

# Tear Gas in Utero Quebec City

BY JENNY FOSTER



*Anti-WTO demonstration in Seattle, 2001. Photo: Jennifer Moreau*

*Les mesures de sécurité associées à la résistance à la mondialisation posent de formidables problèmes pour ceux et celles qui contestent ces institutions néolibérales. Au Canada, les contestataires au sommet de Québec en avril 2002 ont été saturés de gaz lacrymogènes dont la toxicité sur les humains est inconnue. L'auteure explore la relation entre les gaz lacrymogènes et le développement fœtal.*

Neoliberal economic policies are often promoted as means of advancing democracy worldwide. However, the negotiation of these policies and their short- and long-term outcomes raise serious concerns about democratic processes and freedoms in general. The multitude of summits hosting political leaders (often joined by busi-

ness representatives) are persistently confronted by demonstrators, who in turn are persistently confronted by repressive and dangerous crowd control attitudes and techniques in the name of security.

I was pissed off before the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) summit even began. Before the agenda was officially secret, before the fence went up around the conference site in Quebec City, and before I knew I was pregnant. I was disgusted at the arrogance of leaders who could put so much on the line—risking environmental degradation, erosion of labour standards, and increased polarization of living standards—with so little accountability for their actions. Once the conference began, the only means of com-

municating these concerns was on the streets outside the baracades, amid water cannons, rubber bullets, and dense clouds of tear gas. The decision to protest with six friends was a no-brainer: the stakes were so high, the process so flawed. What we didn't know was that the thousands and thousands of tear gas canisters launched randomly at demonstrators would cause unknown harm to those at particular risk in the crowds, including my unborn daughter.

We expected oppressive security measures at the Quebec Summit including arrests and lots of tear gas. We expected a twisted form of democracy. We expected that we would have to protect each other amidst the street-level struggles. But we were going as pacifists and observers. We



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weren't planning to attack the six-kilometre long perimeter sheltering conference delegates from civil society. Aside from a couple of rough nights sleep and potential run-ins with security, what did we have to lose? There were only two women in our group; we agreed to keep an especially close eye on each other and make sure that we didn't get separated. Resisting neo-liberalism was worth it.

For two days we gasped, coughed and wiped away tears as we exercised our constitutional right to demonstrate. On the third day conference organizers didn't even need to spray tear gas at demonstrators. Its burning residue hung thick in the air and covered buildings, sidewalks, trees, statues, lampposts, and all other surfaces. We returned to Toronto worn out, but with strengthened resolve about the critical need to resist globalization and protect civil liberties.

When my doctor delivered the shock three weeks later that I was already five weeks pregnant, one of the first things I grappled with was the possibility that my child had been exposed to tear gas. I remembered all of the warnings circulating in Quebec City about pregnancy and tear gas. Distributed by diverse or-

ganizations, they all cautioned anyone who was pregnant, might be pregnant, or was planning to become pregnant soon to stay well clear of the noxious clouds. I had been exposed at least 12 times. To make matters worse, I soon discovered that the tear gas was mixed with methyl chloride for ease of dispersal. Methyl chloride is a known carcinogen with human toxicity to the liver, kidneys, and central nervous system. I decided not to panic. I resolved to find out as much as I could and make informed decisions about proceeding with the pregnancy.

But where to start? Astonishingly, there is no published research whatsoever related to the effects of tear gas on human pregnancy. Meanwhile, a 1989 review published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* raised serious medical concerns about the use of tear gas as a harassing agent for dispersal of demonstrators and subdual of criminals. The authors conclude that :

The possibility of long-term health consequences such as tumour formation, reproductive effects, and pulmonary disease is especially disturbing in view of the multiple exposures sus-

tained by demonstrators and non-demonstrators alike in some areas of civilian unrest. (Hu, Fine, Epstein, Kelsey, Reynolds and Walker 662)

The report emphasizes the urgent need for epidemiological and laboratory research. Rarely does a refereed medical journal publish articles advancing concerns about human rights and civil liberties. However, this report makes clear links between medical uncertainty surrounding tear gas exposure and human rights. A sample of statements to this effect include the following:

... the evidence already assembled regarding the pattern of use of tear gas, as well as its toxicology, raises the question of whether its further use can be condoned under any conditions. (663)

At a time when the world has recently seen the recurrence of the use of mustard gas ... it is also worthy to note that in 1969, at the United Nations General Assembly, 80 countries voted to ban the use of any chemical in war, including tear gas, under the Geneva Protocol. (663)

It is the hallmark of repressive regimes to equate the voicing of dissent with disorder and to deny opponents the freedom of assembly and speech, rights guaranteed universally among signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (663)

Implementation of the *Access to information Act* reveals that the RCMP alone launched 3009 canisters of tear gas during the FTAA summit (Picard). This is a staggering figure, but represents only a portion of the tear gas dispersed. Corresponding figures for the other two security forces commissioned for the summit, the Sûreté du Québec and the Police Municipal de Québec, are indeterminate but

presumably equally high. Although data concerning the demographics of demonstrators at Quebec City have not been collected, it is fair to assume that at least half of these were women, scores of whom must also have been pregnant.

