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OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF “CASSEROLES” *textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge*

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Fear and violence in Quebec: Why solidarity with a diversity of tactics matters

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Events in Quebec over the past year, particularly in and around universities, have made it clear that the State and its institutions do not act within the law as they claim. They impose their rule of violence through delegitimizing and suppressing that which does not obey and confirm their dominance, using their laws to silence alternative discourses and crush resistance or dissent.(1) Elites have so thoroughly molded electoral systems and democratic institutions to their advantage that these are unable to provide avenues for genuine change.

Universities and institutions of higher education have become pivotal in this struggle because they systematically suppress student and faculty agency in the name of austerity and financial exigencies, while generating wealth for upper-level administrators. Over the past year, the Quebec government and post secondary institutions have systematically stymied negotiations with students – from basic discussions of student governance to negotiations with striking student unions and associations. Rejection of the tuition hike is a rejection of a system in which the wealth of the people, the future of youth, and the power of expression are seized by a privileged minority. Bill 78 has made these mechanisms of power evident to greater numbers of people. But we should not forget that it simply makes visible what already exists: what Indigenous, Black, poor, and all oppressed people have always experienced in this country and province.

Mainstream media attention to student strikes and the movements in Quebec has appeared in waves over the past several months, with significant social, cultural, and political distinctions between coverage in Anglophone and Francophone press. A problematic characteristic of much of this coverage has been the construction of a binary opposition between violent and nonviolent actions, accompanied by notions of “good” and “bad” protesters and protests. This opposition, a cliché mobilized to discredit and disenfranchise certain kinds of people, groups, and movements, is one that distracts attention from the movement and the other critical issues linked to it, in order to resettle a hierarchical order that posits an “us” (good, civilized, nonviolent, liberal minded) majority that sees itself as different from a “them” (bad, uncivilized, violent, poor/student, radical/anarchist) minority. This of course, is part of the broader construction of a Canadian, white, middle class, liberal/conservative, Anglophone, “nice,” multicultural majority contrasted with its Others – indigenous, immigrant, racialized, and québécois/e.

At a moment when the potential for a powerful inter-sector movement is building and talk of a “social strike” is increasing, the refusal to acknowledge the diversity of people involved or the strength of multiple perspectives and roles that different people bring to this movement, works only in the favour of those whose power is threatened by it. It is in the State’s interest for the general public that consumes media coverage of the movement to be construed as “good” audience-citizens, who, dissatisfied with the current government might participate in neighbourhood casserole protests, for example, but still view themselves as separate from (better than) the “bad” students and anti-capitalists who might engage in more confrontational direct actions.

The liberal social obsession with evaluating protests/protesters based on the extent to which they can be characterized as peaceful must be challenged. Each time a protest is praised as “peaceful,” our fears are supposed to be allayed and our attention is deflected away from the structural violence that makes us want to protest in the first place. The media’s mobilization and praising of the concept of a peaceful demonstration or demonstrator implicitly invokes another kind of demonstration/demonstrator lurking in the background and limits the conception and expression of political alternatives.

This problem must be addressed directly as political profiling must be condemned alongside racial and all other forms of profiling. Protestors wearing red squares, or black hoodies and bandanas that cover their noses and mouths should not be stopped, searched or questioned. This kind of profiling is akin to the way that Blacks and Latinos are stopped and searched and to the way that Muslims are put on no-fly lists, pulled out of lines at airports or removed from airplanes. Profiling criminalizes and pathologizes particular populations who are deemed to pose a threat to or fail to fill their role within the dominant political and social order. The current movements create a political space for this reality to become starkly visible to those who have not lived under a daily regime of profiling and police brutality. There are connections to be made between what we have seen during the student strike and broader movements to other struggles. Middle-class white people in Quebec have been stopped for wearing red-squares, searched for wearing black clothes and carrying backpacks; journalists have been beaten while reporting on demonstrations.(2) Never again can we as a society ignore any and all forms of profiling and police brutality as they affect different communities and individuals.(3) In the long term, a failure of widespread profiling is that increasing the number of populations selected for violent suppression invites nonhierarchical connections across them. This is the emerging potential for diverse political organizing and action.

If the ultimate “peaceful demonstrator” of the movements in Quebec is understood as someone who participates in neighbourhood casserole banging, then the ultimate “violent demonstrators” have been scripted as those who use black bloc tactics. Real experiences with black bloc tactics are incompatible with the mainstream and official

narratives about anarchists and the black bloc, which portray them as menacing to us all. The repetition of these stories conditions the rejection of tactics that have, in fact, been an integral part of this and other social movements.(4) In Montreal this spring, black blocs have repeatedly pushed back against violent police interventions so that other protesters have escaped possible harm; this practice helps keep people engaged in protests safe. More specifically, black blocs often situate themselves at the forefront of confrontations, putting their bodies between riot squads and more vulnerable demonstrators such as children, seniors, and those with disabilities. Black blocs do not respect private property and wealth, and reject the cult of celebrity, which makes them unmanageable from the point of view of those for whom the maintenance of the status quo is sacrosanct. Black blocs also provide models for us to move beyond fears of nonhierarchical formations and practice resistance directly.

A better understanding of black bloc and other tactics helps us reject the divide and rule tactics that separate “good” from “bad” protesters. Solidarity is the principle. We need to think about this in relation to our own fear (we all have it), our situatedness, and how we address that fear and its relation to violence. Is what frightens us the breaking of windows, or the breaking of rules, or the breaking of bones? Are we afraid of authority or of nonhierarchical structures and movements without clearly identifiable individual leaders and villains? Solidarity is what we strive for and what leads to success: people working together across a vast array of differences, even and especially when that work requires us to challenge our discomfort and our fear.

Notes

1. [“La CLASSE dénonce l’intimidation policière et gouvernementale,”](#) *Bloquons la hausse de l’Assé* (n.d.).
2. [C.O.B.P. / Collectif Opposé à la Brutalité Policière](#) (Collective Opposed to Police Brutality). (n.d.).
3. [“Racial profiling remains a problem in Quebec: rights body,”](#) *The Montreal Gazette*, June 14, 2012.
4. [Ⓐ Black Bloc Tactics - 10 Quick Points! \(1 of 3\)](#) [Ⓐ YouTube](#) video (uploaded Mar 30, 2010.)