

The “G-Spot” at the Annemasse Counter-Summit: When Feminism Meets the Global Justice Movement

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We know that the emergence of second-wave feminism in the early 1970s owes a great deal to the sexist relations of domination that riddled extreme left movements at the time. Does the emergence of a feminist current both within and on the margins of the Global Justice Movement (GJM), commonly known as the anti-globalisation movement, reveal comparable processes at work? This indeed appears to be the case, based on examination of a striking and possibly unique feminist initiative within the movement protesting neoliberal globalisation: *Le Point G* (The G-Spot). This was the provocative name of a feminist encampment at the G8 counter-summit in Annemasse, France, in June 2003. For four days, several dozen feminists were able to exchange their experiences, thoughts, and plans for action both in association with and at a distance from the rest of the movement gathered for the occasion. This initiative puts the complex and ambiguous connections that bring feminism and the GJM together into question: although a great many feminists join the critique of a form of globalisation where women are the first victims, their demands get little recognition in a movement where gender domination remains significant. But it also raises questions on developments within feminism: the G-Spot, run by young activists, has a special relationship with preceding generations.¹

1. A Separatist Project

The G-Spot took place at Annemasse from May 29 to June 1, 2003, as part of the counter-summit organised to protest the meeting of G8 heads of state at Evian. Although it was an integral part of this initiative, it had a complicated relationship with

1 The data mobilised in this article were collected during a collective study of the Annemasse counter-summit, using ethnography, interviews, and questionnaires. Ariane Jossin carried out the observation of the G-Spot, which was re-enforced by interviews with seven organisers and participants that she conducted jointly with Lilian Mathieu. This study was also published in: Ariane Jossin and Lilian Mathieu, *Féminisme et altermondialisme – Le Point G au contre-sommet d’Annemasse*, in: Christine Bard ed., *Les féministes de la 2e vague*, Rennes 2012, 245–258.

the rest of the GJM. The very history of its emergence testifies to this fact: the G-Spot was not part of the initial counter-summit project, but over the course of its preparation, in reaction to male organisers' sexism, a handful of female Francophone activists decided to conduct a specifically feminist action.

The decision to take encampment or "village" format reproduced, in break-away form, one of the main ways the counter-summit was to manifest itself. Already in autumn 2002, young GJM activists were planning to organise an encampment that would both serve as a rear-line base for actions disrupting the coming G8 and be a concrete manifestation of the "other possible world" their movement evokes. A group of thirty-some French activists, male and female, formed to carry out the plan, but tensions quickly arose over the range of political orientations that might be welcomed in the village. Some hoped to define its scope in strictly anti-capitalist terms, while others, partisans of the broader notion of "anti-liberalism", wanted to ensure that a wider range of currents, including those considered to be "reformists", could find their place. A conflict arose, leading to a scission. Ultimately two parallel villages were built: the VAAAG (Anti-capitalist, Anti-authoritarian, and Anti-war Village) organised by libertarians, and the VIG (Intergalactic Village) dominated by the extreme left.

But this split would prompt another, one of female activists with stakes in one or the other of the rival movements. In fact, the conflict had predominantly mobilised men, and these women saw it as arising from typically masculine, macho behaviours. Discussions were run through with an abrupt tone, peremptory words, contemptuous postures, and implied humiliation, lending them a sexist and homophobic character. In reaction to this detrimental environment, three French female activists drafted a text denouncing the persistence of sexist attitudes and behaviours in the movement. Entitled "Call for the creation of a feminist network in the alter globalisation movement",² the appeal was launched on various feminist lists in March 2003. The text signaled the inadequate prominence of women and feminism in the GJM, and its authors emphasised the need to fight against both the movement's sexist drift and the discrimination neoliberal globalisation imposes on women. There was also the question of reacting to a two-pronged trend that had been observed at previous gatherings, where gender issues had been relegated to secondary status in debates and the gendered dimension of the themes under debate were sidelined.

The positive response to their initiative led to the development of mailing lists a few months before the summit. Discussions between interested women first led to the creation of the REZAF (Feminist Alternative Network), then to plans for a feminist village, christened the G-Spot, at the next counter-summit at Annemasse, which would let them give "the feminist issue its full scope, instead of limiting it to a few passing references". The tract announcing the G-Spot opens with the observation that "we are rather numer-

² The appeal's text may be found on the following website: <http://cdeacf.ca/actualite/2003/04/28/ap-pel-creation-dun-reseau-feministe-mouvement>.

ous, even a majority in some groups, and yet men hold the most legitimate and influential positions". It goes on to point out that "feminist questions are little heard, as much in the analysis of globalisation as in the collectives' everyday practices, which does little toward challenging the practice of power. In addition, tasks are divided: women give out tracts and take turns speaking, and men run meetings." More generally, it seemed "more than necessary to have spaces for discussion, action etc. between women if we want to be the actors of our lives, our political and activist objectives. We are the ones who are subject to domination, it's up to us to organise ourselves to fight it!"

