

Blocs, Black and Otherwise

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As one middle-aged mother observed while members of the Quebec Black Bloc hugged each other before going off to battle the cops, "I always thought this was going to be sinister, but these are just brave kids!"

For a more specific consideration of dressing for anonymity, consult [Fashion Tips for the Brave](#)

Materials

- Matching clothing that conceals the wearers' identities
- Trust and communication
- A mission

Optional Materials

- Provisions: water (plenty, especially if you'll be dressed in hot gear or expect chemical weapons attacks), food (don't rely on shops or shopkeepers in contested zones), etc.
- Camouflage: different layers of clothing for different purposes or stages of the action
- Defensive gear: banners, shields (possibly disguised as puppets or placards), steel-toed shoes (should still be comfortable for running!), body armor or padding, gas masks or goggles and bandannas soaked in lime juice (store in ziplock bags until necessary), rain coats or chemical protection gear (if there is a risk of chemical attack), whatever relevant medical supplies you know how to apply, etc
- Offensive gear: spraypaint, projectiles, slingshots, signs or flags on thick poles (or just plain poles), molotov cocktails, bright lights (to obscure police or camera vision during night actions), ladders and/or bolt cutters for scaling or breaching barriers, etc.
- Communications equipment: hand radios, cell phones, police scanners, flags, drums, shared codes for making internal announcements
- Transportation: bicycles, enough change for the subway, keys to your SUV (easy there, killer, it's just a joke!)

What is a Bloc? Are there other kinds besides the Black Bloc?

You may have heard of the notorious Black Bloc, a venerable, if not doddering, anarchist tradition in which a mass of direct action enthusiasts gather, all wearing black clothing and masks, and engage in some level of confrontational activity. This tactic has won some famous victories in the past couple decades, and failed more times than anyone can count, too. The specific cultural characteristics that are associated with the Black Bloc tactic today can make it easy to overlook the long history of the Bloc tactic and the wide variety of applications for which it can be used. The Boston Tea Party, for example, was a perfect example of a Bloc at work: the participants organized secretly, wore matching disguises (though their choice to costume themselves as "Indians"

wasn't exactly politically correct), and engaged in a mass act of provocative property destruction; presumably their strategies for communication and mutual defense weren't much different from those used by the famous Black Blocs that, a couple hundred years later, attacked similarly noxious coffee corporations in Seattle. Those who practice direct action would do well to keep in mind the wide range of scenarios in which a version of the Bloc approach can be useful.

What is a Bloc good for?

Acting in a Bloc is especially useful when the participants in the action expect that the police, fascists, or other adversaries will wish to identify the participants—which is to say, very often, nowadays. When everyone in a group looks the same, it is difficult to single out individuals. Many militant activities are better carried off in a way that attracts less attention, but there are situations in which it is necessary to step outside the limits in public. The Bloc tactic is best for conditions in which the action called for occupies the grey area between overt and covert, and as such it must be applied carefully: if you participate with a Bloc in an entirely legal action, you may make a target of yourself unnecessarily, or needlessly frighten bystanders. On the other hand, if you intend to engage in serious organized illegal activity, you might be better off doing so outside the traditional Bloc format, in a totally closed group, with the element of surprise and so on. It's not a coincidence that people don't usually liberate animals from fur factories in Black Blocs (although this did occur once in Brazil).

One of the positive sides of public Bloc activity is that, unlike entirely underground activity, it can create open-ended situations, in which the actions of a few can open the floodgates for others to join in. At best, invite-only militant actions are a spectator sport; a Bloc, on the other hand, can be a participatory and contagious radicalizing experience.

The most obvious way to facilitate this is to organize an open or semi-open Bloc. In an open Bloc, a general call goes out to all interested to gather and act in a Bloc; open meetings are held to discuss goals, strategies, and so on. The benefits of such an approach are that more people can be involved; the obvious drawback is that security is so compromised that the possibilities for action are severely limited. In a semi-open Bloc, the organizing takes place in secret, between people who know and trust each other, but when the Bloc itself comes together, others in Bloc attire are welcomed to it; in the past few years of Black Bloc activities, this has been the most frequent format. In such Blocs, it is still necessary that the participants be prepared to deal with infiltration, but they at least have the benefit of secure planning and internal structures. In an entirely closed Bloc, the participants prepare in secret and do not welcome the participation or company of any outsiders during the action. Even when such a Bloc is called for, it can still be valuable to act openly, as a Bloc, rather than covertly: the public nature of the action may send an important message, others outside the Bloc may be inspired to engage in similar actions of their own, the crowd cover itself might enable an escape that would be more difficult for those opting for a clandestine approach.

There are many reasons to act in a Bloc. Bloc participation can be exciting and good for morale—acting in a mass of people who are ostensibly prepared to do what they believe is right regardless of police intimidation is often a hell of a lot more empowering than chanting weakly with the liberals, and matching battle-dress is a ritual for inspiring courage that need not be abandoned to our uniformed enemies. A Bloc presence may convey important information: to

the powers that be, *don't fuck with this march*, or *don't you dare rig that jury*; to allies or possible allies, *don't despair, we're with you*. Finally, anonymity: there are countless reasons to conceal your identity at mass actions. Even if you do not plan on committing any crimes, even if you don't mind the secret service capturing your image for their files, you still do a great service to others by masking up and increasing the number of people who are disguised, thus making it more difficult for the police to keep up with all of you. Those others might not just be criminals, either; they might be foreigners who don't want their participation in radical activities to be used as grounds for deportation, or teachers who don't want to risk losing their jobs. Sometimes a masked crowd is unnecessarily intimidating to the public; sometimes few enough people are masking up, or police attention is so focused on the Bloc, that you may deem it safer not to draw attention to yourself by doing so, even if you may engage in illegal activities; and sometimes it's better to show your neighbors where you stand, or let the public and the cameras see that not everyone involved in radical activity is young, white, and male. Otherwise, if others are masking up, you might as well do the same.

Those masks don't necessarily have to be black ski masks, anyway; there are plenty of more fun, family-oriented ways to obscure your identity. Beyond the Black Bloc, endless possibilities open up: pink Blocs, clown Blocs, doctor Blocs, maintenance worker Blocs... Wherever there are a bunch of people wearing either identical clothing or costumes, the Bloc tactic could be deployed utilizing the matching crowd for camouflage. Halloween, for example, could offer a great opportunity for Bloc action—as could a high school graduation!

Where and how can the Bloc tactic be applied?

Black Bloc actions have been a hit at mass actions over the past couple decades: there have been Blocs in the protests at meetings of such despicable gangs as the World Trade Organization, at political events such as debates between presidential candidates, at anti-war demonstrations and solidarity marches with communities that are suffering police brutality. Wherever there is a mass gathering of protesters, it may make sense to deploy or call for a Bloc.

