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Oh. Canada.

Forget about art. Can we talk about the streets?

By Gita Hashemi

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Tell me what democracy looks like. This is what democracy looks like!

Although events are still unfolding as I write these words, not yet three weeks after the massive crackdown on anti-G8/20 protests in Toronto, the immediate and most visible signs of the confrontation have disappeared from view. Erected to barricade the heads of G20 states against grassroots displays of discontent, the 3.5-kilometer chain-link “security fence” with concrete base that cut through downtown in much the same fashion that Israel’s more permanent “security fence” cuts through Occupied Palestine (and that resemblance is not accidental) was taken down overnight as soon as the VIPs left town. The next day the financial district returned to business as usual, and within a day, the anti-riot robocops were taken off the streets and the borrowed stormtroopers were returned to the lender cities. In contrast to the literally in-your-face policing, the police presence on the downtown streets has become almost invisible this past week — except in poor areas such as pre-gentrified Regent Park or St James’ Town where heavy policing has been a daily fact of life, before, during and after the Summit. Yet, even for the condo-dwellers and hipsters who now make up the majority of the city’s downtown residents, police presence remains keenly perceptible if not immediately visible. Memories of checkpoints, arbitrary searches, kettling and mass detentions in trendy neighbourhoods still parade on the surface of awareness for those who were on the streets and those who witnessed the goings-on in live broadcasts on a local channel (CP24) or followed the tweets and blogposts of a few mild-mannered, polite Canadian reporters during the Summit’s weekend.¹

G8, G20. They’re few, we’re many.

Arriving in Huntsville by special delivery, the G8 state heads stepped on fake grass, grinned for photos, and delivered, as they had done before, empty promises and banal feel-good words for the global public’s stupefaction.² Then the G20 state heads cavalcaded into Toronto, posed for a larger group photo and agreed to respond to the global economic crisis by continuing the policy of “fiscal sustainability” through “delivering existing stimulus plans, while working to create the conditions for robust private demand” and taking “actions to boost national savings while maintaining open markets.”³ In plain words, they agreed to continue bailing out big business and letting the rich make astronomical profits while imposing further “austerity” measures on the working class and the poor. Canada’s Conservative Government played its role as a globally gracious and “fiscally responsible” host with an unprecedented security expenditure of over one billion dollars. But, although even the tame Liberals and the right wing media questioned the merits and mechanics of such expenditure, in all too familiar Canadian fashion nobody was too rude and persistent when the agencies that were handed the cash failed to provide adequate answers, and, in the case of RCMP that got the biggest cash prize, any answer at all.⁴ It was business as usual in the globalized world and in our domesticated public sphere.

Whose streets? Our streets! Whose city? Our city!

Over ten thousand government and NGO delegates and mainstream and alternative reporters that poured into the city have long left. And so have many of the people who converged here from across the municipal, provincial and national borders to stage the resistance to G8/20, starting with the People's Summit a week earlier. The convergence built up through a range of panels, screenings, meetings and themed rallies to the headiest of the street shows pinnacled by the mass demonstrations on Saturday, June 26th that brought some 30 thousand participants from diverse communities and vastly different ideological and topical interests to a march led by the labour unions. There are now far fewer briefcases, cameras, voice recorders, big bright official name-tags, bandanas, banners, flags, picket signs, megaphones, pink tutus and black backpacks on the streets. These days, the non-residents that walk the streets of downtown once again are innocuous summer tourists, carrying cameras and souvenir bags, posing for photos in front of monuments and landmarks, apparently oblivious to the CCTV cameras that were installed in many major locations as part of the security measures for the Summit and seem to have become a permanent fixture. In the upheaval caused by the empire striking back, nobody in the official "public sphere" is asking when these cameras will be uninstalled. That doesn't seem to be yet at the top of the civil liberty advocates' demands either although there are many who have vowed to protest until their demand for a public inquiry into G20 security operations is met meaningfully.