Making the G-Spot a gender-segregated space was conceived of as a way of imposing feminist issues on the agenda of a movement that neglects them, and acquiring some form of autonomy within that movement. In so doing, it "rediscovered" a principle of 1968-era feminism, and one might hypothesise that this rediscovery came in part from the same need to break away from groups where the mixing of the sexes ends up with men monopolising speech and more rewarding tasks. It was also caused by a desire, also reminiscent of "consciousness-raising groups" of the 1970s, to address themes related to intimacy, impossible in mixed groups. With this choice, though, the G-Spot went somewhat against the tendency of recently formed feminist groups (such as the Parisian association *Mix-Cité*), which tend to prefer mixing the genders with the rationale that this gives a less aggressive and more "modern" image of the critique of inequalities between men and women.³ From this perspective, gender segregation seems to be one of the main dividing issues among younger generations of feminists, and is evidence that these various youthful fractions practice a differentiated selectivity regarding the legacy of preceding generations.

The G-Spot is, however, distinguished from post-1968 feminism by its more open conception of sexual identities. Indeed, the camp is not exclusively for women, but for people "identifying as women", a formulation making it possible for transgendered people to participate. In this way it aims to integrate contributions from gender theory disconnecting sexual identities from all biological bases, conceiving of them as social constructions. One may also see here an echo of queer theory, which stresses individual logics of identification and the self-fulfillment of gender in practice. From this perspective, the G-Spot not only illustrates a generational renewal of feminism, it demonstrates its intellectual reconfiguration as well.

2. The Practice of Feminism

The G-Spot opened at the same time as the VIG and the VAAAG villages, on a little piece of land between their camps ceded by the VAAAG. G-Spot activists came from

³ Liane Henneron, Être jeune féministe aujourd'hui: Les rapports de génération dans le mouvement féministe contemporain, in: *L'homme et la société*, 158 (2005): Féminismes. Théories, mouvements, conflits, 102–104.

libertarian and anarchist networks as well as from environmental, Trotskyist, and Global Justice Movements. This geographical middle-ground thus corresponded to their political diversity as well as their wish to cut themselves off from the squabbling that marked the preparation of the two factional villages.

The quantitative study conducted during the summit⁴ gathered 2281 questionnaires from counter-summit participants. Only eight of them declared having gone to the G-Spot. Although it is quite limited, the information they provide nonetheless supplies some elements giving a profile of participants. Respondents were young (between 22 and 32, with the exception of a 57-year-old woman) and educated (all had spent more than three years at university). Four were students, one had an insecure job, and the other three worked part-time; their jobs all indicate significant cultural capital (position of responsibility in an activist organisation, biologist, librarian). Five were French and three Swiss, reflecting a mobilisation that recruits most of its participants in the two countries where it is active. Indicative of the openness to the world found in a majority of Global Justice activists, three had lived abroad and seven speak foreign languages. Although none declared themselves to be a member of a political party, half declared sympathies with the extreme left. Overall, the G-Spot appeared to be a gathering of young activists, some of whom belonged to local-level feminist groups, often rather loosely structured. This current is relatively distant from another feminist component of the GJM, the branch aligned with the World March of Women, which is more institutionalised and has an older membership that preferred participating in the more formal forums held in Geneva at the same time.

At the G-Spot entrance, a sign asked men to respect it as a segregated space, and there was a brochure explaining the endeavour. Campers had set up their tents, put up the pavilion, and built a small kitchen and lavatories. Posters with diagrams and quotes on feminine sexuality drawn from “The Hite Report” evoked the sisterly connection defended by some participants, as well as the homosexuality of some of their number. Horizontality was the rule, as much in the practical organisation as for circulating the right to speak in discussions. This rejection of hierarchy manifested itself during the visit of the feminist activist and researcher Christine Delphy, for example.⁵ At first she sat on a chair in a gathering of about 60 women who were seated on the ground, which led to a protest by some who saw her seating position as one of domination. This meeting was to be a setting for transmitting feminism between the generations, which organisers had designated as one of the G-Spot’s major themes.

4 Cf. Olivier Fillieule et al., *L’Altermondialisme en réseaux: Trajectoires militantes, multipositionnalité et formes de l’engagement: les participants du contre-sommet du G8 d’Evian (2003)*, in: *Politix*, 17, 68 (2004), 13–48.

