

Noirceur Parfaite #2

The Anti-Fascist Movement in 2017

Noirceur Parfaite

October 2017

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Preamble

I expected to have published the second *Noirceur Parfaite* long before now, but for at least two reasons, it didn't happen.

The first reason is that I felt like kind of a dick after the first one. I more or less stand by my comments, but the reaction elicited from at least one person involved in the @news project wasn't what I was expecting, and I felt bad about it. One of the problems with anarchist discourse right now is that we tend towards being assholes with one another—or at least, it often feels that way. I don't like this or want this. If anything, I'd say that I would prefer to be a force in the world that works counter to this tendency, and moves us all along to All Hanging Out and Smoking Weed (the second part being a stand-in for whatever fun activity you like). This is not a realistic project, but that's not the point of it.

The second reason is that I was busy. Thankfully, I had the advantage of a vacation recently, which I spent in southern Ontario—but I expect I will remain busy with other projects in the next days. Hopefully there will be time to keep working on this column, and to make it more regular, but I'm not entirely sure how realistic a goal that is.

In the time since the last column, a friend asked me to “facilitate” a discussion about anti-fascism—or more properly, a discussion about going “Beyond Anti-Fascism”, as it would end up titled. (How many workshops, discussions, etc. have I done in which someone else puts the word “beyond” in the title?) I put the word “facilitate” in air quotes because it was unclear to me what this would mean. What ended up happening is that I *introduced* the discussion, and really made very little effort to facilitate anything; I did not take stack, I did not try to draw out themes, nothing of the sort. Instead, I made two requests of those listening: let's avoid any efforts to define fascism, and let's avoid talking about specific events, primarily demos. Then I expressed my own ideas for a little over five minutes, and from there, other people started to talk too.

The conversation was all over the place, but I actually liked it in this context. People talked about what they wanted to talk about, and I wanted to know what others' priorities were. Really, we were having a conversation about *the context*, and the referent “anti-fascism” was just a gateway to that. There was some discussion of the established practice of counterprotesting La Meute whenever those fucks decide to go to the Lacolle border crossing (as happened most recently on September 30), but there was also wild and enthusiastic talk of squats in the countryside and the deep woods where the spook of citizenship would be proactively, decisively negated. Others wanted to talk about anarchist cultural visions versus nationalist ones, and at least one person wanted to talk about conflict with the Maoists. Eventually, there was a break-up into smaller discussion groups, some of which had a more practical focus than others.

For me, “Beyond Anti-Fascism” was a chance for me to voice some ideas I've had in my head for awhile, to a somewhat larger and more ideologically diverse audience than the people who often sit on the couch in my living room, and in a more complete way than those argumentative bastards I share my life with will often allow. The rest of this section will go through these ideas, including a few that I didn't have time for in the discussion, in arbitrary sequence.

The first three points elaborate a possible understanding for what anti-fascism actually is—or, at least, how we might usefully conceive of it and talk about it.

1) Anti-fascism, like any social movement, is a constant.

This is to say, it is a social movement with a long history—not a fad, but something that some people have been doing for a long time. Obviously there was an anti-fascism of a sort even in the days before Mussolini was invited into government, but we don't need to start there to put the present moment in proper perspective. It should suffice to think only of North America, and to start from the 1980s or '90s. During this entire time, there have been people concerned about fascists and fascism—which is to say, for the purposes of this text, some combination of:

1. small organizations with specifically racist or otherwise oppressive politics;
2. larger movements with politics that are less defined but generally amenable to these organizations' agendas; and
3. not infrequently, but particularly during Republican administrations, the executive branch of the United States government (the governments of Québec, Arizona, and a few other U.S. states might occasionally be identified as fascist as well)

During this entire time, there have been discussions of this “fascist threat” (its composition, its activities, its capacities, etc.) and a consistent trend of people taking action against it.

2) Anti-fascism, like any social movement, is a space.

Meetings, public demonstrations, and gnarlier actions comprise the bulk of this space, which is broadly non-fixed in geographic terms and non-subcultural with regards to the people present—i.e. it does not correspond to where certain people (in the Montréal context, the stereotype would be francophone skinheads who like to drink and talk about the working class) decide to spend their Saturday nights. Like any space that exists in the real world, a concept of purity simply does not apply. The range of ideas present within anti-fascism is extremely diverse, and made all the more so in any moment when participation spikes.

3) In 2017, anti-fascism is experiencing greater visibility and a higher level of participation than normal.