One, two, three, four: We won't take this shit no more!

For some their dream of democracy has been deeply disturbed. They were whip-lashed at the corner of Queen and Spadina – where a few people burned a police car on Saturday afternoon, and on Sunday evening, in plain view of live television cameras, some one hundred and fifty people, most of them accidental passers-by or residents of the neighbourhood, met with Israeli style collective punishment (no accidental resemblance here either), encircled and outnumbered by fully geared riot cops, held without explanation for hours under torrential rain. They were "released" only after several among them that were profiled or self-identified as activists were snatched by the cops or voluntarily submitted to arrest.⁵ On that Sunday, many people who were not protesters before saw their own powerlessness in the face of arbitrary power.

Many of those who participated in the anti-G8/20 protests also suffered a shock as they witnessed their "Charter Rights" trampled over, as was a woman, by mounted cops storming into the "Designated Speech Area," indifferent to the audio-visual equipment that presumably televised the "free speech" and "legitimate protest" activities to the G20 delegates several blocks south. The police seemed oblivious to citizen cameras too, in fact to the very notion of "citizenry," as if they knew that their uniforms and shields protected them not only against bubbles and squirt guns but also against any public accountability that might be motivated by the ubiquitous citizen-cum-documentarian accounts.

What was displayed in plain view were the frightening powers of militarized police, the frailty of notions of free speech and civil liberties, the fragility of so-called safe spaces, and the falsehood of the assumption that "that" was what happened in Iran or in Occupied Palestine, in "those" places. As an Iranian observer commented, if the stakes were high enough, the same force would be shooting live ammunition at protesters instead of rubber bullets. They did so in Oka and

Ipperwash. A young black man, Junior Alexander Manon was killed in Toronto police custody just a few weeks before G20. For those from racialized communities that bear on their bodies and collective psyche the marks of daily state violence, and for those with some historical perspective and political acuteness, there were no surprises. Everything is already overdetermined in a violent racist settler state. Yes, I mean in Canada.

“Free speech” under attack! What do we do? (Unite and fight back!)

Humbled too was the mainstream media’s self-serving claim that they safeguard democracy. They arrived in hundreds with their recording and relaying gear. They were embedded in cool hotels and reported from a specially equipped media centre, well protected from the city’s unusual summer heat and lulled by a fake lake to images of tranquil Canadian natural scenery and Toronto’s sizzling world-class urbanscape while watching soccer games and drinking ale on public’s tab.⁶ Their counterparts on the streets saw an altogether different scene:

Line after line of cops advanced into the “protest zone” beating their shields with their batons, as if in a perverse machine-vs-human competition with the high-energy, joyous and organically forming and flowing samba squads that marched in the protests. The police didn’t hesitate to wield their batons against unarmed protesters that were naively hanging to their understanding of their rights by sitting on the ground and singing or waving peace signs. Here as in closer to the fence at the site of a legal strike at Novotel Hotel, the police were emphatically hostile to independent journalists, beating and/or detaining some and breaking or confiscating their recording equipment, a fate they meted out indiscriminately even to the officially-accredited name-tag-displaying mainstream media folks.⁷

But while indy journalists from around the world and a few outraged corporate journalist (most of them locals) dispatched reports of what they were witnessing, the mainstream corporate media – including publicly funded CBC – followed the tried-and-true formula of running short clips or photographs showing burning police cars and black blockers smashing windows as backdrop to analysis that divided the people on the street into “peaceful” and “violent” protesters. Some didn’t even make that distinction and simply reported on “violent protests” and “riots.”⁸

Protesting is not a crime! No more cops on overtime!

