

Noise, Flags and Fists

Reflections on a Weekend in Downtown Montréal

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Since May 6 of this year, apparently first with respect to the Sheikh Jarrah property dispute, there has been an intercommunal conflict between neighbours in ethnically mixed urban parts of occupied Palestine, from Jerusalem to Jaffa and beyond. Consequently, there has been an uneven exchange of bombs and rockets between the Israeli state and Hamas, the latter being the state authority in the small territory of Gaza. Where things will go in Palestine, I cannot say. I don't pretend to have more than a Wikipedia-level understanding of the situation. I do not speak the relevant languages and am not trying to follow the news too closely anyway.

My reflections concern the situation in Montréal, home to sizeable populations of both Muslims and Jews, many of whom, respectively – and I understand that this is quite reductive – bolster the ranks of local social movements in support of both the Palestinian side and the Zionist/Israeli side of the conflict. This past weekend, a part of both movements took the streets of downtown Montréal in response to the most recent events overseas.

On Saturday, May 15, tens of thousands (at a minimum) of people came out in support of the Palestinian side; they demonstrated both at Westmount Square, an office tower complex that is home to the Israeli consulate, and in Dorchester Square, more or less in the central part of downtown. The entire zone in between those two locations was, for hours, convulsed with people waving the Palestinian flag, shouting slogans, and honking horns. It must have certainly been one of the largest demonstrations that has taken place in Montréal in the last year. There was little violence or vandalism, although a window was broken at Westmount Square and some people climbed scaffolding on a building adjoining Dorchester Square. All of this was preceded by a motorcade that started on the other side of town. Some anarchists and “radical leftists” without close family ties to any sort of Muslim community were present, but seemingly not many, in comparison to the rest of the crowd.

On Sunday, May 16, the pro-Israeli side had its own rally – that is, a static event – in Dorchester Square, which was opposed by a roughly equivalent number of people in a pro-Palestinian crowd that gathered initially in Place du Canada, directly to the south of Dorchester Square. From my own observations, I think it is fair to say that some people on the pro-Palestine side were deliberately provocative with respect to the pro-Israeli crowd, doing their best to get close to them and wave flags and stuff of that nature. The police attempted to keep both sides from coming into conflict with one another, but the logistics of their operation degraded over time, and there were several moments when members of both crowds were able to get close enough to each other to throw fists, try to steal each other's flags, etc. Although the absolute number of people was much smaller than the day before, the area of downtown around Dorchester Square at least (and particularly on the nearby section of rue Sainte-Catherine, a major commercial artery that always has a lot of foot traffic) was gummed up with the movements of pro-Palestinian demonstrators trying to get to Dorchester Square or Place du Canada, then with members of the pro-Israeli crowd trying to leave the area, and certainly with police. Tear gas was deployed quite indiscriminately, affecting numerous bystanders and passers-by that had nothing to do with the unfolding skirmishes and attempts to fight each other. Pro-Palestinian groups remained in the vicinity for many hours after the pro-Israeli side had dispersed completely, defying the police, getting chased, and getting shot at with “less-than-lethal” munitions.

This weekend was preceded by numerous, significantly smaller pro-Palestine protests in the broad area of Montréal's western downtown, which were less openly defiant of the police, but still loud and visible. It is my tentative prediction that more demonstrations will happen locally

in the coming days. [Update: Between when I started writing this text, and when I submitted for publication on anarchist websites, another rally at the Israeli consulate came and went.]

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Images resonate. Words inspire. People in the stadium love it when the audience roars in their favour. I think it might work the same way, at least a little bit, with struggle. But I don't know for sure.

I do know that the violence that happened in Montréal on Saturday and Sunday – whether interpersonal or simply defenestrative, whether against the police or between partisans of competing nationalisms – did not materially help out anyone, from either national camp, in Palestine. It is perfectly unclear, to me, how many people in Palestine heard about what happened in Montréal at all. There have been demonstrations in cities all around the world, but I presume they are, in any case, paying more attention to local news.

Anarchists in Montréal have occasionally demonstrated at the consulate of a foreign government in Montréal. We have done other things too. The Russian consulate, specifically, was attacked at least twice in the last decade.

