

INTRODUCTION

YOU BEGIN WITH RAGE, YOU MOVE ON TO SILLY FANTASIES ...

“So,” Jaggi says. “I have an idea for what Ya Basta! might contribute to the actions in Québec City. The Canadian press keeps framing this as some kind of alien invasion. Thousands of American anarchists are going to be invading Canada to disrupt the Summit. The Québécois press is doing the same thing: it’s the English invasion all over again. So my idea is we play with that. We reenact the battle of Québec.”

Puzzled stares from the Americans at the table.

“That was the battle in 1759 in which the British conquered the city in the first place. They surprised the French garrison by climbing up these cliffs just to the west of the Plains of Abraham, near the old fort. So here’s my idea. You guys can suit up in your Ya Basta! outfits, and climb the exact same cliff, except—no, wait, listen! This part is important—over all the padding and the chemical jumpsuits, you’ll all be wearing Québec Nordiques hockey jerseys.”

“You want us to climb a cliff?” asked Moose.

“Uh huh.”

“And how high exactly is this cliff?”

“Oh, I don’t know, 60 meters. What’s that, about 180 feet?”

“So you want us to climb a 180-foot cliff geared up in gloves and helmets and gas masks and foam rubber padding?”—Moose acting as if Jaggi might actually be serious about this.

“Think of it this way: the helmets and padding would be very helpful if you fall down at all. Which is likely because you have to figure the cliffs *will* be defended.”

Moose: “Oh, great. So now we’re climbing a 180-foot cliff with riot cops all over the top.”

"Oh come on, you're probably all going to get arrested immediately just for *wearing* those suits. You might as well actually do something with them first. And the symbolism would be perfect."

"I refuse to be so pessimistic," I say. "Let's imagine some of us get through. We scale the cliffs. Suddenly we're inside the security perimeter..."

"Well, actually, no," says Jaggi, looking down at the map of the city. The map of the city is drawn in felt tip on a large unfolded napkin, on the table of a pastry shop in New York City's Little Italy, surrounded by various salt shakers and sugar bowls being used to represent imaginary activist and police units, all flanked by empty bottles of beer and a former chocolate cake. Six activists are crowded around the table, three Canadians, three representatives of the New York Ya Basta! Collective—all that are left of what had started as a much larger group. "We're kind of assuming the fence will actually run around the edge of the cliff as well."

Jaggi confers briefly with his two Québécois friends, who nod agreement. One, Nicole, adds another line to the map to make this more explicit.

"You mean we get over the cliffs and we still have to go over the wall?" someone asks.

"Oh come on," says Jaggi. "If you can get up a 180-foot cliff, a 15-foot chain-link fence is going to be a problem?"

"Fine, we're inside." I'm insisting on my scenario. "Fifty activists in yellow chemical jumpsuits and—what was it, some Québec team's hockey jerseys?—make it over the wall. We are inside the security perimeter. We have reversed the British invasion. Now what do we do? Occupy the citadel? Present a petition?"

"Actually, that would be really funny," says one of the Yabbas. "We fight our way up the cliffs past two thousand riot cops, we go over the wall, and then, when we get there, we just present a petition."

"To who?"

"Well to Bush, obviously."

"How do we know where Bush is going to be?" asks someone else.

"He will be staying in the Concord hotel," says one of the Québécois anarchists. "It will be easy to find; you can see it from almost anywhere in the city. Especially easy now," he smiles. "Just look for the building with the surface-to-air missiles on top."

"Plus about ten thousand snipers and secret service men, presumably, with endless high tech surveillance equipment..."

"...which will, in turn, be disrupted by our vast fleet of remote-controlled model airplanes..."

Conversation had, in fact, been seriously degenerating for at least half an hour.