The RCMP-led Integrated Security Unit – comprised of partners from the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), Canadian Forces (CF), Toronto Police Service (TPS) and Peel Regional Police (PRP) – in collaboration with private security companies provided the special effects for the summit show from a command centre over 100 kilometers away from Toronto in Barrie. The ISU erected fences, removed garbage bins and tree boxes from the designated “security zone,” installed more cameras, brought in water and sonic canons, got Ontario’s Liberals to pass a special law and lied about how far it extended the police powers, and deployed to the streets an occupation force comprised of over nineteen thousands overtime-earning no-nametags cops, shielded up and armed with a wide range of assault weapons and restraining tools, who roamed the city on foot, on bike, on horseback, in police cars, in unmarked vans and trucks, in rental vans and trucks, in city transit and Gray Hound buses, accompanied by paddywagons and surveillance video units on the ground and helicopters in the air. All this was in addition to

countless undercover cops and informants that infiltrated, some from months before the Summit, every mobilizing and protesting nook and cranny.

Two, four, six, eight: We don't want no police state!

Although its scale was as overblown as its budget, the remote-controlled violence perpetrated by security operators was scripted in its general outline if not in its exact details. The levels and methods of coordination of forces, technologization, surveillance and brutality were to be expected, and their resemblance to Israeli style policing was no accident. This included the preemptive early-morning raids on activist houses, the careful identification, targeting and arrests of some community organizers prior to Saturday's "riot," the detention-by-profile or random arrest of over one-thousand people and the subsequent identification and intimidation techniques used against them, as well as the deceptively erratic and well-documented collective punishment and street beatings.

The massively militarized policing and urban occupation that we saw in Toronto seemed to be the first full dress rehearsal in what successive Canadian governments have been building towards. Formalized through the agreement signed in 2008 by Harper's former Minister of Public Safety, Stockwell Day, the Canadian "security" forces (which include the military, the police, the intelligence apparatus and private security armies) have been sharing "knowledge, experience, expertise, information, research, and best practices" and in "technical exchange cooperation, including education, training, and exercises" with Israel which now surpasses even the United States in exporting tools and techniques of occupation and policing.⁹ Nothing went "wrong" in the Summit's security. Everything went as planned.

Whose side are you on? Whose side are you on?

Also predictable and played out again and again were the divisions and disagreements within the so-called "protesters" which the media now refer to as a monolithic entity. While some labour leaders rushed to issue statements to disassociate themselves from the "thugs" only two hours after the black bloc actions started, others decided to stay on the streets and stand on principles of solidarity across divides. Many advocates of non-violence fumed at those who pushed south toward the fence ("black blocers" mostly went north on Yonge away from the fence) and thus challenged the limits and choreography imposed on protest. "Militants" and "radicals" in turn felt angry at the "institutional left" who voluntarily accepted the limits and deserted the streets when the police attacked "peaceful" protesters even at the "designated protest zone." Almost immediately, social media and blogosphere filled with arguments for or against one or another.

The discussion about the effectiveness of black bloc – or even pink bloc – tactics is as old as their emergence as distinct presence/tendencies in protest movements.¹⁰ For that matter, so is the discussion about the effectiveness of ritualized mass rallies and "convergences" as sites of people power and resistance to globalization. While the political divisions run much deeper than the levels of tactics and strategies, it is far too simplistic and self-defeating to reduce the landscape of resistance to rigidly opposing camps of "non-violence" and "militant/confrontational," or to "those building alternatives" and "those challenging the power of the state," or to "those seeking state legitimacy" and "those questioning the legitimacy of the state." In reality, many activists fluidly move between these "camps" and/or intentionally occupy a variety of in-between spaces.

The history of social movements shows that “empowering-transforming” and “radicalizing-mobilizing” of broad communities have to go hand-in-hand if the politico-economic system is to change substantially. It is precisely in the work of negotiating and building political, tactical and strategic alliances around specific actions, interventions and campaigns that we can envision and actualize alternatives to the existing corrupt and untenable system. In Toronto, the mobilizing groups and activist convergence showed a great deal of creativity in networking, coalition building and allowing for a diversity of tactics, and, subsequently, in staging a wide range of events and forms of protest. The movement – can we call it that yet? – that seems to be shaping in defense of civil liberties in Canada may also show a potential for making far-reaching alliances.