Most of the time, though, demonstrations of solidarity with people involved in some sort of overseas political issue has been by communities of people who have family in those places. They happen all the time, although few Montréalers will ever hear about them. They don't tend to be very large, most of the time, and it is unlikely that they will be reported upon in the news. You have to be in the right place at the right time to see a banner, a sombre speech (perhaps in a language other than English or French), and usually about 60 people tops. Even when they are bigger, they rarely become riotous (and it is worth noting that, despite isolated moments of rowdy energy, the Saturday demonstration was overwhelmingly nonviolent).

The problem with campaigns of international solidarity is that, pretty frequently, they distract attention from projects that are more locally pertinent. I feel like I can get myself into trouble here, so let me be clear: I don't think they are without value. But I do think, quite categorically, that it is generally disadvantageous when people know more about the latest events happening in a place far away than they do about the events that are happening in their own city. When they have a narratively simple understanding of events and the lead-up to those events in societies on the other side of the world, but they don't understand, or at least fail to recognize, the tensions and dynamics that are manifest in their own social context.

International solidarity may sometimes be for the people far away, but it also needs to be for the people who are doing it. For anarchists, it is imperative that these campaigns of struggle feed into strategies that are about making anarchy – or other projects that align with what anarchists want – happen locally, whatever that might concretely mean.

MONTRÉAL RIOTS

The above header is a verb. Montréal riots, and does so with some regularity. In the present context, after more than a year of the pandemic and several months of curfew imposed by a government sitting in Québec City and elected by the suburbs, that current is bubbling up again. If it wasn't this issue, it would be something else.

There are a lot of sweeping claims to make about demographics, which I'll just get out of the way now. First of all, it is usually young men who riot, and while this need not be inevitable, it is what seems to happen, insofar as I have been able to infer the gender identities of people I've seen smashing windows, looting stores, throwing things at police, or trying to get closer to pro-Israelis rallies in the last year. Second of all, it seems that racialized people are as likely if not more likely than white people to riot.

Really, I am bringing up demography to dismiss it as a concern. If people riot, as they did on the evening of April 11 in the context of the curfew's intensification, then certain progressive journalists and commentators will label the participants "white" as a matter of course – which is exactly what happened. And, for the people who have deemed anarchist scenes themselves to be hopelessly problematic, including those who remain adjacent to those scenes, they are going to see some big problems with any engagement I might offer – as well as any *failure* to engage on my part – with respect to the fact that, broadly speaking, the participants in a given riot might be markedly browner, poorer, or more marginalized than the people who populate anarchist scenes.

To the extent that this becomes a distraction from, or an argument against, contributing to a youth-led social rupture, I think it's a serious problem.

In Montréal, everyone riots. Not everyone everyone, but a lot of people, across many demographics. And people here have been rioting for a very long time. This city has an esteemed history of fucking shit up that goes back deep into the early decades of the 19th century. This continues through all sorts of political cycles and social crises, at times when white people of various kinds comprised the near totality of Montréal's urban population, and certainly a much greater proportion of the population than is the case today. This is something that every Montréaler who hates the police and loves the culture of the streets can and should take pride in. This is not to say that every riot has been pure or perfect, but that there is more to celebrate in all of these histories than there is to condemn. Riots, after all, work. To the extent that we enjoy living in welfare capitalism versus, like, whatever they have in Texas, it is in part thanks to riots, and I think a little more sustained rioting now could get us a lot more stuff further down the line.

Being who we are, we don't necessarily need to form a "contingent" within someone else's demo. With respect to the most confrontational and defiant elements in the pro-Palestine street movement right now, we are talking about crews that most of us don't have connections with, that we may not know how to talk to, where a relationship of trust doesn't yet exist between us, and which are in any case entirely capable of doing things on their own. Our goal, instead, should be to expand the scope of the disruption to downtown commerce and police logistics, at the same time but not in precisely the same place as other events. We should want to be our own pole, which can attract different participants than those who would already come out to pro-Palestine stuff, and which can also preoccupy the strategic imperative of the police, which is to be everywhere at once. The job of the police is always impossible, but by being present, we can make that impossibility show itself faster.

There were glimpses of a total breakdown of police logistics and police strategy on Sunday, in the context of operations to stop just two relatively small cohorts of people from fighting one another. Every little bit of extra chaos counts.

A SUGGESTION: À BAS LA FRANCE

Apart from Jews and Muslims, Montréal is also home to a sizeable population of French people – that is, not francophones, but people born and/or raised in France, or who at least have close family ties to people living in France. Many anarchists I have known who lived in Montréal were themselves French. Additionally, lots of other Montréal anarchists, who are not exactly “French” themselves, have spent a lot of time in France, have close friends there, opinions about political issues that are local to France, etc. Although France is far away, it is *emotionally close* to many of us (but certainly not all of us).

