



CREOGN Research Note

Gendarmerie Nationale Officers College Research Center

BLACK BLOCS: EVIDENCING MUTATIONS IN METHODS OF SOCIAL PROTEST

As widely acknowledged, the violent incidents having taken place during recent demonstrations against the French government's project for new employment legislation (the controversial *Loi Travail*) were the work of so-called "casseurs", i.e. opportunistic rioters intent on breaking glass. Yet, as correctly underlined by an article in *Le Monde* dated May 28, 2016, there is in fact "a whole galaxy of types"¹ behind this catchword. Relying on media reports describing such events as confused mayhem detracting from the real object of demonstrations, the general public is often quite unable to distinguish between mere vandals on the rampage and organized groups such as the "Black Blocs".

A nexus of activists with German origins

Originating from Germany, Black Blocs were initially small groups of *Autonomen* (autonomous activists) occupying West Berlin squats in the 1980s. Reacting to eviction operations by police forces, these individuals started organizing street protests, wearing black and hiding their faces—hence the name *Schwarze Block*.

The Black Bloc technique was progressively developed through fanzines², specialized websites and punk counterculture. This has enabled its worldwide spreading, as witness in particular its use during major international events such as World Trade Organization, European Union, International Monetary Fund or even NATO summits. Its transnational dissemination is also reflected in the presence of foreign individuals – mainly Germans and Italians – at demonstrations taking place outside their own country. Participants in Black Blocs are highly mobile and therefore facilitate further spreading within targeted countries.

Early media recognition came with the 1999 WTO summit in Seattle where "Schwarze Block" was anglicized into "Black Bloc". In France, Black Blocs were first noticed in late 2000 during the European Union summit in Nice; they later resurfaced with great prominence during the protests at Notre-Dame-des-Landes in 2014 and have now come to the fore again with the 2016 protests against new employment legislation.

According to Francis Dupuis-Déri, the phrase "Black Bloc" must be defined as follows: "A form of collective action with highly specific tactics involving demonstrators maneuvering in groups with the appearance of a solid block in which every participant preserves anonymity via the wearing of top-to-toe black clothing and masks preventing identification"³. Black Blocs are therefore to be distinguished from standard demonstrators by both behavior and appearance. Full black clothing creates a strong visual media impact while reinforcing the two main characteristics of a Black Bloc—unity and anonymity. Behavior is equally original: Black Bloc demonstrators appear tightly grouped within the main procession and remain in compact formation until its dispersal (on the contrary, classic rioters are much more individualistic and tend to scatter as soon as law-enforcement units intervene). The resulting mass effect is intended to project an impressive image of solidarity and strength; for Black Bloc participants, "mass creates safety"⁴.

Though permanent in their appearance, Black Blocs are essentially short-lived since "the makeup of such groups varies in accordance with each new emergence"⁵. Black Blocs are essentially plural and there is no such thing as the Black Bloc; from one demonstration to another, individuals or peer groups who aggregate to form them are not necessarily the same. In fact, a Black Bloc is organized horizontally—without a hierarchy or leader. Its network-like mode of operation offers constituent peer groups a very high degree of autonomy and responsiveness, denied to standard demonstrators. To qualify such characteristics, several authors have described a "trilogy of horizontality, fluidity and changeability"⁶.

1 PASCUAL Julia. Derrière les « casseurs », toute une galaxie. *Le Monde*, May 28, 2016.

2 Independent or amateur printed material created by and for fanatics of any precise subject (a combination of "fan" and "magazine").

3 DUPUIS-DÉRI François. *Les Black blocs. La liberté et l'égalité se manifestent*. 3rd Edition. Quebec: Lux Éditeur, 2007, p. 13.

4 https://infokiosques.net/lire.php?id_article=3

5 Ibid.

6 BAUER Alain, HUYGHE François-Bernard. Ultra-gauche : le mot, l'idée, l'action. *Sécurité globale*, Summer 2010, No.12, p. 56.

