

The politics of sideways glances

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The first time I experienced what I would now describe as righteous political anger, an anger all the more fevered because of my powerlessness to unleash it on anyone or anything, was in the spring of 2003. I was in my second year of a Bachelor of Arts degree, as of then major undeclared, but leaning toward Political Science, because of its relative greater ‘life relevance’ or ‘practicality’ over English Literature and its seeming emphasis on talking about the feelings that you had when reading... Conrad, let’s say. What I *really* wanted to be was a real writer of novels, of course, but, in the words of a French teacher whose fear I continue to share, *J’ai toujours voulu écrire, mais je jamais eu le courage de le faire*. But that’s another story for another day. Political theory is where I found myself, because I didn’t think my personal feelings (or anyone else’s) were relevant to thinking about the problems of the world – which, in any case, were more important than novels.

I have one vivid image-memory from that time, a memory that is encapsulated by a moment the sensory fullness of which remains. I think it was sometime in early February of 2003, maybe in the afternoon, as it was still light out. It was raining, but not heavily. I had just left a lecture and was walking back to my dorm, quickly, so as not to get too wet. As I passed one of the many poster poles around campus, I caught a glimpse of a poster that said something like ‘No War in Iraq’ and urged people to come to a demonstration in front of the Art Gallery. I don’t remember what the poster looked like, or even exactly what it said. It doesn’t matter, really, for the purposes of this story. What I remember was the rage I felt overwhelming me as I walked past. Those fuckers are really going to do it. They are lying through their teeth, and no one can stop them from going to war, and killing because they want to. No one can stop them. The leering, self-satisfied faces of Cheney, Rumsfeld, Bush. I stopped paying attention to the debates, the justifications, the grinding gears after that, as much as I could in that war-saturated media time. I didn’t go to the demonstration, what became part of the largest coordinated series of anti-war demonstrations in history.

Wikipedia now tells me that 40,000 people came out in Vancouver. I walked away from televisions. I tried to avoid the headlines, and when anyone asked me what I thought, I said I didn’t want to talk about it. It made me too angry. Back in high school, a friend of mine had taken to using the word ‘visceral.’ It was her favourite word, and she often used it in tandem with ‘apathy,’ a word whose meaning I was pretty sure I’d experienced. I’d never really understood what ‘visceral’ meant, though, except that it had something to do with your guts. Later that second semester of my second year of university, it occurred to me that I now knew how to use ‘visceral’ in a sentence. I felt sick to my stomach when I heard the phrase ‘weapons of mass destruction.’ And somehow, the memory that remains of that time of intensely focused emotion is that of the helpless rage brought forth by a rainy sideways glance at a poster outside of Buchanan A.

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In the fall of 2011, I was entering the second year of my PhD program at the University of Victoria. My main interest at the time was understanding for myself the problem of origins (and more importantly stories of origins) through the late 1960s philosophy of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. ‘It seems like you learned a lot,’ my supervisor wrote on my tortured exegesis of Foucault’s archaeologies. I was preparing for my first comprehensive exam, in the interdisciplinary field of ‘Cultural, Social and Political Thought,’ and I couldn’t find any text that I particularly liked other than the Derrida, whose linguistic plays I found charming and couldn’t help emulating. It was politically important too, I was sure of it. The problem of ‘resistance’ I thought, puzzling over the reading section titled ‘Contours of Critique,’ was that it’s a bit of a cop-out to admit the legitimacy of those you are resisting by positioning your claims against their dominance. Charming linguistic plays seemed like a more appealing option. ‘Perhaps, it is certainly the oft-repeated hope, these sorts of contestations of appeals, appealing the appeal of appeals to origins, unsettle their claims to legitimacy, uncovering their non-originary histories,’ I wrote, high on self-satisfaction, coffee, and 1.5 hours of sleep.