In such environments, the Bloc can serve many purposes. As mentioned before, it can simply be present as a promise of solidarity, or a threat. It can act as a line of defense for or a distraction from other activists doing civil disobedience actions such as lock-downs and blockades, who will be unable to defend themselves from the police. It can engage in property destruction: this can achieve economic ends, such as inflicting financial losses upon wicked corporations, or other practical goals: a city can be persuaded never to risk hosting another fill-in-the-blank, or alienated workers (and even activists!) can experience firsthand that the stranglehold their oppressors seem to have on reality can literally be broken. A Bloc can attempt to prevent delegates from reaching an unwanted meeting, or trap them inside the meeting space to make sure they get the message that their shenanigans are not welcome. It can reclaim urban space, opening up and protecting a street or park for others to reinterpret and enjoy, or rerouting a permitted march into unpermitted areas. It can engage the police in conflict, and thus disrupt business as usual—a meeting in Quebec City to discuss the Free Trade Area of the Americas agreement had to be halted temporarily when tear gas from the streetfighting below entered the vents of the building hosting it. It can offer the possibility of contesting power and control in immediate actions, rather than mere words, and thus keep spirits up and appetites whetted. A Bloc might attempt to set off

full-scale rioting, in hope of precipitating an insurrection—or it could simply create a spectacle, to emphasize the anarchist presence and foreground its romantic appeal: liberal carping about “alienating the public” notwithstanding, the Black Blocs in Seattle and afterwards did as much to increase the mass appeal of anarchist action as any propaganda publication ever has. If nothing else, a Bloc action can be good practice for future such actions that may achieve more.

When choosing goals for a Bloc at a mass action, it is critical that the intentions, needs, and comfort levels of locals and others who will be involved or present be taken into account. Alienating people needlessly is not only counterproductive, but endangers Bloc participants; the police are already enough enemies for anyone breaking the law. The last thing you want to do is endanger others with your actions—don’t throw stones at the police from the back of a crowd, don’t risk provoking police attacks on peaceful marches, especially if you’re not planning on sticking around to bear the brunt of them. If you’re operating in a mostly out-of-town group that will be acting in a residential neighborhood, don’t be so arrogant as to think you should be the ones to decide what level of conflict is most appropriate for the situation—far better you show that you respect the needs and perspectives of the locals, and are willing to follow their lead. There may be cases in which it is appropriate to bring a level of intensity to an action that others aren’t prepared to—for example, if liberal organizers are addressing a gross injustice with useless gestures that will do nothing to put things right—but it’s good form to make sure that the first ones to pay the piper for whatever goes down will be you and your companions, not innocent bystanders.

Similarly, it is important to be realistic about what you can hope to accomplish in the situation at hand, given your experience, numbers, and other resources. If the local populace hates the arrogance of the leaders who are meeting in their city, but mistrusts the equally foreign hordes who have gathered there to protest them, it might make more sense to target those leaders than to smash corporate windows in what the locals might perceive as an outsiders’ attack on their home streets. Take everything into account: the personality of the police force, the current local political climate, how aware others will be of what happens to you and your companions, whether the authorities will want to teach you a lesson this time or avoid inopportune media coverage, whether the police will be trying to secure the whole area (in which case you can expect them to attempt mass arrests, if they have the numbers) or simply protect a part of it (in which case they may resort to dispersal or defense tactics, if they are outnumbered or uncertain). Is your action intended for media coverage, for those who witness it in person, for those who participate in it, or for those who foot the bills? Is your goal worth the risk, is it appropriate to the event in question?

Outside the mass at mass actions, acting in a Bloc is a much riskier proposition, for the Bloc can be easily surrounded and neutralized by the police. Historically, at demonstrations, almost every Bloc that has mixed well with a much larger mass of law-abiding protesters has managed to maintain some degree of safety and coherence, while almost every Bloc that has attempted to operate in their absence has suffered or at least risked serious police repression. Some lessons we can draw from such previous successes and failures are:

1. The Bloc should not operate without either the element of surprise or the benefit of broad crowd cover, at least not unless it is expected to be of vast numbers, high morale, and great defensive experience, or unless the purpose of the action is to get a lot of participants arrested.

2. Announced direct actions (Blocs, unpermitted marches, etc.) at mass events should always take place on or before the big day of general protest, never after them. When direct action precedes or coincides with massive marches and gatherings, it often sets the tone for everything that follows, upping the ante and radicalizing the event in general; when direct action enthusiasts are the only ones left out on the street after the law-abiding activists have gone home, the police know they can isolate, abuse, and arrest them without fear of stepping on the toes of the “wrong” citizens, or being observed by such citizens as they do so. The presence of others who would witness police brutality is an important deterrent; work without it at your peril.
3. Those operating in a Bloc need to have the support or at least the respect of some, if not most, of those outside the Bloc, so as to ensure their safety on the field, let alone general good will in the activist community. In one historic instance, a Black Bloc was surrounded and cornered by police, who were moving in to finish it off when a march organized by a liberal women’s organization was re-routed to pass through the area and provide members of the Bloc with an opportunity to blend in and escape. To this end, it helps a great deal if the goals or targets of the Bloc are instantly comprehensible to outsiders, so whether or not others agree with the tactic itself they can at least understand why it is being employed.

On the other hand, there are cases in which none of these rules of thumb is relevant. Entirely outside the realm of mass actions, as long as the element of surprise is present, there are many other environments in which the Bloc tactic can be applied; indeed, such applications may be the most promising for the future of the Bloc, now that police are very familiar with and prepared for Bloc presence at demonstrations. A Bloc operating swiftly and with the element of surprise against an unsuspecting target can accomplish a great deal, especially if it is of decent size. Consult the illustration at the end of this text for an example of how a Bloc can be deployed outside the demonstration format to wreak havoc on corporate and governmental property.

When acting in a Bloc with no demonstrating mass for cover, the most important advantage you have to work with is surprise. If you organize in such a way that the authorities in question don’t see your action coming, you may be able to get everything done and escape before they’re able to respond. Even when they do arrive, chances are they will not be prepared to make mass arrests, so you can expect them to attempt only to seize individuals; in this situation, the individuals carrying out high risk actions may be able to disappear in the commotion (enthusiasts of civil disobedience could even snarl the police up in petty arrests to facilitate this, though they might thus risk a conspiracy charge if they were connected to the Bloc)—or, if the group is able to act with a high degree of solidarity and audacity, staying close together and not permitting police to get their hands on individuals within it, it might be possible to negotiate a departure en masse, though you can expect to be followed at the very least. It has happened before that groups of activists breaking the law together, who showed that they would not be intimidated nor allow members to be picked off, have been permitted by unprepared police to leave an area in return for concluding their action. It’s also happened that they’ve had rubber bullets shot at them, though! If some of you are planning illegal activity of a serious nature, it may be a good idea to have others in your group applying a wide range of less confrontational tactics, so the police won’t be as likely to treat you all as hard-core criminals. Always be sure everyone in your group, especially the ones who aren’t keen on taking great legal risks, knows exactly what the

highest level of possible illegal activity is in advance, as you never know whether the police will choose to hold others responsible for the actions of those they couldn't catch!

If you're showing up at a corporate office at sunrise, you can expect to be practically the only ones there, and you'll have to count on speed and clever escape routes for your liberty; but there are other situations in which, just as at a demonstration, there will be crowd cover—even potentially supportive crowd cover—to melt into. Who knows, a Sports Fan Bloc mixing with the jubilant crowd celebrating a home team football victory might be able to touch off hard-core anti-corporate vandalism and looting!