I probed my doctor for any further information whatsoever relating to tear gas and pregnancy. She came up with nothing and referred me to Motherisk, an organization run out of The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto devoted to public education, counselling, and research pertaining to fetal risks associated with drug, chemical, infection, disease, and radiation exposure during pregnancy. Consultation with Motherisk turned up nothing either. The report I later received from Motherisk briefly concluded that "there is limited data published on effects of chlorobenzylidone malonanionitrate, a component of tear gas" (Ratnapalan).

At eight weeks, I still didn't know what I was going to do about the pregnancy. I was already feeling strong maternal instincts, protecting the young fetus with a careful diet, regular exercise, and lots of sleep. But what hazards had it been exposed to in Quebec City? Nobody could answer this question, and I had serious misgivings about basic health and prenatal development. The day before my birthday I started bleeding heavily with painful abdominal cramps. After an internal exam, my doctor diagnosed a miscarriage, one of the purported effects of tear gas exposure (stillbirth and genotoxicity are others). I was sad and angry. Strangely though, after only two days the bleeding stopped and I still felt pregnant. Blood tests confirmed that I was still pregnant, that I had probably lost a twin. A week later, I considered terminating the pregnancy. I felt that this fetus had already been exposed to undue stress, and my own anxiety level about the whole matter was very high. But after seeing an ultrasound image of the shrimp-like baby I just couldn't follow through with an abortion. I



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dearly wanted to hold it in my hands and tell it I loved it and would do whatever I could to protect it. Although the baby had been tear gassed and its living environment was traumatized with a miscarriage, this young sprout passed the five basic criteria defining appropriate prenatal development: it had a heartbeat, a spinal column, a yolk sac, intestines, and a brain.

Although Health Canada provides national leadership to develop health policy and enforces health regulations, it has expressed no interest in the issue of massive use of tear gas on the public. As far as I can tell, Health Canada maintains responsibility for at least three federal acts (the Food and Drugs Act, the Hazardous Materials Information Review Act, and the Hazardous Products Act) which should have caused the ministry to at least question the indiscriminant use of tear gas in Quebec City (and at other demonstrations). Yet, Health Canada raised no concerns before, during, or after the Quebec Summit.

My baby was born in early January 2002. All of the tests conducted so far tell me that she has developed in a healthy manner. But there are significant limitations to what can be tested both pre- and postnatally.

Weighing a healthy 9 pounds 5 ounces at birth, my daughter has grown like a weed over the past six months. She squirms and wiggles practically non-stop, and has a twinkling two-toothed smile that captures even the most dour faces we meet. Despite vigorous growth and endearing charm, concern about the effects of tear gas linger. Specifically, the article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports that tear gas is potentially genotoxic (622).

As is the experience of most child-bearing women I know, I have encountered some negative socio-cultural response to pregnancy and pending motherhood. For example, a couple of people responded poorly to the news of my pregnancy, questioning the wisdom of bringing a baby into the world. But most were extremely supportive. I have learned to recognize the numerous ways in which pregnant women and mothers are often desexualized and infantilised. It is also true that many people feel they can comfortably overstep boundaries of decorum and baseline respect by trying to tell pregnant women and mothers exactly what they should and should not do. I encounter these irritations regu-

larly, combined with the physical effects of hosting a gestating human being, giving birth, sleep deprivation and general exhaustion. Yet these pale in comparison to the stress and anxiety of an unstable pregnancy provoked by tear gas and the shortage of information relating to associated health risks.

There is no proof that tear gas is safe for public consumption. If anything, the scant research that has been conducted in this area indicates that there are grounds to assume it is unsafe, especially for people at particular risk. An outstanding example is risk to prenatal development. I went to Quebec City as a citizen exercising my democratic right to protest. I was Jane Public, one of over 50,000 people who felt strongly enough about globalization to stand up and be counted. There is no reasonable way that I or the vast majority could be perceived as a security threat. Yet, we were gassed repeatedly. For many people, the Quebec Summit was an intensely politicizing event. It certainly confirmed my own commitment to resisting the negative effects of globalization and

fighting to protect civil liberties. But the urgent need for thorough testing of the human toxicity of tear gas prior to any further dissemination of the compounds must be underscored. This must become part of the policy agenda surrounding Canadian civil liberties, health, and safety.

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#### References

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- Ratnapalan, S. (Specialty Fellow in Clinical Pharmacology, The Hospital for Sick Children). Personal communication, 14 Sept. 2001.

## HOLLY DAY

### Floor Pie

when dreams of escape fade  
into wasted breath  
she picks up her memories

like cloudy marbles  
whispers,  
"this is what pockets are made for"

those men in the hall  
are like needles

that shouldn't be used again.

*Holly Day's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*

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