

Public Grief and the Logic of War

November 3, 2014

The past week has seen two attacks in Canada against Canadian soldiers by Muslim men. In response, thousands of people filled the streets to wave flags and call for heightened surveillance, preventive arrests, and war in the middle east. The crowds are calling for a police state. It feels heavy, and we're stuck watching with dread as the crowds seem intent on re-enacting propaganda scenes from the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Except in Canada in 2014, instead of a torch the crowds are cheering on the progress of a dead soldier whose corpse was driven from Ottawa to Hamilton.

The politics advanced by these two spectacles are alarmingly similar: to defeat the enemy outside our borders, we have to defeat the enemy within. In theory, the military and police are distinct bodies with separate roles. But even though these attacks targeted soldiers and followed Canada's decision to go to war in Iraq and Syria, the response to them will be through policing.

People are in the streets calling for a police state: Why isn't everyone with an extremist ideology being watched around the clock? If you have enough suspicion to surveil someone, why can't you arrest them? What additional powers do police need to surveil and assess who has an extremist ideology? They are calling for the further merging of policing and military roles, for the expansion of counter-insurgency warfare within the Canadian territory.

The second soldier killed was from Hamilton and his regiment is based right downtown, on a rapidly gentrifying stretch of James St, just a few blocks from where I'm writing. For three days, the street has seen a proliferation of flags and public displays of grief. Local media dutifully film the spectacle and broadcast it back to us – in the echo chamber, grief and nationalism become inseparable. Any questioning of the state is a failure of compassion for the tragic hero.

There is no space for a critical public narrative around this, which is unsurprising. Cue the usual calls for anyone visibly Muslim to participate in the public grief

– the local imam makes his way down to the armory to lay a wreath and remind everyone that he’s Canadian to. With us or against us – the logic of war begins to take over. Meanwhile, in Alberta, in the same town that hosts the fighter jets that just left for Iraq, nationalists paint “Go Home” and “Canada” across the face of a mosque.

I’m finding it hard to avoid the comparison to 1936, no matter how cliched. In anarchist circles, people had already begun describing the conflict in and around Syria as a “Spain 1936 moment” – it seems clear that a decisive ideological combat has been engaged. However, as in 1936, each step in the shift from rhetoric to proxy war to open war marked a closing of debate, a narrowing of ideology, and a consolidation of power. By the time World War 2 began in earnest, all the sides had settled into more or less their own forms of fascism – the start of the war marked a closing of possibility for liberatory struggle.

Within Syria, this was the government’s strategy from the beginning. The government responded to protest militarily, which meant that only a militarized opposition was possible. As conflict escalated, the possibilities steadily closed until the only roles left to be played were soldier, refugee, or victim. And the part of the opposition to the Syrian government most prepared to accept the military paradigm were the religious fascist organization such as the Islamic State/Daesh and Al-Nusra. And this was exactly what the government had anticipated – the logic of war had narrowed the field until Bashar al-Assad could reasonably look like the good guy.

The grassroots activists who started this uprising are still struggling for freedom and dignity, but their voices are largely submerged in the logic of war. Effectively, the conflict has become a struggle between rival fascisms, secular and religious, each with their different international backers.

The Kurdish regions sought to engage differently, securing their autonomy by force but not taking part in the struggle to control the state. But inevitably, the war came to them. Anarchists in North America have been increasingly interested in the Kurdish regions of Syria and Turkey, where decades of more traditional national liberation struggle against various states have given way to a new strategy of federated communities developing practical autonomy in their territories without the need to decisively engage the state. Many have described it as an anarchistic system. However, the increasingly dangerous situation in the Syrian Kurdish regions, aggravated by the actions of the Turkish and Iraqi states, has become the justification for an expanded military role of Western nations in the conflict, actions that stand to most benefit the Assad dictatorship.

And so enter Canada, with its six old fighter jets, making a symbolic stand alongside the United States and the other big boys of western power and influence.

When I talk about how the logic of war shuts down discussion, I'm not hoping for some sort of democratic ideal, the free exchange of views in the marketplace of ideas. I don't just want to be able to go hold a "Fuck the Military" sign out in front of the armory without getting beat up. I'm talking about fascism and police states, where the logic of war enters into every part of our lives and demands we line up on the side of the nation state that claims us. What kind of response can we imagine to this?

It's taken many of us in this area a long time to admit it, but radical momentum decreasing. The pendulum is moving away from us in its cyclical path. Many former anarchists (who may still use that word for themselves when it suits them) have already noticed this, and slipped into safer positions within the institutional left. Anarcha-lobbyists, anarcho-bureaucrats, anarchist academics. In a context of decreasing strength, can we imagine a response to the calls for a police state this isn't further retreat?

Anarchists and other radicals here have a recent history of being arrested and charged based on "extremist" ideologies and actions not yet taken – many of us got rounded up in advance of the G20 summit in 2010. The G20 as well as the response to the massive 2012 student strike in Montreal demonstrated the state's willingness and ability to militarize even a major city and the lengths they will go to shut us down if its convenient or necessary for them to consider us a threat. These fresh memories and our reduced capacity for confrontation explain the heaviness that settled over us as public grief seamlessly became nationalism, which then became a call for a massive increase in policing.

