

Resistance is possible

2004 RNC Protests

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2004

The Republican National Convention (RNC) was the ultimate slight to New York: those who made careers and a quick buck off the September 11th events returned to feast like vultures on the corpses of the dead, attempting to rally support for a failing war and a disastrous regime by parading around near the site of Ground Zero.



On A-29, the legendary anarchist collective The Living Theater performs the “Code Orange Contata” in the streets (photo by Sunfrog)

The RNC 2004 protests showed that resistance is possible in this country quickly sliding towards old-fashioned homeland fascism: a vast multitude of people are getting ready to roll against the corporate aristocracy that runs this country. Popular hatred against the government, particularly as symbolized by its leading figurehead George W Bush, was at an all-time high. In New York City, during the months preceding the RNC, Republicans not only lacked support but were openly hated.

The Protest that Never Sleeps

The protests began in earnest on Thursday, August 26 and lasted for a week. On Friday night, the largest Critical Mass in NYC history seized the street in defiance of the terrifying environmental costs of this oil-driven civilization. Over five thousand bikers of all stripes and colors seized the streets for two hours, fouling up traffic in Manhattan and generally humiliating

the police, who have never been able to control Critical Mass in NYC.

On Sunday, the United For Peace & Justice march slowly but surely gathered in the streets. The “Don’t Just Vote, Get Active” campaign called for a “Unified Direct Democracy and Direct Action” contingent to deliver “a radical message to what otherwise might be a reformist event.” Gathering the Rhythm Workers Union and the Infernal Noise Brigade, the Pagans and the Greens, colorful hippies and black-clad anarcho-punks, pink-clad musicians and radical cheerleaders, this amalgamation grew into one of the largest and most festive contingents in the entire march.

A huge Green Dragon of Self-Determination led the entire contingent, taking up almost an entire block. A small group of people with strange signs urging people to “disassemble the totality of power,” holding black umbrellas to hide themselves from the ever-present cameras filming on the tops of buildings, gathered behind the dragon.

Others danced in front of the dragon, and the march seemed to be riding a crest of sheer joy as it approached Madison Square Garden, where the convention was to be held.

At this juncture, right in front of the convention center, the sound system of the dragon finally ran out of batteries. In this opening, the Pagans began their inspiring Spiral Dance, and then, as Starhawk of the pagan cluster wrote, she felt “some powerful earth energy, a kind of raw life force that pulsed and thundered and rose up into a great, focused cone of power.

Someone told me to look behind, and in the relatively empty space between us and the line of cops at 34th St., the dragon was burning.” The Green Dragon had burst into flames. Police retreated behind their barricades, and then gathered forces and began arresting people at random. A spontaneous Black Bloc appeared, defending themselves from the attacking police by throwing bottles as the flames raged behind them.

To this day, no one knows exactly why the Green Dragon went up in smoke. I was dancing relatively near it and have no idea if it was a malfunction, a Pagan spell, an undercover Black Bloc using the Green Dragon as a Trojan Horse, or just some random act of madness. Regardless, in this downright surreal course of events, it became clear to me as the crowd fought back against the police assault that at least some people were bored of marching around aimlessly in circles and wanted to take militant direct action against the powers of the State. At one point, the cops even retreated from the crowd.

After the march, many anarchists and other angry citizens who weren’t already at Broadway went there to participate in the “Chaos on Broadway” and “Mouse Bloc” actions. This is where another phase in direct action began, one that fit almost perfectly the personality of New York City: small groups followed Republican delegates around New York and made their lives a living hell by being as rude as possible to them. On Broadway, I was greeted by an amazing sight: hundreds of protesters gathering in both large clumps and small clusters, undercover cops everywhere but seemingly unable to do anything, hundreds of ordinary tourists wandering about, and the cops generally losing control of the situation.

Generally, the rule seemed to be that groups of protesters who were wearing bandannas, holding up anti-Bush banners, or dressing in even more black than is usual in New York City, were targeted by the police and arrested as soon as they attempted to do anything even mildly illegal. However, many protesters were dressed for the occasion, easily blending into the constant stream of tourists on Broadway. The cops were unable to arrest everybody, as the Republicans, protesters, and unsuspecting people passing by were mixed together. The protesters appeared as if by magic just where the Republicans were, as the Republicans could be easily identified by their blue tuxedos and red badges, as well as their pasty all-white faces and the gleam of greed and religious fundamentalism in their eyes.

The organizational backbone of the whole event was the text messaging txtmob.org set up by the Institute for Applied Autonomy. A network is only as powerful as its communications. Tactical information about the location of the police and the Republican delegates was sent out to hundreds of small groups of protesters, who used the information to gather and disperse quickly. It was the second coming of smart mobs, a fading trend given new life by a political objective.

It was definitely not a pleasant night out on the town for the would-be masters of the universe. The arrogance of the Republican delegates was shocking: most of them didn’t even have security or bodyguards. Because of Iraq, everywhere the delegates went there were both peace signs and fingers in the air, and the promise of “RNC Not Welcome” fulfilled itself, lasting hours until the cops finally managed to arrest several hundred people and the remaining protesters left tired but smiling.

The direct action plans for Tuesday originated as some strange plan for a coordinated primal scream. When I went to one of the planning spokescouncil meetings, they were passing around a flower to denote who was given the floor to speak. While I understand there are cultural differences between the East and West Coast, I somehow had difficulty imagining actual New Yorkers in that meeting.

Still, when the day of action on Tuesday actually took place, it was impressive. Using the same text-messaging techniques employed successfully in the Broadway actions, large masses of people attempted to block intersections and hassle delegates, bringing large parts of Manhattan to a standstill. The police responded by arresting as many people as they could, as quickly as possible, with little regard to what they were actually doing or if any laws were being broken.

At one point cops surrounded me and a friend with the dreaded orange netting. The orange netting was more of a psychological barrier than a physical one: riled up crowds sometimes broke through it. However, most of the crowd I was with didn't even seem to notice that they were about to be mass-arrested. I walked calmly up to a cop, stared him straight in the eye, and said "You are not arresting me. I'm not a protester. Let me go." The Jedi mind trick worked, and the cop meekly opened up the orange netting to let me and my friend out. Reports kept flooding in that people were sitting in the streets blocking traffic, and groups like the TrueSecurity Cluster did in fact seize a block occasionally.

There's a Song Beneath the Concrete

If anything, the RNC protests showed that domestic dissent is alive and well in the United States in the face of the creeping fascism of the Bush regime. This happened against overwhelming odds and broke a spell of several years of bad luck. As anarchists, it's not our job to lead by giving commands. We lead by being an inspiring example, and the RNC was an example. We need more heroic examples to show that resistance is possible. We anarchists seek not to represent the people, for we know people can only represent themselves.

We're not superheroes, but ordinary people, dirty and tired, weary yet still smiling, toiling away at mind-numbing drudgery and acting with unbelievable heroism for the dignity of life. We all have the courage we need within us. We can feel it in our bones and in the soil. As Aresh and the folks working in the community gardens in the Bronx know all too well, the soil is still rich and fertile beneath the concrete skyscrapers of New York. All that is required is that we have the courage to break open the concrete. And in New York, I could almost hear the concrete breaking.

— Alexander Trocchi, CrimethInc. International News Agent Provocateur

For a much longer version of this piece, please visit: www.rncnotwelcome.org/rncredux.html

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Fifth Estate #367, Winter 2004-2005

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