A number of observers also draw a parallel with the traditional figure of the urban guerrilla understood as “*an armed individual using non-conventional methods to fight against a military dictatorship or any other form of oppression. His struggle is political and his only targets for attack are the government, major capitalists and the agents of imperialism.*”⁷. Indeed, members of a Black Bloc reject everything connected with globalization, capitalism, the consumer society and authority at large. They claim to be acting in reaction against two forms of violence: economic violence and state violence—in particular from law-enforcement agencies. For them, “*repression against the Black Blocs is blind repression against the consequences of social inequalities—deliberately blind to their causes. Ultimately, repression is used to defend such inequalities and the system that creates them.*”⁸

Black Blocs therefore tend to attack a variety of targets but never random ones: administrative buildings used by the state, corporate offices, advertising billboards, etc. These targets are mainly material assets since “non-violence does not mean the absence of forceful action but rather its limitation to acts against property, excluding human beings”⁹. Though less directly, law-enforcement officers are nonetheless targeted.

Unusual tactics based on group solidarity

Black Blocs do not rely on significant resources and mostly use homemade weapons or fairly common objects. Three types must be distinguished: objects used to protect anonymity, objects used for attacks and objects for defense.

In order to hide their personal identity, participants all wear full black and conceal their faces with black scarves, hoods, caps or balaclavas. Participants are also careful to bring along spare clothes (of a different color) in order to blend with the rest of the crowd once their action is over. The objective is to guarantee anonymity both within the Black bloc itself and later outside.

For violent attacks, Black Blocs bring their own tools (hammers, pickaxes, glass-breakers, chisels, etc.) to get hold of anything found in their way: street furniture, shopping carts, paving stones, asphalt blocks, etc. Weapons are also homemade, e.g. paint bombs or missiles, incendiary devices or even protest placards reinforced with screws and nails pointing towards police lines. Whenever possible, Black Blocs pick up teargas grenades thrown at them in order to throw them back at police forces.

Individual defensive objects include previously mentioned scarves, hoods or balaclavas, together with gas masks, ski masks or diving goggles protecting their wearers from teargas or toxic fumes—not to mention leather gloves to avoid burns from picked up grenades. A number of Black Bloc participants wear robust homemade protections to cover their arms and legs against possible injuries. Collective defense is ensured by reinforced banners with wooden plates or even handles to plant them on shopping carts and create a rolling barrier protecting their front line against truncheon whacks and maintaining cohesion in the event of a charge. Such devices also render individual arrests near impossible.

In terms of tactics, Black Bloc techniques depend on the objective (attack or defense) and on the target (law-enforcement forces or property). Once the Black Bloc is formed, participants immediately use the so-called “cuckoo method”: like this famous bird laying its eggs in other birds' nests uninvited, they split, infiltrate the march and suddenly regroup in its midst without organizers being given any advance warning. Their unexpected appearance often creates alarm and confusion, which they use to leave the main crowd by moving to its front or pushing through its flanks in order to reach their targets.

During subsequent attacks, another type of tactics specific to Black Blocs is the “swarming” method, consisting in splitting the bloc into smaller groups (creating multiple incidents to overwhelm the capacity of security officers to maintain order) before gathering again as a single, solid bloc. This repetitive de-grouping/re-grouping routine is similar to the behavior of a fish shoal: an aggregate of individuals belonging to the same species but answering no hierarchy. Such tactics allow Black Blocs to be both mobile for attack and compact for defense. This also creates a serious challenge for law-enforcement units—always more accustomed to traditional rioters who disperse after an attack and are therefore much easier to arrest once alone or in small numbers.

In general terms, offensive Black Bloc tactics consist in damaging specific types of street furniture, defacing advertising or spray-painting graffiti to convey political messages. More recurrent tags express their hatred of the state (*We won't take power—we'll smash it!*; *Kein Staat ist mein Staat = no state is my state*), police forces (*Everybody hates the police*; *ACAB = all cops are bastards*) or capitalism (*At your command, boss! Death to multinational corporations! There won't be enough money for all as long as money exists*)¹⁰. As observers often underline: “*The primary aim of a*

7 <http://www.terrorisme.net/2002/10/25/document-manuel-du-guerillero-urbain-marighella/>

8 https://infokiosques.net/lire.php?id_article=53

9 DENÉCÉ Éric, ABOU ASSI Jamil. *ÉCOTERRORISME Altermondialisme, écologie, animalisme De la contestation à la violence*. Paris: Éditions Tallandier, 2016, p. 153.