5 Christine Delphy is one of the founders of the French feminist movement, identified with materialist feminism.

Women from the VIG and VAAAG camps joined G-Spot-based activists for debates and film projections (Carole Roussopoulos's "Debout!" and Marilyn Waring's "Who's Counting?"). The ability to express oneself in discussions without being interrupted by men was the most frequently offered argument used to justify frequenting the G-Spot. At the "talk group" on Saturday morning, the freedom to speak between women without self-censuring personal issues was highlighted most of all. Indeed, sexuality had a central place in discussions, taking the form either of accounts of personal experiences (contraception, masturbation, homo- and hetero-sexual relations, sexual abuse etc.) or of debates on fundamental feminist themes ripe for dissent (prostitution, pornography). There were workshops on other themes, such as ecology, war, and fair trade, approached from the angle of the oppression of women.

For some women coming to the G-Spot, gender segregation meant protection and the possibility of observing the GJM while remaining sheltered, some going so far as to describe it as a "cocoon". This feminine in-group setting provoked some strong reactions from outside the camp, however. Many had trouble understanding the segregation, including women with feminist sensibilities participating with VIG or VAAAG to whom G-Spot coordinators regularly had to justify their separatism. But it was most of all men who saw and denounced the G-Spot as the product of a dynamic of exclusion. G-Spot campers were obliged to add a new sign at the entry, "Please urinate elsewhere", directed at the men who expressed their hostility to gender segregation in this way. This aggressiveness culminated with the violent intrusion of a man and woman into the G-Spot, requiring the intervention of the three villages' services of order.

Because "all the aggressions the G-Spot suffered in and of themselves legitimated the initiative, because they demonstrated how little the level of thinking had advanced"⁶ within the GJM, its coordinators decided to disrupt one of the counter-summit's masculine "strongholds" on Saturday night – the space for rough punk pogo dancing at a concert being held in the VAAAG village. For the feminists this was not only an occasion for denouncing the fact that a reputedly sexist band had been invited to play by and for a movement claiming to be progressive, it was also a question of re-appropriating a space where women were excluded by the practice of violence. By their mere presence, seen as incongruous, in a space reserved for men, and by their adoption of a brutal behaviour thought to be a masculine privilege, the feminists simultaneously revealed and undermined the conditions of the "arrangement of the sexes",⁷ a social order founded on the spatial relegation of women and their exposure to violence.

In fact, the feminists had tried to connect their project with those of the other villages, first with a very poorly attended open meeting with VIG, then by rebroadcasting some of their debates on VIG's radio frequency. Beyond these two initiatives, the main

6 Interview with a G-Spot organiser.

7 Erving Goffman, *The Arrangement Between the Sexes*, in: *Theory and Society*, 4, 3 (1977), 301–331, published in France as: *L'arrangement des sexes*, Paris 2002.

link with the outside was Sunday's united demonstration, during which they unfurled a banner proclaiming "3 billion clits [clitorises] against the G8". For all that, the rally was not devoid of critical distance from the GJM, expressed by another banner wondering: "Who washes José Bové's socks?"⁸ But there was no real G-Spot procession within the demonstration, the majority of campers having rejoined the mixed processions of their respective organisations.

G-Spot also aimed to spark a feminist mobilisation at the conclusion of the counter-summit, in the form of a national network of local groups. Each of the collectives that grew out of G-Spot chose its own way of operating and repertoire of action: women from Lyon, for example, organised actions denouncing sexist violence, while women from Paris favoured the form of a female-only "consciousness group" until 2007. The national network has remained very loose, however, and has not been able to find a sustainable way of operating. A year after the summit, the Internet discussion group shut down. The Parisian REZAF group lasted longer, concentrating its activity on issues of feminine sexuality and masculine domination, but it experienced heavy turnover.

3. Conclusion

G-Spot organisers assessed it favourably upon their return home. The collective management was considered a success, as well as the diversity of the networks they mobilised and the choice of debate themes. On the other hand, if the rivalry between VAAAG and VIG activists leading up to the counter-summit faded once it began, the feminists were faced with incomprehension and hostility throughout its entire duration. The ceaseless and necessary call to justify the G-Spot's merits and the aggression it was subjected to did not damage the feminist in-group sentiment inside the camp, but it did contribute to its isolation in the GJM. Like feminists in the early 1970s who broke away from the extreme left to build a movement protesting masculine domination, their Global Justice descendants had to construct forms of activism apart from a movement they are invested in, but whose patriarchal logics of activism tend to marginalise them.

8 José Bové was at that time a farmer and union leader from the Larzac plateau in south-central France who has become a leading figure of the GJM in France.