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Thin Ice, Deep Water

The Vancouver Hockey Riots

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The surging waters of the collective unconscious that were unleashed in the Vancouver “Hockey” Riot of June 2011 made it abundantly clear just how fragile the artificial ice age of industrial civilization can be when it comes in contact with the searing heat of the moment.

Faced with the nagging miserabilism of daily life, the emotional dam of mutual acquiescence finally burst its walls and a tidal wave of repressed desire obliterated the illusion of social peace.

In the aftermath of the riot, the scolding voices of authority were quick to blame it on the usual suspects—hooligans (originally a derogatory term referring to working class Irish immigrants whose behavior was perceived by their “social betters” to be rowdy and immoral) and nefarious anarchist conspirators opportunistically using the cover of the crowd to start a riot.

Under the respectable cloak of being “upstanding citizens”, these accusing politicians and their housetrained media pundits self-righteously and incessantly brayed that the culprits must now be caught and locked in the penalty box. While these local notables were wrong in their assumption that specific anarchist

troublemakers singlehandedly fomented the riot, perhaps it is more to the point to say that the seductive lure of anarchy wafting on the summer breeze that night was somehow intrinsically at the heart of the matter.

When presented with a readymade downtown stage complete with the promising possibility of unrestrained libidinal play, an unruly horde of 150,000 people gathered at the end of the Stanley Cup hockey finals to act out their suppressed fantasies of liberation, each in his or her own way. For some this simply involved a crude derangement of the senses in alcoholic euphoria or the drunkards claim to a free pass for loutish behavior. For others, it took the form of an exhilarating looting spree which shattered the icy veneer that coats the glass house of business-as-usual.

In the ever popular game of shopping without money, looters blithely boosted whatever struck their fancy, and, according to one firsthand account, even shared their illegal gains in a spontaneous potlatch of destruction and redistribution. The glittering baubles of imperial capitalism that had earlier been on display in the now smashed windows of the Hudson's Bay Company department store were hijacked like fruits ripe for the picking. The gang of police assigned to stickhandle the imposition of a state of emergency were quickly washed away in the rushing flood waters, as were the 10 cop cars overturned like beached crabs foundering helplessly in the light of the full moon.

In a country where Queen Elizabeth's picture is still emblazoned on the coin of the realm as if Canada were a perpetual colony, the only royalty present amidst the shattered plate-glass that night were the bold outlaws that constituted King Mob.

The journalists who covered the story might as well have been embedded (in bed) with the cops as they rushed to condemn the riots, shame the rioters and urge now repentant looters, along with cell phone picture-snapping bystanders and social media obsessives alike, to inform on their friends (Facebook and otherwise), neighbors and family members.

They even went so far as to label those who took the side of the cops in their martial defense of the state and private property as “Good Samaritans,” as if obedience to law and order was an act of brotherly love. While the media talking heads wrung their hands in moral panic at the specter of barbarians storming the gates of consensus reality and incredulously scratched their collective heads, they wondered aloud just how this could have happened in the province that the British Columbian tourist industry arrogantly has branded “the best place on earth.”

Not once in their fervent efforts at personal vilification, blanket criminalization and attempted recuperation did they ever explain the festive appeal of a riot which entails an overflowing of the ramparts of bourgeois morality that mirrors the appeal of the transgressive physicality evident in the game of hockey itself but without the trappings of a national religion that have allowed the sport to be linked by broadcasters and politicians alike to the patriotic frenzy surrounding the 2010 Vancouver Olympics or the Canadian role in the Afghanistan war.

Nor did they show any understanding of the attraction underlying the realization of a temporary pirate utopia by occupying streets usually reserved for corporate commerce or of the legendary hobo dreamsong of the “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” an unmapped nowhere that includes, among its many pleasures, “lemonade springs,” “cigarette trees,” and “whiskey streams,” all there for the taking in a veritable Land of Cockaigne paradise where “the cops all have wooden legs.”

During the face off to the riot, as imagination increasingly took power, the frozen automaton smiles of everyday alienation began to thaw and gave way to wild and delirious roars of rebellion. As the ice was melted by the blowtorch kiss of anarchy, the raging river beneath the surface relentlessly churned its way upwards with a rollicking defiance that brooked no timeout in carving its ludic passage to freedom.

The only remaining question left for anarchists to ponder is why there isn't a riot every day!