10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kheUyX3jU8> ; <http://larueourien.tumblr.com/>

*Black Bloc is to signal the presence within the demonstration of a radical criticism of the political and economic system*¹¹. Media organizations and politicians seldom mention such protest messages, preferring to concentrate on the damage to property. Black Blocs therefore remain largely unknown to the general public

When attacking law-enforcement units, Black Blocs tend to use less direct methods, operating “*mostly from a distance, hurling airborne missiles*”¹². Such missiles include almost anything (paving stones, empty bottles, gravel, etc.)—always aimed at police lines to create a paralyzing shower of heavy objects. Participants also try to blur or narrow the line of vision available to law-enforcers, either by using paint bombs to smear police helmets and shields (thereby forcing temporarily blind men to withdraw) or by throwing back teargas grenades. Resulting confusion often allows Black Bloc members to move elsewhere – unnoticed - to go on with their rampage or tagging activities. This obviously requires coordination: though all members may not be personally known to one another, all share the same tactics.

Such solidarity is also demonstrated in their behavior towards other demonstrators. When a Black Bloc takes the front of a march or issues from its flanks, standard demonstrators somehow find themselves protected as the Black Bloc stands between them and law-enforcement units. Equally, when law-enforcers intervene, Black Bloc members often strive to set free demonstrators under arrest or cover their flight—whether or not such individuals belong to the Black Bloc itself. The same indifference to “membership” is shown when cornering tactics are used by police forces against any group of demonstrators: Black Bloc participants will try to break through the net and surround police forces themselves¹³. The same will to thwart police tactics is obvious when Black Blocs try to prevent division of a main march - intended to isolate groups of demonstrators - by massively crowding onto sidewalks and other side spaces.

Other entities offer help to standard demonstrators as well as Black Bloc members, namely Street Medics and Defcol. Self-styled Street Medics¹⁴ initially appeared in the United States during the 1960s, identifiable through their red-cross helmets, armbands and rucksacks. Not demonstrating themselves, their presence was - and still is - intended to bring medical help as close as possible to the marches. Defcol is a French acronym for “Défense Collective” (collective defense); it is used by an association of lawyers created in March 2016 who volunteer to assist individuals arrested or prosecuted as a result of taking part in a demonstration. The names and phone numbers of these attorneys are well-known, circulate during demonstrations and are even shouted to people being arrested.

In spite of their very different tactics, Black Bloc members benefit from the support of the aforementioned two organizations—just like any other demonstrators. Their violent side seems to be taken as a “minor feature”. However, the very existence of those two entities seems to call into question the efficiency or adequacy of similar state services (emergency services or even fire brigades); such services are deemed unadapted for interventions during demonstrations. Furthermore, these activities entail the specialization of segments within marches, i.e. demanding special treatment from law-enforcement agencies. Interventions to help injured demonstrators may thus result in two problems: possible competition between Street Medics and “normal” A&E doctors and, secondly, possible hindrance to law-enforcement officers trying to assess the seriousness of the incident or to facilitate access for emergency services. In such critical circumstances, communications between demonstrators and law-enforcers may prove problematical.

New forms of protest: a challenge to law-enforcement agencies

Confronted with the rise of Black Blocs, law-enforcers must adapt their response. This requires adherence to the following two basic principles of law and order maintenance: gradual response and proportionality. Indeed, law-enforcers must not remain unaware of “*their own causal and amplifying effect with regard to public disturbances*”¹⁵. For Black Blocs, “*the over-presence of police forces acts as a provocation*”¹⁶--a view partly confirmed by General Devis Favier, Director General of the Gendarmerie Nationale: “*If [our forces] appear too heavily equipped, they will send warlike signals in contradiction with the intended objective*”¹⁷. Conversely, if presence on the ground appears too light, delinquent behavior may be encouraged as repression would appear potentially unlikely. One must therefore be careful not to indulge the “*process of re-militarization of law and order maintenance*”¹⁸ which has recently developed through the use of non-lethal weapons such as Flash-Ball® guns and sting-ball grenades.

Since Black Blocs use different and more violent tactics than standard demonstrators, response from law-

11 DUPUIS-DÉRI François. *Op. cit.* p.13.

12 FILION Normand. “*Il n’y a pas de raisons pour que cela s’améliore . Les nouveaux rassemblements de personnes : enjeux et perspectives* (Étude EPMES n°2007/061). Centre d’étude et de recherche Travail Organisation Pouvoir Université de Toulouse – Le Mirail, 2009. p. 107.

