

Alternative Anti-capitalist and Anti-war Village

A First-Hand Report on the Anti-G8 VAAAG

a Villager

2003

translated & edited by FE collective members

This article was written by a participant in the VAAAG, the Village Alternatif Anticapitaliste et Anti-guerre (the Alternative Anti-capitalist and Anti-war Village) that was created during the Group of Eight summit meeting (G8) in Evian, Switzerland during June 2003. The anonymous author wants to make it clear that s/he was not a member of the coalition protesting the summit, the Convergence des Luttes Anti-Autoritaires et Anticapitalistes Contre le G8 (CLAAAC G 8). This text, the author says, is “addressed to comrades and companions on the other side of the Atlantic and elsewhere.”

Setting the Stage

When the blood-letting overlords of this world decided to hold the G8 conference in Evian, French libertarians launched the idea of a building a VAAAG anarchist village in France near the Swiss border. The VAAAG broke sharply with the Trotskyites, reformists, and ecological groups who rejected anti-capitalism and sought only to make the G8 more receptive to European left-wing political parties and reformist groups. Those groups formed the VIG (the Intergalactic Village) that was built next to the VAAAG but it functioned on centralized principles. A womyn-only feminist village, G Spot, was also built.

Tension in the area was palpable even before the construction of the village began due to the militarization of the region (ground-to-air missiles stationed on surrounding mountain tops, increased security check-points at the borders, large numbers of soldiers and military helicopters). The Franco-Swiss border region is mountainous, urbanized, conservative and wealthy on the Swiss side—all in all, not very favorable conditions for anti-capitalists coming from all of France, Europe, and North and South America. The cities of Evian and Thonon were inaccessible to outsiders and heavily policed, and memories of what had happened in Genoa weighed on everyone’s mind. To make matters worse, the statist groups appeared to be collaborating with the authorities, as in their statements to a local newspaper claiming that “the class struggle is over.”

But it was exactly this tension which made a village—a place for meetings, socializing, debates, and the concrete experimentation of libertarian principles—more pertinent than the spectacles of a counter-summit and demonstrators attempting to march on the G8 meetings. France’s social climate at the time played an important role as well—there was a growing threat of a general strike in response to the right-wing Chirac-Raffarin government’s offensives against many social programs. It is important to understand that the French (and’ European) bourgeoisie have decided to liquidate much of what the proletariat had obtained through decades of struggles, like public services, social security, and medical insurance. The subsequent atmosphere of class struggle limited the degree of repression in France, since the government couldn’t risk a billy-club incident that would spark and escalate major social conflict.

The Village

The VAAAG covered two large fields and was surrounded by a small forest. This site had been permitted by the authorities on the assumption that such a space would help to concentrate and confine the most radical of the anti-G8 protestors. One minute away was the authoritarian leftist VIG, built in a large field. The town of Annemasse (population 40,000) was a 15-minute walk away and the Swiss border was an hour's walk away or ten minutes by car.

The plan was to have the VAAAG's political activities (debates, demonstrations, workshops, forums) between May 28 and June 3. A four-page document (well-written and free of the usual wooden language of militants) had been prepared by and for the participants. The first three pages presented the libertarian ideas behind the VAAAG and similar projects, provided a list of contacts, and included a questionnaire about the participant's material and human resources that could be contributed to the Village. A tract attempting to explain and de-dramatize the situation was also distributed to the local population.

Area militants had been scouting out the location, clearing paths, and depositing basic materials since the middle of May. I arrived a week later, just as construction began on the first building, "Kitchen 1" (two big tents, one for preparing food and one for eating). There were only about fifty of us who could liberate ourselves from the deadening routine of *méto-boulot-dodo* in order to start working on the Village.

The Village was organized along two axes: the barrios (neighborhoods) and collective spaces. At the heart of each barrio was its kitchen that, for practical reasons, was staffed and supplied by groups or individuals from different geographic regions (the Paris kitchen, the Lyon kitchen, the Nantes kitchen; the Heidelberg kitchen, and so on). Villagers were free to stake their tents wherever they wished.

In addition to spontaneous discussions, each kitchen held a general assembly every morning after breakfast to discuss practical and political matters and to choose their delegates (at least two) for the daily inter-barrio assembly held daily at noon.

The inter-barrio collective spaces consisted of the welcome zone; the medical, legal, and Indymedia tents; and tables with publications from a variety of radical presses. And I can't forget to mention the chemical toilets installed by the municipality, the ecological toilets that had been dug in the forest, and the hand-held showers. By May 29, the collective spaces were in place, and on the schedule were demos, blockades, and numerous debate-discussions (on the relationship between France and Africa, roundtables with libertarians from Latin America, the plight of illegal immigrants in Europe, the struggle to safeguard public services by the anarcho-syndicalist CNT trade union, anti-specism, feminism, the privatization of water, squatting, agitating in the suburbs, anti-militarism, and so on). And I should also call attention to the Village broadcasters of Radio VAAAG.

For many participants, the most successful aspect was the actual experience of the Village itself. It may have been because of the high quality of interaction and connection of this human community that went beyond the dead, totalitarian world of authoritarianism and spectacle; or maybe it was the efficiency of the anarchist organization; or perhaps it was the act of providing another way of relating to work, of opening up the possibility to build and to live outside of the confines of wage labor. "I never want to work again" is a vow almost impossible to keep, but the Village provided the conditions and determination necessary to do everything possible to keep this promise and to struggle more than ever against capital and the state.