When making plans and setting goals for a Bloc action in a particular context, it is always important to look back in history for precedents. If the last time someone tried something similar to what you are trying was a disaster, you had better figure out what new element you can throw in to give yourself a better chance. History tends to repeat itself—at least when we don't use our ingenuity to derail it! Get familiar with the history of Bloc actions over the past few years; whenever you're considering joining in one, pick out and consider the previous example that best indicates what you can expect from this one—keeping in mind, of course, that your adversaries have been doing the same, so counting on a particular stratagem to work twice is a risky proposition. It is at least as important to know when not to do a Bloc action as it is to know when to try one: unsuccessful attempts to act in Bloc, when there are not enough participants available or the conditions are not favorable, can sap energy better applied elsewhere. When you strike in Bloc, strike hard and impressively, then wait for the next realistic chance to do so again.

Structure

Naturally, the affinity group is the basic building block of any Bloc. It is impossible to overstate the importance of engaging in Bloc activity as part of a small group capable of fending for itself and making decisions; to do otherwise is to abdicate responsibility for yourself to the mass, and to deny that mass the benefit of your participation as an equal. Blocs made up of self-sufficient affinity groups can make democratic decisions quickly, can split up into equally effective smaller groups, can handle stressful situations without the added stress of herding a flock of confused followers. It goes without saying that within your affinity group, you should establish common expectations about what goals are, what level of risk is acceptable, what kind of security is appropriate. Security is especially important in Bloc activities, because of the sketchy mix of public and unlawful activity that may be involved; be sure everyone has the same sense of security culture.

Regardless of the total size of the Bloc, each affinity group should be totally self-sustaining, at least in regards to the goals it intends to achieve. Escape routes, legal resources, emergency backup plans, knowledge of the area—every affinity group should have all of these. A buddy system inside a group is useful, so if the group itself is dispersed individuals can take responsibility for the safety and whereabouts of their partners. Internal roles can be assigned: for example, scouts who keep track of activity and police presence (these can be equipped with hand radios or cell phones with which to communicate with the main group, and can ride bicycles for extra speed and mobility; it usually makes the most sense to position them a block or so away from the group, so they can provide early warnings and broader perspective on the area), communications people (also with radios or cell phones, and perhaps a police scanner) to exchange information with the scouts and other groups, runners to communicate new information to nearby

groups, experienced folks to correlate and consider information and take responsibility for making split-second decisions, persons to actually carry out the actions planned, lookouts to cover them, perhaps a flag-bearer or marching band to maintain morale and keep the group visible from a distance, and so on. It might be wise to have one person in non-Bloc clothing to attend the Bloc, to handle such tasks as explaining to spectators that they should not take photographs, for the police can seize their cameras and use the pictures in court. The role the affinity group plays in a larger group can also be specialized: an affinity group could serve as scouts for a larger Bloc, or set out to blockade a particular intersection, or concentrate on maintaining a banner at the front of a large group.

An affinity group can form a small, ad-hoc Bloc on its own, but a larger, more powerful Bloc can be formed as a cluster of affinity groups. In this case, it is critical that efficient and democratic structures be set up within the cluster. It should be possible for news, questions, and answers to be communicated swiftly between individuals within affinity groups and between affinity groups themselves, in even the tensest of situations. Some have argued in favor of a more militaristic Bloc model, that would presumably operate more like the hierarchical regiments our enemies pit against us, but the very strength of the Bloc is its decentralized, unpredictable nature; it seems foolish to try to beat our oppressors at their own game rather than capitalizing on our own strengths. Better we improve our coordination, rather than control: we are conductors setting the stage for improvisation, not military tacticians with underlings and commanding officers.

In a Bloc made up of affinity groups from different areas, the local group will inevitably have the most information about what is possible, and may well consequently have done the most thinking and preparing. This is not necessarily a problem, as long as others trust them and are organized enough themselves to retain their autonomy. The local group should make provisions for sharing as much information with others as is safe, and also be sure not to assume unthinkingly a position of authority over the other groups; a local group attempting to lead an uninformed mass on an unrevealed secret mission can be a real recipe for disaster.

Preparation

One of the most important things to do before an action is learn the area. As many members of each group as possible should spend time traversing it, taking careful note of escape routes and dead ends, cameras, places the police may mass or seek to protect, possible targets, possible resources (barricading materials such as moveable fences, etc.), and above all making sure they will not get lost. Those who cannot be there in advance should at least memorize maps. It is possible to get aerial maps off the internet, for locations for which street maps are unavailable or do not suffice.

Make sure you have safe accommodations before the action, if there's any chance the police are expecting it. Far too many times, the police have raided activist housing before an action and arrested hundreds of people; do everything you can to find a place to sleep and prepare that is off their radar, so you won't run that risk. Stay with a friend of your uncle, or rent sleeping space at a YMCA. Don't be stuck trying to sleep in your car on the streets they're patrolling in preparation for the next day's riot! If you're from out of town, make equally sure your traveling group (which may not be the same as your affinity group) has planned a safe regrouping and departure from the area, and has a backup plan in case of emergency. Keep in mind that if things

really go off, certain parts of the city may be closed off to you after the action, so you'll need to regroup elsewhere.

Advance meetings are a critical part of the preparation for most Blocs. Again, how secure or public these meetings are will depend on how many people (and with what level of direct action experience) you hope to involve, and what degree of legal risk you're willing to take. If you're trying to organize a massive but largely symbolic open Bloc, you might choose to circulate meeting times openly; if you're organizing the core of a Bloc that will be open in the street but needs some preparation in private, tell others you trust to pass on an invitation to the meeting only to those they trust; if you're preparing an entirely closed Bloc, not only should you only reveal the time and place of the meeting to your companions in the action, but you should also make sure they all know not to mention the existence of the project itself to anyone, and to have alibis ready so their other friends won't wonder what they're up to.

Meeting location is an important factor in security. You don't want a place that can be monitored (no private residences), you don't want a place where you can be observed all together (not the park across from the site of the next day's actions), you don't want a place where you can be seen entering and leaving or that someone could enter unexpectedly—post scouts, lock the door once things get started, watch out for anything suspicious. I'll never forget exiting an ultra-high security meeting in a university basement only to discover that while we'd been locked in, a crowd of liberal student protestors had flooded the adjoining room to watch a slideshow—which all the organizers of the next day's militant Black Bloc had to wade through in embarrassment! Oops! Small groups can take walks and chat; larger groups can meet in quiet outdoor settings—go hiking or camping, if there's time—or in private rooms in public buildings, such as library study rooms or empty classrooms. Best case scenario: though he has no idea you're involved in direct action, you're close with the old guy who runs the café across town, and he doesn't mind letting you have the back room one afternoon for a private party, no questions asked.

Once everyone is together, if the folks in attendance do not all know each other already you can establish the level of security by playing the “vouched for” game: each person puts a hand on someone else present they know and trust. Hopefully, everyone in the room will be touching, through one connection or another, and the meeting can begin with some degree of confidence in the air.

