

# Touching the Violence of the State

by Brian Holmes

**The Masks:** The world is upside down. Democracy has its face in the mud. Thirty-four of the world's most violent people are enclosed behind their own wall in Québec City. Outside, crowds move freely beneath the cameras of the police. The crimes inside are unbearable, the tension is too great. The Carnival Against Capital is about to begin. Already last night, thousands of bandanas started appearing – orange, red, yellow, the colours of fire. They are hand-printed with a fantastic, grotesque, carnivalesque smile. They are masks. Folded carefully, like a soft weapon. Every gesture, every word of resistance counts. The weapons have these words, on a little photocopied sheet inside:

## The Gift of Masks

*"A classic crisis of legitimacy has overtaken the key institutions of global economic governance. If legitimacy is not regained, it is only a matter of time before structures collapse ..."* – Walden Bello

Inevitably as the global movements against neoliberalism and for life have grown and become more vocal, so has the repression. But with each act of repression, the men of money reveal themselves further. No longer can they meet in relative anonymity. Their unmasking has become a carnivalesque ritual, repeated in Seattle, Prague, Seoul, and Buenos Aires...

Now, the fences grow ever higher and the meeting locations

ever more remote as the mask of 'tolerance' continues to slip further, revealing an animal that is cornered, knows its time is up, and is fighting for its survival. Besieged by those who desire justice, the men of money are getting scared. They want to name the faces of resistance – name them thugs, terrorists, flat-earthers, delinquents, dreamers. They want to capture, catalogue, and criminalize the faces of those who are saying "enough is enough." They want to wipe the smile of resistance off these faces forever.

*"Resistance is the secret of joy."* – Alice Walker

Carnival and rebellion have identical goals: to invert the social order with joyous abandon and to celebrate our indestructible lust for life. Carnival breaks down the barriers of capital, and releases the creativity of each individual. It throws beauty back into the streets, streets in which people begin to really live again. During Carnival, as in rebellion, we wear masks to free our inhibitions, we wear masks to transform ourselves, we wear masks to show that we are your daughter, your teacher, your bus driver, your boss. Being faceless protects and unites us while they try to divide and persecute. By being faceless we show that who we are is not as important as what we want, and we want everything for everyone.

So we will remain faceless because we refuse the spectacle of celebrity, we will remain faceless because the carnival beckons, we will remain faceless because the world is upside down, we will remain faceless because we are everywhere. By covering our faces we show that our words, dreams, and imaginations are more important than our biographies. By covering our faces we

**recover the power of our voices and our deeds. By wearing masks we become visible once again.**

– Carnival Against Capital, Québec, 20-22 April 2001.

### **After the action**

How to create new forms of expression, exchange, and debate? How to maintain them over time? How and where – at what scale – to institute new spheres of popular decision-making, and how to link those spheres together in the planetary society?

You think about these kinds of questions, after ... After the “legislative theatre” of the Peoples’ Summit and the street theatre of the Peoples’ March, orchestrated to transform the city, blending new democratic procedures and old, raising echoes in the press and elsewhere, creating spin-offs and facing parallels in the province, the nation, and across the hemisphere. After the Carnival Against Capital, where so many individuals – from the blackest-clad anarchists to teachers, local residents, intellectuals, artists, children, average folks if there were such a thing – all felt the need to touch the violence of the state, to feel and shake

the wall it builds around corporate interests, to taste the tear gas it spits out into the faces of the crowd.

We are not the only ones. Think back on the recent decades: How many anti-IMF riots in Latin America, Africa, Asia? How many local committees, social movements, single-issue and electoral campaigns? How many formal victories for democracy that brought back the police with other explanations?

The ethics, the intelligence, the analysis, the openness, the energy, the creativity, the disruptiveness, and the violence of this dissidence are changing my life, changing the lives of everyone touched by it, from near or far. The stakes are the autonomy and coexistence of all the varieties of human time, against the clock and grid of market exchanges. When we reflect, read, and debate for years, not as experts but as passionate amateurs, it’s a very different kind of time. When we dance all night around a huge fire beneath a freeway bridge, drumming with rocks and sticks, it’s a different kind of time. When we talk between the bursts of tear gas and the intense work on our own projects, we open up an infinite well of freedom. We are fighting for

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law remains intact.

>> **May 17** >> Greece is brought to a standstill for the second time in three weeks as pensioners, unionists, and young people demonstrate against economic reforms and a general strike closes down most cities. Even state television goes off the air, and radio news stations broadcast only music, interspersed with taped messages from the journalists’ union explaining the

reasons for the strike.

>> **May 17-19** >> More than 1,000 migrants converge on Berlin, Germany and set up a protest camp near the Reichstag, where they conduct workshops and organize small actions. They denounce the illegitimacy of the recently passed *Residenzpflicht* law (which assigns them to live in a very restricted area). The final day of the camp sees a demonstration of several thousand Berliners

in solidarity with the migrants’ plight.

>> **May 18** >> Thirty-five thousand indigenous and Afro-Colombians march to the city of Cali, Colombia, demanding recognition of their rights to life and autonomy, and expressing their solidarity with the Zapatista caravan.