Concretely

Unlike the VIG, the VAAAG wasn't a campground for activists. It was an experience in autonomy loosely organized into a village model. Being little more than a collection of camps and small tents for militant groups to display their wares, the VIG had no soul; the VAAAG, on the other hand, was full of life because it chose to value the individual and constellated itself around the neighborhood kitchens.

In fact, many people from the VIG moved to the VAAAG, commenting on its warmth. What I'm describing here is not stupid sectarian rivalry but the result of strategic choices that differentiated the two villages.

The motto that “anarchy is order without power” was wonderfully illustrated by the Village, which remained clean and well-arranged in spite of the thousands of residents and the “visitors” from the VIG and elsewhere. Technicians from the nearby town expressed surprise at the anarchists’ level of organization. This even caused problems when people from the VIG started using the Village’s showers and toilets, which were cleaner and more efficient than their own.

To help facilitate in this venture, the “welcome team” (of which I was a member) was scrupulous in greeting all participants and guests and carefully explaining the principles of the VAAAG. We were also responsible for turning back motorized vehicles and for escorting visiting journalists. At night, “serenity teams” made the rounds to see that campfires weren’t burning too close to tents and to deal with the occasional hostile intruder (usually cops and journalists) and the techno adepts who raved the night away in a nearby field. Unfortunately, they also had to intervene when machos harassed the villagers of G Spot.

All was not perfect, however, as internal communication was weak. For example, translation was inadequate until people from Quebec adopted the small group model of translation used by radical groups there.

Work in a Libertarian Village

We often have theoretical debates about the nature of work. At the VAAAG, libertarian ideas confronted the necessity of preparing the Village and making it function with a lot of pressure and very little time.

During the first few days, tasks were listed (digging ecological toilets, building showers, tables and benches, setting up tents, cutting wood, cooking) and we worked together in small teams. Of course, we used as much recycled material as possible. Tools were stored in the Storage Tent and could be borrowed as needed (although there weren’t always enough tools, unfortunately).

Frequently, the same people do all of the most unpleasant work in militant circles, but at the VAAAG, everyone agreed that sharing of tasks went well. We worked for the good of the community, without money, and we were ‘free to rest or change jobs whenever we felt like it.

However, we’re all affected by our authoritarian society. For example, I immediately began to feel guilty whenever I had nothing to do—how could I rest while others worked?! After a few seconds of reflection, I would laugh at myself. When others asked me and someone else for help, we joked that we were functioning as the Village’s unemployed as we joined them. Slowly, we were able to lose the spirit of productivism and began to have fun while working.

The differences between having a job as an assistant cook and helping out at the Village’s neighborhood kitchens are beyond words. Although the tasks were basically the same, they were carried out in the context of a non-hierarchical organization of labor that was divorced from wages and other monetary-based relations, tempered by real job-sharing which permitted short work shifts. These modifications really changed everything.

People easily transmitted their skills to others; when no one knew what to do, we experimented. It was great to figure out how to build a bench with two other people!

The Last Day

We invited residents of the surrounding communities to share a meal with us on the last day of the Village, when many of our Villagers had already left. We wanted to thank the people of the area for their welcome in spite of the propaganda against us. Once our neighbors arrived, we began with a general assembly that demonstrated how libertarian groups function. First, our guests took turn speaking and they could ask questions and made comments. Everyone thanked and congratulated us; they praised autogestion, [workers’ self-management, the cleanliness of the Village, and our openness, and most said that they found our initiative to be legitimate. The question that was continually raised concerned what was to be done next: how do we continue what was accomplished in the Village? One of the answers offered was to commit ourselves to reproducing the guiding practices and principles of the VAAAG in future social struggles, in everyday situations, and in our communities.

We then went on to explain how 'the Village functioned' before continuing conversations between Villagers and local residents over a meal. Connections were made and people agreed to meet again and act on their concerns. The evening ended around a huge bonfire of joy and resistance. Children, adults, libertarians, neighbors, anarcho-communists, anarcho-individualists, and everyone else shared this last evening of the Village to the sound of drums, guitars, accordions and lively, animated conversations.

Here are some comrades' comments that I remember from that night:

* "Let's reproduce the Village on a long-term basis without waiting for some counter-summit to motivate us."

* "Let's continue to practice our alternatives without cutting ourselves off from traditional social struggles, or from situations where we are forced to react instead of acting. Autogestion is important, but we can't wall ourselves off in alternative monasteries."

* "As a laboratory for our experiments, this Village was the best kind of propaganda by deed, far more effective than producing tracts and convoking assemblies."

Finally, to end this account on a personal note: while in the Village, I observed that everyone participated without the sectarianism and dogmatism that is so common in the French radical milieu. When working or sharing with someone, no one thought to ask "Are you a libertarian communist, a member of the Federation anarchiste, or a nonaffiliated individual?"

This may have been the first time in my experience that so many people from so many different organizations and so many who were not members of an anarchist organization found themselves working side by side towards a common purpose.

Other perspectives are available on the Village at the VAAAG homepage:

<http://www.vaaag.org>

The homepage for the CLAAAC G8:

<http://www.claaacg8.org>

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