I was fairly preoccupied with all of that, but occasionally I found time to feel excited and hopeful when I looked at stories and videos from Zucotti Park and elsewhere. Part of my procrastinatory web-repertoire became scrolling through the 99% Tumblr, talking to my much more engaged roommates about their experiences. They had been going to organizing meetings for what became known as The People’s Assembly of Victoria. (As ‘Victoria’ is already the name of the already occupied unceded territories of the Coast and Straits Salish peoples, the name ‘Occupy Victoria’ seemed uncouth at best). They talked about Media Committees and Food Committees and the People’s Education Library. I donated two books – I think one was Plato and the other was definitely Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*. I remember saying, handing my roommate the Gramsci, that I couldn’t envision reading *that* again. I didn’t go to any of those meetings, and I only made it to Centennial Square (at that time, in a decolonizing gesture, newly renamed Spirit Square), the site of the People’s Assembly of Victoria (PAOV), twice before it began to dwindle amid city ordinances and was removed as winter fell. My roommates and several of my friends and colleagues camped out the first night, and spent long hours in the square. I walked through one night, meandering between groups of people, feeling cold, out of place and uncomfortable, and a little scared. Of what, I don’t know. Another time, in the late afternoon, equally cold, when The People’s Assembly of Victoria had been established for a couple of weeks at least, I joined several friends (I think we had been studying at a nearby café) to check out that day’s General Assembly. By that time, I knew how it all worked. The gestures, the people’s mic, the consensus-based decisions. I went that day because a friend of a friend would be introducing a motion to adopt a resolution towards the decolonization of Victoria. If I remember correctly, it was the only resolution that was adopted by the PAOV during its activity. What particularly struck me that day, though, was the General Assembly’s facilitation. Someone had taken on a facilitator role and was moving conversation along, calling on speakers, opening and closing discussion. It felt like a smoothly running gathering, and again, I felt uncomfortable. I think it’s been my resting emotional stance for a while now. Not to split hairs (or, rather, to do exactly that - my favourite literary device was always litotes – saying the negative to imply the positive), but for a leaderless movement, this one sure seemed to have a leader, at least that afternoon. Nonetheless, it was all very exciting and – dare I say it? – *cool*. Especially the parts where so many people didn’t get it. I took pleasure in reading the befuddled (and often angry) commentaries trying to describe what ‘Occupy’ was about, and what it was for. It was intellectually interesting and politically relevant, I thought, both that this, whatever it was, was happening in so many places (albeit most of them cities in the West) and that it was hard to suss out just what was going on. There was something going and we can’t name what it is! How... *cool* is that?

Who are you? What do you want? What are your demands? What is your program? Soon enough, people began to try to answer these questions and others like them, but that, too, is another story for another day.

In late June of 2013, I was heading to Bulgaria, the country of my birth, with a suitcase full of unread books. After my family visit and seaside vacation, I would be attending a weeklong methods workshop in ‘postinternational thought’ in rural Wales, an experience I hoped would somewhat shake out nearly two years of debilitating intellectual and personal insecurities. I billed it as a self-imposed test: enjoy this workshop or give up this academic thing, finally. But first, family time. My plane was late arriving in Sofia by about 45 minutes and my brother and mother, also in Bulgaria that summer, were coincidentally 45 minutes late to meet me at the airport. They were both a bit breathless when they saw me, excited in that somewhat formal way one gets when about to describe a traffic situation. Orlov Most was impassable, Todor said, blocked off by the protestors. They’d had to manoeuvre all over the city to get to the airport. And they’d marched the night before! Mama, too! She’d loved it, my shy, fearful mama who tends to walk out of the room when the news is on, saying something like, ‘It’s horrible. I can’t watch this.’ Maybe we could go out again tomorrow night?