>> **May 22** >> Kenyan state-employed air traffic controllers in Mombasa’s main airport go on strike

another time, and for each other's time.

For anyone who went to greet the IMF in Prague, or took part somewhere in a global day of action like June 18th, Québec could come as a kind of revelation. In Prague or London the protesters were like a flying saucer, a message from outer space, with most of the popular support coming from unknown, invisible fringes. Here, the entire city gave us the warmest welcome – because it was mobilized first, many months ago. And support poured in from across the country.

All the complexity and agency of a highly articulated political society was on our side. Tactical debates notwithstanding – ‘civil’ disobedience, or just plain disobedience – the movement in its different facets showed a coherency that will affect the province of Québec and the nation of Canada in enduring ways, while serving as a model and an inspiration to the world-wide effort that made these revolutionary days possible. The neoliberal project is being torpedoed by those who were to be its ‘beneficiaries’ – the citizens. Its rhetoric is proving as weak as the absurd fence that fell at the first blows of the crowd.

### **Counterpowers: on the ground**

What was it like for an individual, for someone out in the sea of faces at the FTAA summit protests in Québec City? I don't think many people were alone. Almost everybody was part of some kind of association, from the most organized and abstract civil-society groups – the Hemispheric Social Alliance, the *Réseau Québécois sur l'Intégration Continentale*, Common Frontiers, ATTAC, SALAMI, the union federations –

**“It's important to draw a distinction between our trade progress and labour and the environment.. We should not link these things together at all costs.”**

**– Canadian trade minister Pierre Pettigrew, June 2000**

to your local street-level welcoming committee. Myself, I went as a member of *Ne Pas Plier* (do not bend), which is a small French association that distributes graphic art productions in collaboration with social movements. We deliberately went as a network, inviting artists and graphic designers from the US and England (Cactus), Spain (Las Agencias), and ex-Yugoslavia (Skart, Emigrative Art), as well as two members of a French social movement (l'APEIS: Association for employment, information and solidarity for jobless and casual workers), and a sociologist working with French radical intellectual Pierre Bourdieu – whose recent statements on the need to encourage a European social movement make a lot of sense to us. We basically wanted to see a translocal social movement in action on a hemispheric scale, and to support it, with the aim of finding out what we could do about that sort of thing at home in Europe.

We held an ‘exhibition,’ a temporary agit-prop centre in support of the movement, in a Québec City gallery called *Le Lieu*, which invited us, got housing for us all, and helped us in many ways. The English and American friends brought

along the mask project, which four of us developed early on in Montréal with the help of some very generous people – teachers and students at Concordia University. Some 3,500 of these masks – bandanas printed with a laughing face on one side, a gagged face behind chain-link fencing on the other – were silk-screened by hand, at personal expense and with the help of 20 or 30 other people. They were all given away free, a few from the gallery, the majority during the first hours of the protest.

*Ne Pas Plier* itself brought posters and stickers, distributing a few hundred thousand of them during the ‘exhibition’. The stickers included slogans, mostly in French. One showed the earth as a hamburger, waiting to be consumed. Another said ‘free’ in various languages. Our idea was to play the political gift against the totalitarianism of the economy, to practice a dispersive art, to spark off conversations through the act of giving signs to strangers – an act which could be performed by anyone, since we gave large quantities to people we didn’t know.

The images we distributed were all enigmatic, they asked people to think, to speak, and to play. The city was

flooded with them, everyone seemed to love it, it was a fantastic pleasure to do. And all around us, people were doing similar sorts of things.

By the nature of it, the work in the street brought me closest not to the more formal counterpowers of the Peoples’ Summit, with its panels of activists and researchers from all over the Américas, but instead to the local activists: OQP2001, who struggled to organize logistics on the ground in Québec City, and the anarchist alliances, CLAC and CASA. With *Ne Pas Plier* we also tried to make contacts with popular education groups and elements of the more traditional cultural and workerist left. In the demonstrations by the fence though, what you saw most was anarchy. So what’s the anarchist program? Right-thinking people are always deploring them for being apolitical, spontaneous, violent – not me. I think diversity of tactics is the key.

Mass protest movements, including direct confrontation, are at the heart of any chance we may have to transform society today, and the anarchists seem to know that, maybe better than the others. In these actions, where art has a central role to play and everyone can act artistically, at least

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demanding better terms of employment and salary increases.

>> **May 23** >> Four hundred children reach Buenos Aires at the end of a mammoth 1,242 mile trek aimed at bringing attention to child poverty. It is estimated that 43 per cent of children in Argentina are living below the poverty line.

>> **May 25** >> Airline workers set up blockades by

parking planes across the runways of the Ezeiza airport in Buenos Aires, Argentina to protest cut-backs and lay offs on Aerolíneas Argentinas. Riot police are brought in to disperse workers’ actions inside the airport.

>> **May 26** >> A coalition of Pakistan’s NGOs protest outside the World Bank building in Islamabad.

Protesters carry banners saying: “IMF: International Monetary Fraud,” and, “World Bank policies: poverty

elevation or alleviation?” In a press statement the coalition states that the IMF and World Bank have violated Pakistan’s national sovereignty by trying to influence the country’s budget.