It had started out seriously enough, as one of those three-hour marathon con-

versations about everything. The Canadians were in town as part of a traveling activist tour, put together by the CLAC, a Montréal-based anarchist group whose French acronym stood for *Convergence des Luttes Anti-Capitalistes*, or “Convergence of Anti-Capitalist Struggles.” It was early March 2001. They were touring to mobilize against the Summit of the Americas due to be held in Québec City on April 20, to be attended by every head of state in the Western Hemisphere (except Cuba). This event was to see the signing of a preliminary draft of something called the Free Trade Area of the Americas Act, an attempt, essentially, to extend NAFTA to the entire hemisphere. These efforts, spearheaded by the United States, were, in fact, ultimately foiled, and the people in that pastry shop, unlikely though it may seem, played a significant role in foiling them. But this is a bit of a different story and anyway I’m jumping ahead. At any rate, the conversation started out in a Lower East Side Mexican restaurant called *Tres Aztecas*, where several activists from the New York City Direct Action Network took the visitors—Jaggi from Montréal and a quieter, francophone couple from Québec City itself—out to dinner. Actually, two of the NYC DAN people were themselves Canadians: a couple named Mac and Lesley, originally from Toronto, currently living in New York. She was a sociology student at Columbia, he currently employed as a house painter and volunteer for the National Lawyers Guild. Most of the others were also part of the NYC *Ya Basta!* collective. This was a newly created group inspired by a group of the same name in Italy, whose name, however was derived from a slogan (it means “Enough Already!”) made famous by the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas, who had, in turn, begun their insurrection on January 1, 1994, the day that NAFTA first went into effect.

In activist circles that year, *Ya Basta!* had something of the quality of a Next Big Thing. Probably, this was most of all for their spectacularly innovative tactics: members of the group were famous for covering themselves in all sorts of elaborate padding, made from everything from foam rubber sheeting to rubber ducky flotation devices, combining it with helmets and plastic shields, so one looked like some kind of futuristic Greek hoplite, then topping the whole thing with gas masks and white chemical protective suits. The idea is that, so suited up, there’s relatively little the cops can do that will actually hurt you. Of course, you are rendered so clumsy there’s probably not that much you could do to hurt anyone else; but that’s kind of the point. Its exponents claim the tactic is rooted in a new philosophy of civil disobedience. Where the old-fashioned, masochistic, Gandhian approach encourages activists to hold out their willingness to let the police beat them up as a sign of moral superiority, the “white overalls” proposed an ethos of protection: as long as you refuse to harm others, it is completely legitimate to take whatever measures necessary to avoid harm to yourself. The costume also makes one look rather ridiculous, but that’s kind of the point too. *Ya Basta!* columns

would often play on it by, for instance, attacking police lines with balloons or water pistols. What really impressed a lot of activists in America, though, was that such groups had a real social base. Ya Basta! emerged from Italy's extremely extensive network of squats and occupied social centers (the "white overalls" began, in effect, as the army of the squats). They also had their own intellectuals: around that time the works of Italian Autonomist thinkers like Toni Negri, Paolo Virno, and Bifo Berardi were just beginning to be translated and disseminated over the Internet and were being picked up by activists across America.

I shouldn't exaggerate. In the spring of 2001, the vast majority of American anarchists knew next to nothing of Italian theory. Still, there were certain very enthusiastic exceptions. In New York, the most significant among them was a man who went by the name of Moose. A tall, gangly young man who almost always wore a fisherman's cap, Moose was, by profession, a retoucher of fashion photos. He was also active in NYC DAN. Inspired by what he had read about the movement in Italy after Ya Basta!'s dramatic appearance at the IMF protests in Prague, Moose did a little research and figured out where you could actually buy cheap chemical jumpsuits. He mail-ordered several and started occasionally wearing them to marches. One day, during a police-brutality march, a student from Italy who had actually done some work with Ya Basta! walked up to him and asked what was going on. And, so, New York Ya Basta! was born.

It was, in his conception, simultaneously an embrace of Italian tactics and of some of the broader principles developed by Italian Autonomist Marxism, which emphasized the refusal of work, "exodus" or engaged withdrawal from mainstream institutions, and, critically, freedom of movement across borders. In Italy, "white overalls" had made a series of dramatic actions against immigration detention camps, to highlight the fact much of what was touted as "globalization" actually meant, in practice, opening borders to the movement of money, manufactures, and certain forms of information, while radically increasing the barriers and controls over the movement of human beings. This idea had already struck a chord in North America, where activists were fond of pointing out that the US Border Patrol had actually tripled in size in the years since the signing of NAFTA. A lot of us were already arguing that the whole point of "free trade" was in fact to confine most of the world's population in impoverished global ghettos with heavily militarized borders, in which existing social protections could be removed and the resulting terror and desperation fully exploited by global capital. The question was how to bring the two—ideas and tactics—together.

If nothing else, the prospect excited people. The NYC Ya Basta! collective grew rapidly, just as similar collectives (the Wombles in England, the Wombats in Australia) were growing all over the Anglophone world. Much of the first part of the conversation at Tres Aztecas had consisted of Moose talking about Ya Basta!.