France has banned demonstrations in support of the Palestinian cause, citing the disturbances that happened in 2014, during the last big crisis.

What is happening in France is worrying. Already in 2016, in response to the jihadists’ massacres the year before (*Charlie Hebdo*, Hypercashier, the Bataclan, the Stade de France), the French state embarked on a path that included the banning of demonstrations, emergency laws, and the expansion of police powers. In the last month, it was made illegal to film the police. Of course, in our territory, French models of governance are much-admired; policies devised there will get imported here. We can see this, too, in the orientation of the government in Québec City’s efforts to suppress all things labelled radical and all things labelled Islamic – two categories which, very often, get conflated.

Between trying to beat up nationalist clowns wearing Israeli flag capes, and kicking in the window at Westmount Square, I personally thought the latter was the more respectable action; I know that many of the clowns were spoiling for a fight, too, but I don’t love angry interpersonal violence. The French consulate is in a building facing avenue McGill College, a few short blocks away from Dorchester Square. Maybe it would make sense for anarchists, and all other opponents of colonialism and capitalism writ large, to call our own demonstration at that location if it ever looks like pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian crowds are about to throw down again downtown. Or hell, somewhere else? But everyone loves a theme!

Really, though: whatever excuse it takes to get us downtown so that we contribute to the disruption and create a larger space of destruction, possibility, and encounter of the kind that is only possible when there is a complete breakdown of the logistical machine that is the police.

THE SPIRIT OF REVOLT

Teenagers have analyses, but they might not be very good. Most of them don’t know what anarchism is, what nationalism is. They might know the words, but that doesn’t count for much. Most of them don’t have a clear or cogent idea about Jews or Palestinians or Zionists or terrorists or whatever. And it’s not like teenagers are necessarily doing the things they are doing entirely because of their political ideas, either.

All of this is true of most adults, too, but teenagers usually have better excuses for why they don’t know about any of these things than adults do, and it’s usually worth trying to explain these things to them, because they probably aren’t lost causes yet. But not by seeking them out to tell them these things. That’s never gonna work.

You cannot have conversations with people about ideas until it is clear that you even want to talk to each other. That is true for both parties. But it is impossible to know whether you want

to talk to each other – really talk, with all the risk of misunderstanding and insult that exists in any conversation with stakes – until there is a good reason for you to talk.

If people see each other in the streets, consistently, they will probably start to talk at some point. Particularly if people in both groups seem to sort of be doing the same weird thing as one another, in a way that is complementary. Maybe cool things come out of that, or maybe they don't. I feel like it would be a good thing, though, if some kid whose family talks a lot of shit about Jews was able to find out that there are Jews who are anarchists, who hate the police, who incidentally don't much like Israel, who have style and/or know how to throw down.

The point is not to go into the streets to “make anarchists” but, instead, to make anarchy. Most anarchists, after all, eventually become social-democrats. Most of the people in any crowd of angry, activated youth are unlikely to find that anarchism, in whatever subcultural form it may take, is able to speak to them or their particular concerns. So be it. It's after anarchy triumphs in some way, perhaps in part because the partisans of anarchy were in the streets as well, that some people will start to pay attention. Some people will like what they see, and may try to find us. It's not worth thinking about much, though. All of that is outside of what we can plan for.

What we can do is recognize where new energy is, how and where why it is bubbling up, and we can also think about where we want to place ourselves in relation to it. What are we trying to do? How are we trying to help? What does it mean for us when police logistics are tied up downtown?

ANARCHY, NOT THE RIOT

If events must take the form of running battles with the police in the downtown core, then anarchists have something to contribute to that situation. But we can do other things, too. The point is not to fetishize the riot or the people who are doing the most to actualize the riot in the present moment. The point is that the path to where we are trying to go, where the police are gone, passes through rioting. *C'est pas les pacifistes qui vont changer l'histoire.*

The point is that we do things, that we don't sit out insurrectional moments, and that we keep our principal focus on what is happening in our own region. The terrain is shifting, and it's hard to keep track, but we need to do our best.

**AGAINST THE CURFEW.
AGAINST THE BOMBING.
AGAINST EVICTIONS HERE AND EVERYWHERE.
FOR A WORLD WITHOUT POLICE.
LET BLACK FLAGS FLY HIGH.**

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