>> **June 3** >> Haitian Cointreau orange workers and local farmers occupy a plantation protesting discrimination against their union’s organizers. Every year during off-season the plantation owners

three things happen, which can change your life. The first is that you touch the concrete limits of your rights: you face the police, the gas, the fence, you feel the worst of the system in your own body, and you need that. Touch the state and be radicalized. It's a way to get beyond the cool media screen, to verify what oppression is, to better imagine how it works far away. It was clear that people needed it, and particularly clear in the stories of everyone who left the union march to climb the stairways up to the fence and find out where the real protest was.

The second thing is solidarity, mutual support: we're all here to help each other, with almost nothing on our backs, no armour, no hierarchies, and when someone has the courage to throw the tear gas canister back at the police, you love that someone. Love on the barricades. You can talk to anyone in the crowd, say things you never said for years to your colleagues or even your friends, you can act collectively in simple but essential ways.

And the third thing is freedom, the freedom of the city. Walk on a freeway, dress in an outlandish costume, give away your art, build a bonfire on the street at night. Dance in the streets. The power of the drumming, hundreds, maybe thousands of sticks and stones on the roadside barriers, beating out a wild, threatening, supportive, joyful, Dionysian rhythm that came together at times into an incredibly sophisticated beat: that's something you can never forget, you carry it within you. The carnival is a counterpower too.

Québec City looked a lot like the beginning of what I'd

seen the end of back in the early 1970s: a countercultural movement with a powerful, articulated politics. We know how that older movement was dismantled, not only through its own internal contradictions, not only through the secret police picking off key people (as they're already doing now), but also by channelling rock music and other spaces of freedom into commodity zones.

What I see today, in the wake of that, is a situation where the only party in town, the only one that can really get you high, is 100 per cent political. Québec City, my friends, was the biggest party you've ever seen, maybe the beginnings of a new political party. It was collective Dionysian political theater. And everyone knows it. There was no real violence: almost no gratuitous smashing of private property (some would say not enough broken banks), no deaths as there might easily have been, not even many broken bones. That level of sublimation was deliberate, and Canadians can be proud of forcing compliance from their cops, who simply were not given the right to break bones and kill. Because the idea is not for us to become the terrorists they want us to be – the idea is to go somewhere we've never been before, to change politics, to change life. To express the violence of contemporary capitalism, to make it real here and now where the power is, and to go beyond it in the same movement. We don't know what 'the revolution' will look like. But we know so many other things: about the nature and structure of exploitation and domination in the present, about the way it is ideologically supported and engineered to bypass any democratic political process, about

its key points of weakness, about the new possibilities for organization, and the sharing of both information and decisions. We also know about the course of radical democratic and socialist movements in the past, about the traces and resources they've left in our societies and our hearts, about the political and social rights we've gained collectively over centuries, rights that the state can't take away without losing all its legitimacy and increasing the force of the movement, as it is doing right now.

We know all that, and that's why no one is allowed to dominate, why no-one's in control. But more and more people are starting to play the great revolution game – carefully, with love and intelligence, urgency and foresight, and with the sense that if you make the right moves now, someone else may surprise you tomorrow. As 60,000 people surprised us, beyond all hopes, and in ways we still have yet to thoroughly understand, last week in Québec City.

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Note: These texts are from three emails sent at the time

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**Resources:**

- » **Hemispheric Campaign Against the FTAA:** [www.movimientos.org/noalca](http://www.movimientos.org/noalca)
- » **Dinero Gratis:** [www.sindominio.net/eldinerogratis/](http://www.sindominio.net/eldinerogratis/)
- » **Yomango:** [www.yomango.net/](http://www.yomango.net/)
- » **Cactus Network:** [www.cactusnetwork.org.uk](http://www.cactusnetwork.org.uk)
- » **Ne Pas Plier:** [www.nepasplier.fr](http://www.nepasplier.fr)
- » **Tendance Floue:** [www.tendancefloue.net/](http://www.tendancefloue.net/)
- » **Universite Tangente:** [www.universite-tangente.fr.st](http://www.universite-tangente.fr.st)

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distribute land parcels, allowing the workers to grow millet and corn, and requiring that they give half of the harvest back to the owners. Union organizers are frequently assigned to the smallest portions of the least fertile land.

**>> June 7 >>** Demanding that the government revive the industry, 12,000 miners converge on La Paz, Bolivia, and vow to stage daily marches and blockades

until their demands for better housing, working conditions, nationally negotiated contracts, and debt forgiveness are met.

**>> June 7 >>** Massive demonstrations shut down much of Colombia's urban centres as a month of strikes and work slow-downs by teachers, state workers, and students culminate in actions targeting an IMF meeting with the government. Major riots take place across

Bogota, and the police respond with water cannons, tear gas, and truncheons, while the city bans liquor sales indefinitely. Highways are blocked nationwide.

**>> June 15 >>** The All-Indonesian Trade Union organizes a massive strike against the government decree proposing to dilute labour laws and cut severance pay for retiring and resigning workers. Under the threat of the strike, the Government backs down.