We’re fighting for our freedom. We shall not be moved.

If the global capital’s seriousness to defend itself by any means necessary even on the streets of the global north hadn’t become clear in Genoa and Quebec City for some, it is now screamingly obvious post-Toronto. They mean business. Literally. It should have also become quite apparent that the security apparatus learn from every confrontation and modify and improve their responsiveness accordingly and based on their vast and insidious intelligence gathering. It’s their job. They get paid for it, however incompetently they perform, as some like to lull themselves into thinking.

In the face of calculated police violence, many communities and activists of different ideological locations and tendencies have again come to a temporary alliance and sprung into action to support the legal defense for the seventeen activists who were detained the longest and have gotten the harshest charges. Many of these were identified and arrested before the “riot” and some are still in detention as I write. There are also efforts to inform and support the two-hundred-plus people who were released shortly after detention but also face criminal charges. These are no doubt the fertile soil for growing and spreading resistance.

Just like a tree standing by the water, we shall not be moved.

The questions and imperatives facing us now have to do with long-term sustainability of our activisms and the effectiveness of our collective actions. We should ask, at this or any juncture, if experiencing the trauma of police brutality and getting entangled in costly and lengthy legal battles may in fact be unavoidable and have catalytic and strategic value for our work. Obviously we cannot avoid the wrath of the state if we shake the foundations of the system, but it is absolutely necessary not to repeat ourselves (for that makes us predictable and policeable and deplete our resources) and not to move always from a reactive position. If we agree that we need a paradigm change, it is important that we don’t glorify any tactics nor any ideological positions at the cost of imagining alternative ways of working together and moving forward with our struggles.

It seems to me that more than symbolic expression of discontent in the form of rallies, spray painting and bubble blowing, at this time our communities need alternative mechanisms for resisting and thriving in the face of undoubtedly increasing militarized policing on the one hand and economic austerity measures on the other. In the long run, the success of our work can only be gauged by our ability to create and maintain self-determined economic and social

institutions.¹¹ As the experience of some indigenous and South American communities is showing, it is only such alternative institutions that can in turn condition the possibility of a different and better world. I hope we choose to put our creativity to that use. I will take up this issue in a forthcoming article in the winter issue of Fuse.

¹ <http://thestar.blogs.com/g20/> and <http://twitter.com/spaikin>

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jul/04/g8-aid-pledges-broken>

³ <http://g20.gc.ca/toronto-summit/summit-documents/the-g-20-toronto-summit-declaration/>

⁴ <http://news.nationalpost.com/2010/06/03/g20-budget-documents-obtained-by-the-national-post/> and <http://www.nationalpost.com/money+being+spent/3104265/story.html> and

<http://www.nationalpost.com/Liberals+question+soaring+security+costs/3104283/story.html>

⁵ <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/g20streetlevel/2010/06/g20-trapped-at-work-at-queen-and-spadina.html> and <http://openfile.ca/toronto-file/g20-sunday-evening-standoff>

⁶ http://torontoist.com/2010/06/g20_dispatches_so_alternative.php

⁷ <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2010/06/28/g20-rosenfeld-police.html> and

<http://www.ctv.ca/CTVNews/TopStoriesV2/20100627/g20-arrested-accounts-100627/>

⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/28/world/americas/28security.html>

⁹ <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article10823.shtml>

¹⁰ <http://www.sspp.us/Protected-Essays/2003-APA-Bisitcas-Cocoves.doc>

¹¹ Read Z. Amadahy's excellent reflections on notions of community and protest at

<http://rabble.ca/news/2010/07/community-%E2%80%98relationship-framework%E2%80%99-and-implications-activism> and <http://rabble.ca/news/2010/07/protest-culture-how%E2%80%99s-it-working-us>

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