If you are part of an affinity group participating in a larger Bloc, you'll want to have your own meetings first, so when a representative of your group attends the larger meeting she can present the information you have, the resources you have to offer, the goals you hope to achieve, and the plans you propose, according to how much of this you trust a larger number of people to know. If this is a mass action and there is a larger spokescouncil meeting taking place, at least one person from the Bloc or in communication with it should attend; it may or may not be safe for this person to identify herself as such, but she should at least be there to take note of what else is going on. A representative of the Bloc could attend the spokescouncil presenting herself as a part of an affinity group hoping to do support for those involved in Bloc activity, and thus test the waters or even meet others interested in the Bloc.

In the meetings with your affinity group and the Bloc, you'll want to establish a plan of some kind for the day (these almost never come off as intended, but they help to get everyone in practice thinking about the situation, and it's good to be prepared to have something to do in case everything does work out), and a structure to facilitate the Bloc communicating and making quick, democratic decisions, as described above. Structure will make you adaptable and thus

effective, whether or not your plans come to fruition. You should establish a meeting point for the Bloc, plans for dispersal, and a possible time and place for regrouping, if that would be desirable should the Bloc be divided early. Share legal information, what resources will be available for those who are arrested. Go over every possible scenario, what you can expect from each other in each of them. Psychology is important here: plan for the worst, but don't demoralize yourselves—you're considering the possible problems so you'll be ready for them, not to talk yourself out of action.

Finally—if there will be more than one language spoken among demonstrators or locals, make sure to learn a few important phrases in each of them: “we are not against you, we want no trouble with you,” “don't run, walk!” “medical assistance needed!”

During the action

It is often wise to write the phone number of a legal contact on your body in permanent marker shortly before an action, so you can be sure it will be available to you if you are arrested, regardless of what else transpires. You may need to know other cell phone numbers and so on for the day's actions: try to learn them by heart, or, failing that, write them on your skin in an ink that you can rub off if absolutely necessary. You'll also want to have enough money on you for food, transportation, and phone calls, but no more, as that would probably disappear in the event of arrest. Remove piercings that could be torn out. Do not carry your address book, or unnecessary anarchist propaganda, or anything needlessly incriminating or illegal; take your I.D. with you if you want to be processed as your “true” identity in the event of arrest, make sure you have no identifying papers on you if you plan on withholding your identity from the police in that event. Carry plenty of water and high-energy foods with you; be prepared for emergencies—if you get separated from everyone and have to spend the night hiding out in a dumpster, you don't want to be starving too—but don't weigh yourself down with anything unnecessary. Carry with you whatever first aid supplies you know how to use that might be useful. Be aware of what medical assistance—such as street medics and clinics—is going to be present in the streets, and have a plan if you have to go to a hospital (a fake name and social security number, and an alibi, if you fear you might encounter police there); be similarly aware of whether legal observers and media will be present in the streets, and whether you'll want them around or far away from you.

Be prepared for the situation at hand. If the police outnumber you, are waiting for you, and there are reporters and civilians in the area, don't come in a gas mask and body armor like the folks in your favorite street riot photographs—they're not going to gas and beat you, they're going to try to encircle and arrest you, and you'll need to be able to move quickly and blend well to avoid it.

Clothing is the one essential feature of the Bloc tactic, and the rock upon which it rests or founders. Far away from the action itself, you may want to practice moving and acting freely in your Bloc gear, so you won't still be getting used to it when it's too late. The whole idea of a Bloc is to look indistinguishable from each other, so make sure whatever your Bloc theme is, everyone is on the same page about it, and that your own clothing doesn't bear any features that distinguish it. In a worst-case scenario, you can make a t-shirt into a mask: use the neck hole for your eyes, tie the sleeves behind your head.

Your clothing should protect you from the hazards you expect, while not weighing you down unnecessarily; it should be adaptable should unexpected situations arise. Layers are key: if possible, wear an outer layer in which to travel to the Bloc action, a layer of Bloc clothing, and then another layer of getaway clothing beneath this—without risking hyperthermia, of course. It may be most sensible to carry the outer layer of your getaway layer in a sealed bag, in case you are covered in paint, tear gas, etc. by the time you need to use it. If you expect chemical weapons attacks, wear a waterproof outer layer that admits no access, and under that synthetic fibers that won't absorb chemicals (cotton will). For serious confrontations, choose a gasmask with shatter-proof lenses and replaceable non-asbestos filters that won't obscure your vision too much; otherwise, you can breathe through a bandanna soaked in vinegar or lime juice (transport the bandanna to the action in a sealed bag; you can carry a lime or two with you to keep it fresh) and wear swimming goggles (these can be obtained in prescription form for those who wear eyeglasses; when not wearing them over your eyes, keep them inside out on your forehead so they won't fog up). You can add a particle mask underneath the bandanna for extra protection. I've read that ear plugs can offer some protection against concussion grenades, but how one is supposed to know when to put them in and when to have them out so as to be appropriately attentive is beyond me. If you expect to risk receiving blows or projectile fire, wear body armor of some kind (sports gear can suffice) and foam or padding, and a bicycle or motorcycle helmet.

A Bloc that intends to defend territory in clashes with the police may decide to use shields. These can be made from trash can lids or cut traffic barrels, inflatable rafts or inner tubes heavily reinforced with duct tape and possibly a layer of tarp, good old-fashioned cardboard, or layered (super-glued together) and reinforced plexiglass. Soften up the handles with a thick wrapping of duct tape so the shock of impact won't break your wrists, and provide plenty of room on the grip so your knuckles don't take all the blow. Larger shields are better for protecting against projectile weapons or functioning as a mobile barricade, while smaller ones provide better mobility and serve better in hand-to-hand combat. A line of individual shield-bearers can form a shield wall, especially if they are practiced at moving together; alternatively, massive multi-person shields can be constructed, such as the insulation board placards mentioned below. The latter shields should have enough joints in them to navigate narrower streets; keep in mind that these joints are also their weakest points.

Slapstick as it is, it often happens that comrades who discussed and prepared together will not be able to recognize each other in their Bloc gear on the day of the action. You may want to identify yourselves to each other early on, especially people from different cities and affinity groups who intend to work together, so it will be easier to keep up with each other in the chaos.

The moment the Bloc forms can be pivotal. Where and when to mask up is a hard question: if you do it too late, once you've joined the Bloc, you risk being identified; if you do it too early, before you've joined the Bloc, you risk being nabbed by the police. Little masked groups walking around before or after events are perfect targets for their enemies. At a big demonstration, one of the best options is to get in your gear in the midst of a large crowd that is not yet under much surveillance, with people around you that you trust, and to move in the body of the crowd to a meeting point with your fellows in the Bloc. Wearing layers is important here, too: if you can start in a disposable outermost layer that makes you look like a civilian or liberal activist (if perhaps one overdressed for the weather), masking up will simply mean discarding it and simultaneously pulling up your mask. At an action in which you have the benefit of surprise, you can always pick a safe, quiet place near your convergence point and mask up there.