13 <http://lavigue.blogspot.fr/2016/05/considerations-de-strategie-et-de.html>

14 <http://www.lesinrocks.com/2016/05/17/actualite/street-medics-mediciens-manifs-11827880/>

For a history of Street Medics, cf. <https://atlantaresistancemedics.wordpress.com/the-library/history/>

15 FILION Normand. *Op. cit.* p. 150.

16 PASCUAL Julia. Derrière les « casseurs », toute une galaxie. *Le Monde*, 28 mai 2016.

17 Report no. 2794 from the Commission of Inquiry of the French National Assembly, available at: <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/rap-enqr/r2794.asp>

18 <https://www.cairn.info/revue-archives-de-politique-criminelle-2010-1-p-165.htm>

enforcers probably ought to be adapted to them in terms of gradation and modus operandi. The German example in the field of sports might be useful, since German law-enforcers “*abide by a principle of divided labor, with sports clubs and social actors taking care of [standard] supporters while police forces only take care of hooligans treated as a specific category*”¹⁹. Transferred to the management of demonstrations, this system would leave the management of the main march to the organizers' own security officers while law-enforcers would concentrate on more “active” demonstrators such as Black Bloc members. This would result in a more targeted and precise approach to deal with the Black Bloc phenomenon. In fact, current French legislation already allows for preventive targeting of masked individuals²⁰.

Another important aspect in need of review is the improvement of communications between law-enforcers and the marchers - and indeed Black Blocs - facing them. Law-enforcers often prefer to concentrate on “*refining intervention techniques without taking into account their indispensable supplement—communication*”²¹. Here again, our German neighbors have put into place a new model which might be a source of inspiration, based on the doctrine of “Deeskalation” (de-escalation)²². This doctrine works with four main orientations, one of which is the development of communication at all stages of law and order maintenance. Such development requires precise identification of *what* is to be communicated, *to whom* and *how*. In furtherance of this communication, German police forces use considerable resources, namely “*vehicles equipped with loudspeakers*” and “*giant LED displays informing the crowd*”²³. Beyond formal warnings – a procedure still quite unsatisfactory – there is currently no direct communication between the crowd and French law-enforcers.

A large number of countries (Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, the UK and Switzerland) are using liaison officers to act as independent relays between Black Bloc members and police forces. This allows for better spreading of messages and improved understanding of the phenomenon since the information is gathered directly on terrain. In France, such intermediaries are gradually being recruited and this is key to developing dialog channels indispensable to the maintenance of law and order—all the more so with Black Blocs who – contrary to trade unions, for instance - do not have any delegates or representatives law-enforcers can contact and work with.

Differentiated and targeted interventions is another main orientation pursued by the de-escalation doctrine. Whereas in France interventions in the main march are essentially used to arrest individuals, German interventions are first and foremost intended to extract potentially disruptive individuals from the procession—even if they have not yet committed any offense. Such extractions are broadcast on giant screens and explained to other demonstrators in order to justify the action of law-enforcers. This upstream approach is efficient in defusing tensions among protesters before they boil over.

Finally, in the event of actual offenses being committed, the context of a demonstration necessarily adds special constraints to the gathering of evidence to be used in the ensuing criminal proceedings. Arrests are made under circumstances that do not always permit the collection of all necessary elements. Valid prosecution requires all arrests – except for unquestionable *in flagrante* cases – to be made on the basis of sufficient evidence (photographs, video footage or testimonies from several law-enforcers).

Undeniably, the methods and external aspects of protest demonstrations are currently undergoing changes creating a significant challenge to French law-enforcement agencies. Finding an appropriate response to the Black Bloc phenomenon is likely to require an intensification of cooperation and the exchange of best-practice solutions between all countries concerned.

19 CROYAL Audran, *La lutte contre le hooliganisme à la veille de l'Euro 2016*, Mémoire de Master 2 Professionnel Droit et stratégies de la sécurité [Master dissertation], Université Paris II Panthéon-Assas, 2016.

20 Ministerial Order no. 2009-724 dated June 19, 2009, governing the incrimination of unlawful concealment of facial features during public demonstrations.

21 FILLIEULE Olivier, JOBARD Fabien. La police française doit privilégier la pacification des manifestations, *Le Monde*, May 8, 2016.

22 <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Un-splendide-isolement.html>

23 Ibid.