The protests had been going on for about a week by then, and the numbers were unprecedented. In that little country where cynicism tends to rule, tens of thousands were in the streets every night, expressing their frustration and anger, and a sense of being together in a way that hadn’t occurred in years. We went out to the center of Sofia late the following afternoon, heading towards the statue of Tsar Osvoboditel¹ where many of the protest marches had begun. There were signs calling for the government’s resignation, Bulgarian flags leaned along the walls of buildings, and the trade in protest flags was in full swing on street corners. A crowd was gathering alongside us as we walked, as if the usual groups of people out for their evening stroll along Vitosha, the trendy shopping and café street, were diverting their paths toward the government buildings. Groups of young people usually found drinking in the park, *babas* and *dyados* in their strolling best (preserved from the communist days), families with children in strollers and on parents’ shoulders, the middle-aged office workers just off the job. And us, the emigres returned ‘home’ for another summer vacation, having missed most of the last twenty years. As it grew dark, we started marching through the centre of the city, to the headquarters of each of the main parties, singing and chanting. Riot cops lined the entrances to most public buildings as well as at the party headquarters, but, for the most part, no one engaged them. Todor was nervous that a fight would break out at the Ataka² headquarters and Mama wanted us to hang back as the group snaked towards their offices next to the opera house, but nothing happened that time. At around nine o’clock, the crowd had thinned and we wandered away to get some dinner. Others headed to discussion groups at Orlov Most and Tsar Osvoboditel – people camped there for months, too. Todor asked me if I wanted to go again the following night, but I didn’t feel like it. It was definitely exciting that it, whatever ‘it’ was, was happening, though. The protests continued nightly throughout the summer and I watched the reports on TV.

I feel a sense of expertise and ownership over Bulgaria when I am elsewhere, a sense I know is feigned and mostly performative, because when I return there, my pseudo-foreignness is all too obvious. As I get older, I think it’s getting better. Is that because I’ve given up my teenage preoccupation with appearing as ‘Canadian’ as possible or because I’ve spent more and more of my time in Bulgaria, learning more, feeling somehow relaxed there in a way I’ve

¹ The statue is of Alexander II, the ‘Tsar Liberator,’ who assisted in the cause of Bulgarian independence from Ottoman rule during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78.

² Ataka is Bulgaria’s ultra-nationalist, racist right-wing party, led by former journalist and television presenter Volen Siderov.

never felt in Canada? Yet, the disjuncture of my supposed expertise vis-a-vis Bulgaria when I am with Bulgarians and when I am elsewhere remains. I just did it above - I narrated that story as if I knew about cynicism, and anger and compatriotship, despite having spent two-thirds of my life far away, disavowing all of that.

The sociologist Richard Sennett writes that '[p]art of the life of a social movement is the effort to say what it is, to see its contours in order to speak its nature.'³ Although I've tended to be taken up, intellectually, emotionally, and politically, with 'protests', 'social movements', various kinds of 'expressions of dissent' (none of the monikers quite work), I've been more excited by the incapacity to articulate their contours in any precise way – both my own, and one that seems more broadly present. I'm curious about our simultaneous desire and incapacity to 'speak [their] nature.' I've made this concern academic – perhaps an alternative sideways to that of angrily stalking past a poster, or excitedly marching in a demonstration I feel a vaguely patriotic connection to. Ten years ago, at a part-time job in student services, a friend and I used to congratulate one another on not being 'joiners.' By this, I suppose, we meant that we didn't want to get taken up by activist group dynamics, by ideology – didn't it make more sense to examine from the sidelines, to be sympathetic and engaged but detached from the minutiae?

I've cultivated a politics of the sideways glance - perhaps this is the most comfortable way to work through my once helpless rage? Or perhaps it is a visceral apathy? I tell myself that sideways glances are important. In that spring of 2003, my academic writing became more confident, more assured in argument and evidence. My journaling practice became more sporadic. I never fully gave it up, but it too became the object of a sideways glance.

At the beginning of 2018, I've written most of a dissertation on my own reluctant stances in relation to others' anger, courage, hope, desire. My own anger, courage, hope, and desire are in there somewhere too – perhaps in the years of research and analysis, perhaps in the glimpses of life stories that linger there. I have had a lot to say about why and how we try to express the excitement of a protest, the moment of resistance, of collective possibility, and it could probably be contained in the ambivalent thrill of a sideways glance.

³ Richard Sennett, "Foreward," *The Voice and The Eye* by Alain Touraine (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), x.