In a mass action situation, the convergence of the Bloc should never occur before other protesters are out in the streets; once again, the police will simply pick off the Bloc when no one else is there to provide crowd cover or bear witness. Don't mill around for long at your convergence point—be timely, and get moving. It can happen that the Bloc has a difficult time getting out into the field of action, once it has gathered. One of the best options at a mass action is to have the Bloc form somewhere outside the area of heavy police presence, and move into it (uh, if that's really where you need to go! maybe you should consider what you could accomplish in the other direction...) as part of a much larger group, before separating to act as a Bloc. When moving with a mass of others, a Bloc should keep close to them as well as tight internally; police may try to push in and isolate the Bloc.

Once together, stay tight spatially (with the obvious exception of the scouts, who need to be further out)—you need to keep police out of your ranks, prevent snatch squads from getting in to grab individuals, and also keep your friends at your sides rather than strangers or possible undercover officers. Banners (reinforced with PVC pipe or, far better, if you can get them safely out into the streets, great placards made from tough but limber insulation board, with hand-holds cut into them; these can be tied or chained together, to create a mobile, jointed full size barricade) down the front and sides of a group can offer useful barriers to this end. Remember, your physical presence and togetherness comprise your strength, your readiness to repel police charges and foil arrest attempts is your marching permit. If you strike when they're not prepared to make mass arrests or attack with chemical weapons, they'll be forced to try to intimidate you by singling out individuals for attack or arrest; make this impossible, defend each other and don't back down.

It's possible to conceal useful materials in an area in advance—a dumpster can be filled with sticks and rocks or spraypaint cans. Sensitive materials (such as projectiles) can be transported to the action concealed in puppets, and puppets built from paper mache over stronger stuff can serve as effective shields—though those poor puppeteers get enough shit from the secret service already without suffering on your account too. Keep in mind that carrying a bag of rocks, bottles, gasoline, etc. will not look good if you get arrested. Don't forget, also, that with a simple tool it's always possible to break concrete or asphalt up into projectiles on the spot—beneath the concrete, the paving stones, isn't that how the old French saying goes?

Everyone in your group should have a one-time-only nickname for the duration of the planning and action, so you can address each other without giving away your identities. Those communicating over cell phones or hand-held radios can count on the possibility that the police are listening in; it may be wise for those doing communications to learn a code of some kind, or at least keep in mind what not to say over the air. It can also be good for an affinity group or Bloc to learn coded announcements in advance, so you can communicate openly without anyone else understanding. "Tighten up!", "The pigs are moving in!", "We need to break through their lines!", "It's time, let's do it!", "Split up and regroup at convergence point B!" are all examples of typical announcements you might want to code. Don't use codes unnecessarily, or assume that if you just say "cookie" every time you mean "molotov cocktail" it's going to protect you; clumsy use of code can actually put you in greater danger, for the authorities can claim that your coded terms stood for more serious things than they actually did. Also, don't be afraid to make uncoded announcements to everyone: "Don't panic, stick together!", "We need to get closer and fill in this space here, slow down up ahead!", "Medic!", "Who can verify what he's saying?", "Hold the fucking line!"

In the heat of action, it's easy for all the structures you have set up in your affinity group to dissolve as individuals get caught up in new developments. Don't lose your head and let the mob mentality take over; make sure to stay spatially close with your group at all times, keep in communication with them about what is happening, don't get distracted from your role. It might help to have an informal formation—you can stay a couple paces behind a particular companion at all times, with another friend always at your side, and another behind you, for example. Plans will change, but don't lose the structures that enable you to change them in unison.

Don't panic, don't believe unsubstantiated rumors. You probably won't get a clear idea of what was going on everywhere else during the action until the day after, if you ever do; in the midst of everything, it will be easy to get buffeted about by waves of faulty information, so resist acting on news until you've double-checked it. Don't spread rumors yourself, and don't just tell others your conclusions based on what you've seen or heard—tell them what you've seen or heard and let them draw conclusions too.

Scouts should practice using communication equipment without being obvious, and while bicycling, if applicable; those recognized as scouts can count on police harassment, which will be all the more problematic because they are alone and critical to the success of the group. They should be particularly quick and alert. Those using radios should make sure they have decided together on a channel to use in advance, and a backup channel should there be problems.

Barricades can be made out of anything from newspaper dispensers to burning dumpsters, and can serve to slow police progress or simply halt traffic; if you've scouted in advance, you should be able to get them in place very quickly, amid crowd confusion. Don't ever completely block off an escape route you may need! In a less confrontational situation, you can make it more difficult for the police to follow you in an organized line by simply moving the wrong way up a one-way street, provided there's still traffic coming down it. Offensive use of projectiles is serious stuff—one can go to prison for many years, if arrested—but it can serve to keep police at a distance in order to protect an area, or provoke them into using tear gas (which may actually be a tactic they hoped to avoid). Don't begin throwing projectiles in a small group that can be surrounded—save it for massive clashes in which the city belongs to the police in one direction and the protesters in the other. When you throw, do so as part of a large group, from the front of the crowd, and maintain a steady hail in the contested area. Those behind the throwers can take provide more ammunition via bucket brigade.

If you're planning to do property destruction, come equipped with the appropriate tools. Make sure you're informed about your targets and their weakness or strength; if you get in position and strike that felonious blow only to find you're unable to break the shatter-proof glass, you've just risked a lot for nothing. Sometimes spray paint can be more eloquent than broken glass: "Network TV, keep your eyes on the issues" across the front of the smashed corporate storefront they'll want to film—or, of course, if possible, you can always just spraypaint their camera lenses! Stay abreast of the different stations' coverage, so you can offer a pithy retort to the reporter who accuses you of interfering with free speech: "We saw your coverage of the social forum last night—you know as well as I do you don't care about free speech." Then disappear into the crowd while he angrily telephones his boss.

The most dangerous weapons you should probably ever consider using in a street confrontation are molotov cocktails. Understand that if you use these, you can expect serious reprisals from the police; only do so when you've got a police-free zone behind you and a sympathetic crowd close by that you can escape into without unnecessarily endangering anyone. Best case

scenario, you split from the angry mass in a small team, apply your cocktail, and disappear. Try to aim them at property, not officers, if possible. Of course, with the government spending thousands of dollars on each officer's special storm trooper suit, throwing stuff at cops is practically a victimless crime (and don't give me that shit about more police officers than demonstrators going to the hospital at the anti-I.M.F. protests in Prague—first of all, how many demonstrators do you think felt safe going to those hospitals, and second of all, haven't you ever heard of offensive injuries?)—but you'd be much better off throwing paint bombs at them (which can be made from glass bottles, light bulbs, hollow Christmas tree ornaments, or wax balls filled with paint), or shooting paint gun pellets from your slingshot. If they get paint over their clear helmets and shields, no one's injured, but they're rendered blind in their expensive armor and have to retreat.

There is a variety of police weapons that may be deployed against you: pepper spray, tear gas, water cannons, concussion grenades, rubber bullets, clubs, charging horses or vehicles. Know what to expect in each situation, and be prepared. Sometimes the best defense really is a good offense; a Bloc prepared to act more quickly and courageously than law enforcers expect can disable a water cannon before it is employed against them. Tear gas canisters can be thrown back at the police, but they will be extremely hot when they land; if you expect to be doing this, make sure you have on welding gloves or other serious protection from heat, and that you have a good enough throwing arm and aim to get them out of the area entirely. Don't pick them up until they begin releasing gas—they may explode and injure you. Horses may balk at approaching an area where things are on fire; a less confrontational mass can deter a horse charge by all sitting or lying down.

