the case, it can be expected that marginalized people who do participate in direct actions such as protests may never do so again, and for good reasons—self-preservation and common sense. If organizers have difficulty addressing this problem, then they are probably biased by their own privilege and have not been including women, communities of colour, and the marginalized folks they intend to represent, in a way that is meaningful, direct, non-patronizing, and that does not revert to tokenism.

It is more disempowering than empowering for a woman to “fight alongside (her) brothers” only to be faced with more serious charges, serious injuries, and the sexist, abusive, demoralizing, and psychologically oppressive tactics of police, prison guards, and judges, no matter how prepared she may be. This is more disempowering than empowering especially for women who experience this oppression everyday—whether it be from abusive partners; disrespectful welfare workers who work within a system that hates and wishes to sterilize single mothers and unattached women; from harassing and over-demanding employers; from greedy and degrading pimps and johns; or from the disgusted or sexualizing stare of passerby on the street. It would be more empowering than disempowering for women to fight their own fight against the poverty as it relates back to their own experience which is *very* different from that of men, and to fight that fight alongside their *sisters*. If direct action is accessible to only a few women living in poverty and even then is likely to hurt or discourage them rather than empower them, then direct action against poverty as it now exists is far from effective and might even be counter-productive to women’s efforts to survive.

Bag suggests that the provision of civil disobedience training or workshops about what to expect from the police and the legal system could prepare and support those people who have had to overcome the greatest barriers to engage in a direct action and those people who are most vulnerable to the disempowering effects of direct action. I agree. However, I would further suggest that activists attempt to transform direct action in general and protest in particular from a potentially dehumanizing risk that can be merely buffered by proactive training to a *truly* empowering and rewarding activity.

Inclusion and empowerment in the decision-making process

At the protest, my anti-authoritarian sensibility kicked in as John Clarke gave directions over the megaphone to storm the building. This made it indubitably clear that plans which had been decided upon by OCAP beforehand were being presented as incontrovertible, leaving no room for spontaneous discussion and decision-making. The nature of the organization responsible for the planning must be examined on various levels.

In terms of numbers, OCAP as an organization *does* represent the gendered composition of poverty. However, OCAP specifically focuses on direct action that involves greater and different risks for many women and people of colour than it does for men, white people, and women who have already overcome the stereotypes and illusions that keep women passive and out of organizing. Not all women living in poverty share this position of autonomy and politicized struggle. Nor do all women in poverty identify themselves as anti-poverty activists. They cannot be expected to discard their present day-to-day struggles that are shaped by insidious forms of patriarchy to take up a struggle that seems to be designed by women and men who may have very different experiences and worldviews from their own. The greatest barriers to women's participation in direct actions and protests remain intact despite small steps towards accessibility. That is why women in poverty may not be as *directly* involved in OCAP organizing, and possibly other anti-poverty direct action, as they could be.

Thus, the predetermined plans delivered to the crowd at the protest were tailored to suit white men and a counter-culture of activists. The inclusion of women and people of colour, brought about by addressing more risks and barriers to their participation or by broadening the focus to include more accessible actions, does not necessarily preclude empowerment. For marginalized people to be included *and* empowered, the decision-making structure must be decentralized to ensure that power does not, however accidentally, accumulate within the hands of those with pre-established privilege.

Flexible and decentralized organization at the protest could have created the space for those who are normally excluded or silenced in decision-making processes to participate in deciding what action will occur and how it will unfold. For instance, a decision-making process such as the consensus-based spokescouncil model, alongside conscientious anti-oppression procedures, could have done this. The spokescouncil model is a *directly* democratic decision-making structure that unites spokespeople from small, autonomous, and diverse affinity groups. Such a structure could have ensured that everyone present had more input into the design of the action, consented to engaging in it, and accepted the collective risks that it involved.

For these reasons I believe that, had the decision-making processes been different before and during the protest, we could have seen a rioting crowd of poor, angry, racially diverse women who were not exclusively punks, "squeegee kids," or self-identified activists. Or, perhaps women and people of colour may have influenced the group to choose a more non-confrontational action, potentially rousing less police violence. I suggest this because their experience with violence is typically different from that of men and whites, and because this experience may persuade them to be strategically non-violent; this is *not* to suggest that they are inherent moral pacifists.

Perhaps this is all speculation—but that is exactly my point. We have not yet even come close to imagining what a crowd of poor, angry, racially diverse Canadian women storming the legislature would look like. Much less have we really started creating the conditions of inclusion and empowerment that would give rise to such a radical action. This is a dangerous blindspot in the creativity and imaginative vision of current direct action activism that primarily relies upon the act of protesting.

Protest is not the only form of direct action. Neither protest nor direct action are by any means the only method of struggle against poverty. Nor are they always the best. If anti-poverty activists and organizations choose to rely primarily on direct action as the means of struggle, direct action as we know it, including protest, must *at least* become radicalized. Centralized plans for direct action that are coordinated by a small group intended to be adopted by a larger and more diverse crowd contain little space for spontaneous negotiation or input. This is especially true for marginalized people such as women and people of colour. Direct actions do not have to be centralized to be organized. Nor do they have to be aggressively confrontational to truly express the depth and urgency of collective discontent.

Some may argue that only those with privilege can afford the sort of challenging restructuring of decision-making that I propose. This argument assumes that women, the poor, people of colour, and other marginalized people are incapable of anything but top-down, centralized organization. Some may argue that only the privileged can afford non-violence. This argument assumes that the marginalized never have a choice and their conditions will always determine their behaviour. It is to imply that marginalized people respond better to orders than to decentralized spaces where they can reclaim real, autonomous decision-making power. It is to deny marginalized people the pride of their own histories which may be richer with cooperative, inclusive, and just forms of resistance than commonly recognized.

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