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OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF “CASSEROLES”

textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge

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Multigenerational Casserole Orchestras: the New Face of Anarchist Insurgency

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Over the last 40 years, riot police gear has changed drastically, from billy clubs and short sleeves to fully automated chemical weaponry and Kevlar body armour.¹ But none of this expensive, cutting edge military equipment can defend the police against the most recent communication technology deployed by anarchist insurgents: the casserole. Furthermore, contemporary riot police appear completely unequipped to deal with the new faces of anarchy: grandmothers, middle-class families, and neighborhood kids wearing capes and distributing cupcakes.

Just two weeks ago, we were sitting at home, checking our social media and despairingly watching CUTV'S live coverage of the student protests. While the mainstream media was berating the one or two protestors who broke a little private property, CUTV showed students marching along peacefully until they were cut off, corralled, or pepper sprayed – usually without provocation.² The students of Quebec were getting beaten nightly – but they wouldn't give up. And then things got worse: Law 78. This draconian violation of the right to assemble showed that Charest's strategy was to criminalize and punish dissent rather than negotiate. We were astonished: our beautiful Montreal streets were becoming increasingly militarized. 400 000 of us hit the streets in support of the students and against Law 78 – in a massive march that was called “the biggest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history.” The next day the police got worse: on Wednesday, they kettled the nightly march and arrested 518 students and minors. So far, more people have been arrested than during the October crisis of 1970, when the War Measures Act was invoked. Our social media was abuzz and you could smell the outrage.

A call circulated through social media and into the medium of the evening air. First a couple of pings and pangs, then some clanging and banging: a call to grab a wooden spoon or spatula and whack a casserole. The magnetic communication drew people to their balconies, then down onto the sidewalk, then out to the streets. Multigenerational casserole orchestras sprung up in neighbourhoods throughout the city. And then we started walking around: grandparents holding hands, teenagers walking their dogs, parents with newborns, kids of all ages... everybody!

Overnight, the arrests dropped from 518 to four. The police stopped pepper spraying, kettling, and arresting students – and started blocking traffic for the spontaneous neighbourhood marches. The casserole orchestras were the most immediately effective grassroots political tactic I have ever seen: they transformed pepper-spraying police into local parade escorts. As the manifis casserole continue, one hears mutters along the lines of “will this really lead anywhere?” But these future-oriented grumblings miss the immediate effectivity – and immanent beauty – of anarchic manifis casserole. Law 78 has remained unimplemented, protesting students and minors are no longer getting beaten up and harassed every night, and our sonorous evenings are expanding into a much larger popular protest. So what lies behind the wild success of these proletarian pots and middle-class pans?

Les manifis casserole manifest a populist and multigenerational form of anarchy. They emerge spontaneously from the ground up: beginning on balconies and moving into the streets as music improvised between neighbours. The casseroles themselves, of course, have been transformed from private implements to public communication technologies. The casseroles ring out into the night and assemble people through an improvised music. There is a strange beauty in collective noise: some people clang in rhythm, some riff off one another, some do their own individual thing. The cacophonous sounds occasionally coalesce into a collective rhythm, prompting your body to move in tune with the crowd, before the pattern dissolves back into chaos. This movement back and forth – between chaos and organization, noise and music – energizes the crowd throughout the evening and into the night. The improvisational music that brings us together has an undeniably anarchic aesthetic.

It’s a wonderful feeling to wander through the streets, slowly picking up more neighbours and strangers. Everyone is smiling at newcomers, people wave and cheer from balconies. The warm sense of expanding collectivity is joyous and playful. But it’s not just ‘fun and games’: there is an incredible effectivity to this focused locality. The police cannot stop 20 or 30 different marches that spontaneously emerge in different neighbourhoods. Early on they admitted, via twitter, that they couldn’t contain more than two marches at a time. Les manifis have been fragmented, dispersed, and decentralized. No one knows for sure where some of these marches are going – not even the people in the front line!

It’s an electric experience to meander out of your neighborhood with one or two hundred people and bump into a massive march of thousands – a raucous cacophony, and a delightful experience of grassroots mass-building. These anarchist orchestras are fundamentally magnetic, and the proof is in their participatory appeal to a wide variety of people who can’t go to dangerous downtown demos. The elderly, the young, those with reduced mobility and those with early bedtimes are all able to participate. One of the most beautiful and effective parts of these spontaneous evenings is that this is not an angry anarchy. The energy is light, open, soft, and

joyous: a direct consequence of the multigenerational appeal. And joy effectively increases energy, as opposed to the anger that can exhaust and drain. This celebratory energy has fueled us for over a week now: anarchic joy is a renewable resource!

Visitors who fall in love with Montreal intuit the defining characteristic of the city: people's commitment to taking collective pleasure in public spaces. We are a city of festivals, terraces and parks; in the Plateau, we picnic with wine and flowers; on the mountain we bring barbeques and tablecloths. In the spirit of the city, les manifs casserole transcend the politics of the demand: neither angry nor confrontational, they manifest Montrealers' claims to public space. Vibrations in the air, feet on the street: a literal manifestation of being-together and sharing pleasure in public space.

Multigenerational Casserole Orchestras are about more than tuition, more than neoliberal austerity measures and more than Law 78. They resist the militarization of our streets by manifesting the desire to move peacefully together. They resist the criminalization of dissent by joyously celebrating civil disobedience. More than an expression of discontent, the casserole orchestras embody a collective desire to take communal pleasure in public space. And the casseroles continue to ring out nightly with an anarchic communiqué: come! right here, right now – join the joyous manifestation of Montreal!

Notes

1. A [simple graphic](#), circulated during the heyday of OWS, illustrates a dramatic change in policing technology: from [this New York Times article](#).
2. Check out [jerk #728](#).