Police will endeavor to disperse unwanted crowds when they are not prepared to arrest them. Tear gas, concussion grenades, horse charges, rubber bullets, etc. may be employed first, if the mass seems particularly rowdy; then, when they deem it safe, the officers will move in. They will probably do so in lines, charging and falling back to regroup and consolidate their gain before charging again. Violent individual arrests will take place at this time to intimidate the mass, unless the side of the throng facing them is tight-knit and protected by barricades or united by linked arms. While the crowd seems volatile and daring, the police may well keep a distance; if the crowd is confused, passive, or disintegrating, they may move in to form lines in its midst, to speed the process along. At no point should you panic and run—this can only increase your chances of charging into trouble, and endanger others in the process; if others start running, shout out "Walk, don't run!" At the same time, keep moving quickly, keep things chaotic to prevent the police from getting a sense of where their opponents are or what to expect; never let them come together inside the mass.

If you are on the street, they will attempt to force you onto the sidewalk; this thins the crowd, lowers morale, and puts you a step closer to being cornered. If you are forced onto the sidewalk, you can use a street crossing or turn onto a side street to retake the asphalt; banner-carriers can rush forward and block the space to be taken while it is filled with people, as can bicyclists. The same goes for other lanes of traffic, if they are endeavoring to limit you to the one you have seized. If the police cannot get everyone onto the sidewalk, they will at least try to scare the less militant in the crowd into moving onto it and adopting a spectator role, so they can then deal with the hard core contingent; in this case, try to keep moving and circulating so the "spectators" can be absorbed again, though of course if you are moving in a tight Bloc you don't want to lose your cohesion in such a situation. In an urban environment, it can be possible for an organized, alert group to move more quickly on foot than even mounted police officers; always keep moving

and stay ahead of your foes. Sudden bursts of speed and changes in direction can keep them particularly confused—just make sure your group can engage in these without itself becoming confused or divided. To coordinate simultaneous action in large groups, you can shout out a countdown from ten to one.

Police snatch squads can be sent into a crowd to grab individuals the police consider leaders or dangerous (or who have been observed committing a crime). Sometimes you can clearly see the commanding officer point out an individual to be snatched (this can also be the case if there is an officer firing rubber bullets—another officer may be picking out the targets for him, and by watching you can tell who is about to be targeted). The squad will attempt to surround the target, while keeping an open corridor back to police lines. To protect against this, keep a close watch on police movements—they may form a straight line perpendicular to the mass before pushing in. If you know who the target is, get them out of the area and into different clothing. Put your body between approaching officers and the target; keep moving and obstructing their path, while making it seem as accidental as possible, so as not to become a target yourself. If a group can isolate and surround individual officers that have entered a crowd, these will back off if they don't feel in control.

Others can attempt to unarrest individuals who have been nabbed. The time to do this is as soon as the police strike, before they have made their way back to their lines. You'll need a few people to break the officers' grip and others to block their path. As soon as your comrade is free, link arms and disappear immediately into the crowd. The squad will probably try to snatch again, and will aim for the unarresters now too; keep in mind that unarresting may result in more serious criminal charges than the original target would have faced, so only hazard it if you have a good chance of success or the stakes are too high not to. It has happened before that police vehicles surrounded by an angry crowd have been forced to release arrestees, but they have to be trapped there, not just heckled. If their tires are punctured (stick the sidewall, not the tread), that will force them to a halt, but popping tires can be loud—again, don't try this unless you're in a trusted crowd with cover in range.

If you are grabbed by police, keep in mind that even self-defense of the mildest sort can result in assault charges. If you expect your companions to try to snatch you back, keep the arresting officers' job difficult by continuing to move, or else go limp: this will not result in assault charges (though "resisting arrest" is not unheard of), and will force the officers to work much harder to move you. Bear in mind that going limp may provoke them into being even more violent to you. If every arrest they make costs them a lot of manpower and time, your friends will be in a better position to escape or attempt to rescue you.

There's always the chance that the police will totally surround your group and arrest you one by one. If this occurs, you're in trouble. The best defense is to keep abreast of police movement by means of scouts: they may attempt to move up side streets to surround you, or lure you forward while sending a line around to cut off your retreat. If you find your group surrounded by police lines that are thin in one direction, you can attempt to charge out: use your own tight front line, protected with a barrier (banner, shields, fencing, linked arms at the least), to push as a solid wall, potentially with a plow point at the very front to divide them. A Bloc once used a wheelbarrow appropriated from a construction site to front a charge that broke through police lines. Apply this tactic as soon as possible after you've been encircled, before they are entirely sure of the situation, and with maximum confidence if you want it to work. Often your best chance to escape will be all together as a cohesive group; this also allows you to keep your equipment and clothing in the

process, so you can maintain your effectiveness as a Bloc, even if you only choose to use it to escape. On the other hand, if you are part of a crowd that is moving into what you think is a trap, it may be wisest just to disappear onto the sidewalk and out of your Bloc gear before you enter a space you can't escape. If you are hopelessly trapped, make sure you ditch all incriminating items before you are arrested, hopefully in such a way that they cannot be connected to you.

Remember that the police won't be able to make mass arrests unless they have lots of plastic handcuffs and vans or busses in the area, so these can be a good tip-off for what to expect. The same goes for chemical weapons; if they're ready to use tear gas, they'll all be wearing gasmasks themselves.

Think about what the goals of the police will be, and how these affect your options: if they are trying to keep a parade route or fenced area secure, you may actually have free run of other areas for some time. If they are trying to keep a massive march under observation, they will have to split their forces to keep up with a breakaway march; this will only be difficult for them if they are unprepared in numbers, of course, but in certain situations it may be true that ten groups of fifty are much more effective than one group of five hundred. There will be moments during unexpected developments when they are paralyzed waiting for orders; take advantage of these—but if an unusually long period passes without police activity, it may be an indication that they have a trick up their sleeves, such as a new, more heavily armed and armored force massing nearby.

At an action the powers that be see coming, you can expect to be under surveillance by undercover officers, and you may have to deal with agents provocateurs, too. Stay aware of those around you, especially strangers; undercover agents may be easy to identify (pairs of big men with two days of stubble on their faces, nice wristwatches, and communications equipment), or very difficult to. Keep your companions aware of every person you suspect, but don't "out" undercover agents unless you are absolutely sure they are agents (for example, one of your scouts has been following one, and seen him chatting with his coworkers), and something concrete can be gained from it. Unsubstantiated accusations between demonstrators can only make situations more tense and demonstration environments less welcoming. As for agents provocateurs and just plain stupid people, they may be moving among or near you, smashing locally owned stores and private vehicles; whether or not you can prove they are cops or allies thereof, you can certainly make it clear to them that what they are doing is unacceptable and has to stop. Don't get snarled up in a tactical debate in the middle of an action, just make your point (or, in a worst case scenario, intervene) and get on with things.