Anarchists had already been looking for ways to learn more about the conflict in and around Syria and had begun finding ways to offer practical solidarity to Kurdish groups that seemed to share our values. But with Canada's material participation in the war there to support Kurdish regions, are we now simply lining up alongside the western nations in an imperialist war? Or is there space to attack both the military intervention and the fascist groups in Syria?

In 1936, many anarchists thought there was space for a liberatory struggle within the impending clash between socialist and capitalist fascisms. Conflict flared up in Spain, and they traveled there from all over the world to fight Franco's avowed fascists only to find themselves attacked by the fascists who called themselves communists. Their struggle for anarchy became a foot note to the unbelievable slaughter that came after, but after Spain it was clear that none of the powers were fighting for freedom. Though of course all hypocritically claimed they were, and many chose to believe that the lesser of evils was somehow not itself evil.

The two young men who died while attacking Canadian soldiers this week had tried to travel to the middle east shortly before, and at least one of them explicitly trying to join Daesh. Fascist propaganda always contains a grain of truth, which in

the case of Daesh is the reality of the history of western imperialism in the middle east in the 20th century. Western countries redrew the political map, imposed the nation-state model, propped up or toppled dictators at their whims, and perhaps most importantly supported political Zionism and the state of Israel. This grain of truth is then used to drive a romanticized historical narrative and a vision of returning to a purer way of life – for Daesh, the tried-and-true story that Muslim nations are subjugated because they are insufficiently pious and that true Muslim piety is based a specific and highly literal reading of the Qu’ran and Hadith. And finally this narrative is used to garner support for a militarized, totalitarian political project that envisions endless expansion and legitimates authoritarian rule through successful military campaigns abroad.

The Canadian state always struggles to define itself and to arouse the passions of its subjects. A country with a short history, it relies on erasing the histories of Indigenous nations and of genocide, and unlike the United States, it has no founding battle of self-definition, just a bureaucratic stroke of the pen. Canada never became a cause, much to the frustration of its political elites, although it has not yet given up on becoming one.

The media is incessantly asking what could draw good Canadian youths to Daesh’s ideology. But one could just as well ask what drew the young soldier killed in Ottawa to take up arms in defense of a genocidal, imperialist nation state. Interviews with his family show that he loved the military since he was a child, it just seemed to be in his blood they say. As despicable as it is to claim that any child is born to follow orders to kill and die, Canada is using the same kinds of narratives as Daesh to attract the same directionless, war-fetishizing young men to its cause.

The grain of truth in the Canadian propaganda is that people in Canada enjoy many social freedoms. The historical narrative is of brave explorers befriendng natives (who then somehow disappeared) and who through their work and dedication, opened up the country from sea to sea to sea, and developed an enlightened nation while avoiding the excesses of the United States. The authoritarian project looks different here – it’s a trade of complicity for privilege, including the privilege to not be bothered by political matters. In times of crisis though, more is asked of us to stay on the state’s good side.

After the mosque in Cold Lake was vandalized, so-called good Canadians came, helped clean it up, and sang the national anthem outside of it. The choice being offered Canadian Muslims is clear – which side of Canadian nationalism do you want to be on? Do you want to be attacked or join us in singing the anthem? Would you rather be cheering on the jets as they leave Cold Lake, or dodging their bombs in Iraq? Will you support giving the police new powers or will you risk becoming a target?

It turns out anarchists in the Canadian territory didn't need to travel to participate in our very own Spain 1936 – the conflict has conveniently come to us and now even to continue as we did before is to pick sides. There is no neutral position here, and the terrain is shifting rapidly.

In a time of decreasing radical energy, how do we orient ourselves within this logic of war? Between competing fascisms, can we find those with whom we share affinity on the ground in the Middle East, and would our ability to provide solidarity influence the struggle either here or there? Will organizing against new repressive measures provide opportunities for increasing struggle, or will it make us more isolated and vulnerable to repression? What kinds of support and solidarity are we interested in extending to Muslim communities that are increasingly being targeted by the state, and what opportunities could be created by building relationships there?

We have no conclusions to offer. Roads in Hamilton will be closed Tuesday for a soldier's funeral. Two months ago, two young Muslim men were attacked and badly beaten on their way home from Friday prayer. The sign in front of City Hall displays a countdown to the start of the PanAm games, and we know the security apparatus for that event is already in full gear, looking around Hamilton for plausible threats it can use to justify its existence. Should we try to go on the offensive against the nationalist escalation, or should we take this time of diminished expectations to withdraw from confrontation and strengthen our networks? What opportunities exist in this moment? Can we find ways to refuse the logic of war and continue to struggle for anarchy?

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Retrieved on February 10, 2017 from
<http://www.anarchistnews.org/content/public-grief-and-logic-war>

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