Stay aware of others, too, besides the police; other demonstrators of more "liberal" or authoritarian bents may take it upon themselves to interfere your activities, unmasking you, assaulting you, or pointing you out to authorities; the same goes for local civilians. Never, ever respond to this with violence; walk away, or run if necessary. A direct action that turns into a brawl with locals or other activists is disastrous for everyone. Attempt to talk out differences, if this appears possible and worthwhile, when tempers have cooled, in a safe space removed from the immediate action; send a spokesperson if necessary, preferably a supporter from outside the Bloc. At the least, this can distract the meddlers while the rest of the group moves on to other actions.

As crazy as things get, remember that the police have firearms, and there's rarely any reason to risk getting killed for an action. A street confrontation with better-armed police officers is almost always going to be something more of a spectacle of confrontation than a no-holds-barred, life-or-death battle; there's no shame in this fact, it's just important to take into account. The police

are restricted in what they can do by what public opinion will decree about it; you are limited in what you can do by a similar question, for whenever you move up to a more confrontational tactic the police will immediately upgrade their tactics to a level higher than yours. In this sense, streetfighting is a matter of chivalry for us radicals: we always permit our opponents the more powerful tools, in order to keep the violence from getting too out of hand—and, of course, to show off how much more noble and courageous we are! If the papers read (as they have before) “Violence erupted when activists began throwing back tear gas canisters fired by the police,” it will be clear to everyone what’s going on.

Stay flexible, tactically. If you showed up in riot gear for a confrontation with the police, but find yourselves totally outnumbered and unprepared, you can turn the other direction and move through nearby neighborhoods picking up trash and beautifying the area—that’ll give the media a confusing message to distort!

Once again, all this will be very different if you are applying the Bloc tactic outside the demonstration setting. Rather than engaging in a confrontation with the police which you hope will be contagious, or at least risking the possibility, you will probably be doing everything you can to avoid encountering the police. Scouts, in this case, will serve more to warn you about the approach of the police than to monitor the lumbering movements of nearby police forces, and, accordingly, may be better posted at freeway overpasses or in disguise outside the liquor store than on bicycles.

Escape: at the end of the action, the final remaining challenge is to get out of your gear and disappear. Layers, once again, are key: under your Bloc clothing, you should be wearing clothing that will make you blend easily with whatever liberal protesters or civilians will be in the area. You may have to get down to this layer at an instant’s notice: for instance, if the police have singled you out and are pursuing you. Make sure it’s a quick and easy transition to make (though not one that can happen accidentally, in the midst of the action!). Try to do this in a mass of inattentive people, or around a corner or in a bush; if you’re seen or caught on camera changing, all that trouble you went to masking up may be wasted. Hopefully you have a clever escape route or two already planned out: an inconspicuous alley, an open space too wide for any police barricade to block, a fence you can climb more quickly than any pig officer. If possible, you might want to lock a bicycle somewhere nearby, so once you’ve gotten away you can hop on that and move quickly; in urban environments, you can also try to get a taxi (provided they’re out and about), or get on the subway (though in a serious situation this may be shut down, or the police checking people coming in), or duck into a restaurant and just eat fries in a quiet corner in your civilian disguise until things quiet down. Unless things have gotten really hairy, you should still be with your partner, if not a few members of your affinity group.

Finally, the number one rule of all direct action: quit while you’re ahead. Take things as far as you can, but live to fight another day, unless this really is the Last Battle.

Afterwards

After the action, gather again in your affinity group at a place and time safely removed from danger and surveillance. Give everyone a space to share how they’re feeling. Discuss and critique what happened, what you learned from it, what it means for the future. If applicable, make sure to report on your conclusions to other affinity groups who were involved, and seek their feedback

as well. If any of you have been arrested or are facing other difficulties such as injury, discuss how to handle this. Celebrate your achievements, offer emotional support, swear and plot revenge if need be. Make sure above all that everyone involved knows they are loved and supported.

Don't ever brag about your achievements in a Bloc, or share anything others don't need to know, especially if it could incriminate someone. Keep in mind that it's possible you've been caught on camera and, however carefully disguised you were, identified by the authorities. In Sweden, a few months after a street confrontation at a meeting of the European Union, early one morning the police arrived at the residences of a couple dozen activists who had been involved and arrested them all at the same moment. That's a worst case scenario—don't let it make you paranoid. Just stay aware of the dangers; if you're doing a lot of heavy stuff, or organizing for it, you might want to live in such a way that your enemies would be hard-pressed to know where to find you any given morning.

Some important related subjects not covered in this recipe:

- Jail solidarity and prison support
- Medical Treatment
- Legal Observers
- Handling arrest
- Counseling and support

Molotov Cocktail: a martini made with too much vermouth and not enough olives.

Account

Local anarchists and Earth First!ers wanted to make an offensive strike against a biotechnology company whose crimes had not been brought to public attention (in fact, the corporation had bribed the local town government). There was considerable discussion about what tactics to use—and there was a huge variety of tactical differences, with some of us committed to non-violence and others being wild militant anarcho-primitivists! Being from small towns in an area not well-known for having lots of activists, we had to work together to allow everyone to participate at whatever level they were comfortable. The non-violent folks could have dropped a banner, or someone might have come at night and shredded the crops, but what could be done that would allow us to work together, be safe, damage this evil corporation, and provide a wake up call such as our placid small towns had never seen before? What better than the 'bloc'? Who says we need a major mobilization or a giant anti-war protest to use such tactics? We can have the excitement and the action of any global day of action any day of the week in our own town. It's not like there's more state to smash in Washington D.C., Genoa, or Seattle than there is in our own neighborhoods. Not only that, but this time the cops wouldn't be ready for us.

Since we were going to combat biotechnology, it made more sense for us to dress in biohazard suits than in black—not only did they disguise us, but they got our message across by themselves. Bought in bulk, they were less than three dollars each. The suits lacked face masks, so we made a quick trip down to the hospital for them. We started spreading news of the action to our friends by word of mouth, keeping our bloc limited to only those we trusted.

Committed folks drove in from out of town and set up a ‘base camp’ for the action at a local farm, building banners, preparing flags, writing flyers and media releases. The excitement was contagious: local puppeteers brought down a gargantuan puppet of an indigenous farmer, and a local farmer wanted to dig up the front lawn of the biotechnology company to plant organic seeds. Work was spontaneously and naturally divided among teams: media, art, etc. The media team made different pamphlets for different people—one for the corporate media, one for people walking down the street, even one for the employees working there to explain to them what was happening. As time progressed and more and more car-loads of people drove down the dirt road to the farm, we knew that Monday morning, our day to strike, was going to be larger than we expected.

We had picked our target in complete secrecy, and only a few people knew its name and location. If somehow word had leaked to the biotechnology company that we were planning something, our action would have been ruined. Unlike many blocs at protests, we didn’t have a horde of protesters to serve as a distraction, so the main element in our favor was surprise. We told everyone else to trust us—it was going to be a biotechnology target somewhere nearby—and that we had scoped it out. Indeed, we had discovered that the entire complex, one of the main research centers for a biotechnology company, had only a few security guards!

This company had genetically engineered corn to feature “traitor seeds,” seeds modified to be dependent on their expensive pesticides. Farmers would purchase these cheap seeds, and then go into debt buying the pesticide, losing their land and livelihood. This destruction of small and indigenous farming and of biodiversity was leading to huge demonstrations in Brazil and India in which these crops were ripped from the ground and the seeds burnt, in public! These seeds were being designed right down the street—and no one even knew about it. The company was so smug they didn’t even hire much in the way of security. Everyone agreed that it was a worthy target, and everyone from pacifists to militants was happy with keeping the exact location secret until the day of action.

The night before, we went over a map, including aerial photos (which are easily downloaded from the internet—try teraserver.com) and detailed maps. We didn’t give away the precise location except to one driver from each of the cars. People were given an all-too-quick training on un-arresting and bloc techniques, and communication equipment was distributed among the affinity groups. This lack of training, especially considering most of the participants had never been part of a bloc, was a great mistake. Still, affinity groups had come together naturally over the few days before the action, everyone joining groups with close friends who wanted to risk the same level of arrest and participate in the same type of action. Without any argument or coercion, autonomous groups had formed for a truly diverse range of actions: climbing on the roof of the building and dropping banners, digging up the front yard of the biotechnology company to plant seeds, doing independent media work, passing out flyers on the sides of nearby highways to the traffic that would be snarled by the spectacle we were to create, performing in a play involving the giant indigenous farmer puppet, acting as police liaisons (a police liaison is a person whose job is basically to delay the police by acting as the ‘spokesperson’ for the group), and, of course, property destruction. Surprisingly, there was no predictable conflict about violence versus non-violence; everyone felt that they were participating in a collective action in which every group and every action was vital to the overall success of the whole project—the project at hand being to utterly humiliate a biotechnology company that had counted on no one even knowing they existed.

At the crack of dawn, everyone put on their biotechnology suits, double-checked their props, and jumped into their cars. We parked in the parking lots of a nearby hotel and family restaurant, and ran into the front yard of the massive biotechnology complex. Immediately groups scrambled up onto the roof and dropped banners; other groups began spray-painting ‘Fuck Biotechnology’ and ‘Free the Seed’ on the walls of the building. Giant banners were unfurled, and within minutes an unearthly play began, with groups of biotechnology-suited people and a traditionally-dressed farmer tearing up the carefully manicured lawn of the company, planting organic seeds, while giant biotechnology corn visuals were erected facing the highway. The employees of the company must have thought one of their own experiments had gone horribly awry, and fled inside, locking their doors and staring out the windows. The security guards, vastly outnumbered, just watched with mouths agape. This entire action was visible from the highway, and more participants dressed in biohazard suits handed our flyers out and carefully talked through the issues with passing traffic—traffic that soon ground to a halt. Within fifteen minutes, our action had completely paralyzed one of the largest biotechnology companies in the world and had frozen traffic on one of the major highways in the United States. Of course, it was the cops that actually shut down the highway—maybe in fear the public would see the spectacle ahead.

Of course the cops did come eventually—although, due to the element of surprise, we had free run of the place for almost an hour. Even when the first cops arrived, they realized like the security guards that they were outnumbered by a large mass of maniacs in biotech suits. They tried “talking” to our police liaisons, who repeatedly told them we had to consult with each other on any decision, a delaying tactic that enabled us to get more of the action done—a mistake in retrospect, since that was when we should have re-grouped and prepared for the inevitable police assault. Even after reinforcements arrived, the cops were afraid to act until some of the businessmen came out of the office and whispered in their ears. A few of the officers began trying to arrest people, starting by arresting the only person they could identify—the farmer. Unfortunately, all the affinity groups were so absorbed in carrying out the actions they had planned they let some precious seconds pass before they could act—and by then the police managed to pepper-spray one individual in the face. However, through quick thinking, our white biotech suit disguises, and some ridiculously brave unarresting techniques (including giving cops wedgies and pulling people free from their grasp) we managed to protect almost everyone from arrest.

At this point the bloc had become a very loose cluster of affinity groups, most folks not even spatially near each other, which played into the hands of the cops. When calls to ‘bloc up’ were made, it soon became apparent most people didn’t have any idea what we were talking about, and had little grasp that by gathering together as a larger group we could stand off the cops—a difficulty due to our lack of training beforehand. Still, when cops came out on bikes, protesters nimbly jumped over fences to avoid them, leading one cop to a near-collision with the fence! For a good fifteen minutes pure pandemonium reigned, with cops unsuccessfully chasing protesters and protesters swarming outside the cops’ grasp without evacuating the premises of the company. The farmer chose to be arrested non-violently while the person who was pepper-sprayed was finally cuffed after a considerable battle. Finally, the cops settled down and agreed to let us move our protest off the premises. Rescuing our giant banners, we managed to regroup our scattered forces and make a quick getaway to our cars. Altogether, out of fifty-some people at the action, there were three arrests.

We tried to make it back to our secret hide-out, only to find out the city had sent undercover cops after us. After some quick driving, we escaped the police and pulled into a truck station—

we had to dispose of our biotech suits, which we were still wearing! We went around back to an isolated dumpster and began throwing our biotech suits and other incriminating evidence inside. Then, to our surprise, we noticed a trucker watching us through his shades. He gave us a thumbs up and a shady smile. Our victory was all over the CB radios!

Reunited at our secret hideout, we gathered around and decided to march downtown and to the jail. Everywhere, people were talking about our action, at diners and in shopping centers, old men and young women—no one had seen it coming, and people got the message! Not only that, but almost everyone was supportive—“I don’t believe they’re putting that in our food,” “they’re messing with God’s creation,” “that company’s just out to make money regardless of the cost to this town or the world”...I had never before seen such a positive reaction to an action. When we finally got to the jail, our boring little town was scandalized—as was the biotech company!

A lawyer agreed to defend the defendants for two hundred bucks, and we raised the money through benefit concerts in which every style of music from punk to bluegrass was played. In court, the cops admitted that due to everyone wearing white biotech suits they were unable to identify exactly who did what, so they couldn’t really make any charges stick. At the end, the defendants were let off with community service and the cops even apologized!

As in any action, there were things that went wrong and things that went right. We definitely had free run of the place for a while, and could have inflicted much more serious damage on the biotechnology company than we did—at the risk of possibly alienating some people. Given the weight of the issue, it probably would have been worth it. We definitely should have done more unarresting trainings—the methods we used, like jumping and wrestling with cops, may be courageous, but are not recommended. We could have also used a good bloc training—people didn’t really respond when folks called out ‘bloc up’ to tighten our ranks. Fifty people together could definitely have stood up the cops, but when people panicked and began running around as lone individuals, the cops managed to nab them. Lastly, we should have had a lawyer ready ahead of time. Still, hindsight is always clearer than foresight, and the creative use of bloc tactics with great public outreach made this an action people in our small town will be talking about for years—and one that’s caused the biotechnology company considerable grief and expense.

There are some that say the bloc is dead, but it is only as dead as the ideas that motivate it. Trying to repeat Seattle is going to fail: those ideas died after they were employed, but they were well and alive at the time because they were new and creative: the cops couldn’t see them coming. Don’t just think about previous blocs, look around you for living inspiration. The real question is not whether the bloc is dead or alive, but what ideas we can come up with for striking the next blow against capitalism. May that next blow be a killing one!

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