This obviously has something to do with the electoral campaign of Donald Trump and its success, though it cannot be reduced to that either. Suffice it to say, though, that the incoherent conceptual category of fascism feels more relevant to people, and more people are saying it, including those with the largest capacity to broadcast their thoughts. This creates a feedback loop of sorts, which might not necessarily correlate to higher rates of participation in anti-fascism, but which has certainly done so in this case. The demos are bigger, and more frequent. More people are involving themselves in anti-fascism, either for good reasons or bad, and this makes it “bigger”.

Accepting this elaboration, a comparison can be made between anti-fascism in 2017 and anti-austerity in 2012—that is, in the Montréal context, the time of “the student strike” or “le Printemps

érable” or whatever other historonym we might prefer. The anti-austerity movement—or more narrowly, the so-called “student movement” aiming for free tuition at Québécois public universities—had a long history before 2012, and its history did not end there, either. The fourth article in the “After the Crest” series from CrimethInc., reflecting on Montréal anarchists’ experience in 2012, concerns itself primarily with what led anarchists of various backgrounds and persuasions to engage with the movement in 2012 and the years immediately adjacent; this article also imagines forms of disengagement and distancing that might have been, at times, more empowering than straightforward participation as agitators and bodies on the ground. The remaining points aim at an analysis of anti-fascism in 2017 with the same priorities at the fore.

4) The baseline objective of the anti-fascist movement, while obviously limited from a critical anarchist perspective, is entirely consistent with anarchist aims.

More elaborate articulations of this goal by those with agendas that go beyond the aims of the movement, such as Maoists or liberal democrats, will probably not be consistent with anarchist aims—but these other tendencies do not define anti-fascism as a whole anymore than anarchists do.

Trying to perfectly define the baseline objective of the movement is an exercise in futility. That said, I would consider it a broad effort to do away with the forces itemized in point #1.

5) Engagement with the anti-fascist movement can serve to satisfy both the emotional and practical needs of anarchists.

Like many others in society, we find the activities of fascists to be monstrous and abhorrent, and we may find ourselves with a desire to “do something” about it; this is true even for the most rhetorically nihilist among us, who present as very aloof but who may nevertheless find themselves beset with righteous fury when an acquaintance gets stabbed, a mosque gets shot up, or a family member starts promoting reactionary ideas on Facebook. These emotions can be rationalized away, or they can be used. Regarding the practical, there is too much to say. There are new friends to be met, plenty of opportunities to practice new skills, and social energy that might be harnessed towards any number of interesting avenues. Even if your goal is just to shit-talk leftists, some level of engagement will provide your critiques a touch of authenticity.

The above two points are fairly banal, I think, but they probably need to be said. The remaining points should challenge many participants in the anti-fascist movement, and perhaps actively antagonize a few of them, so I want to make it clear right now that these points are offered in solidarity, and that I am mostly contemptuous of the purist rhetoric from certain anarchists (largely the issue of certain tendencies, though I won’t name names) that reject engagement with anti-fascism out of hand. If you’re one of those purists, cut it the fuck out.

6) Petitioning the government is useless; direct action gets the goods.

For years, Solidarity Across Borders has organized an annual demo in Montréal under the slogan of first *STATUS FOR ALL!* and then, more recently, *OPEN THE BORDERS!* These slogans articulate as demands, necessarily directed at the Canadian government, which is arbiter of status and maintainer of borders in this territory. These demands, even if we imagined them voiced or embodied by a hundred times more participants in a SAB demo, will not directly affect government policy. This truth is well-understood by anarchists, both those who participate in SAB demos and those who do not.

But when it comes to fascists doing essentially the same thing, articulating a demand for mass deportation or the like, these same anarchists can get very worried—namely, by imagining a clear causal relationship between the petitioning action and a dreaded government policy outcome. It is fine to be disgusted by racist petitioners standing in front of the National Assembly or gathering at some other visible or symbolically important site (the Quartier des spectacles, Montréal City Hall, the Lacolle border crossing), and it is perfectly fine to attack them (in strategically sound ways, of course). At the same time, it is problematic to understand any manifestation of civil discourse as an urgent threat and attendance-obligatory.

A call for a demo in a residential neighbourhood with a visibly Muslim character, or to march on the Olympic Stadium at the moment of its usage by refugees, indicates a risk of a pogrom—in other words, direct action. A proper threat assessment would understand such calls as more urgently threatening than, for instance, the passive and virtue signaling public activity of La Meute.

7) Under Canadian law, the state guarantees the right of citizens to peaceful assembly and peaceful expression of political opinion.

Thus, any attack on such rights is simultaneously an attack on the state itself. It is absolutely possible to attack the state and succeed, but it is a difficult operation, and one that demands a great deal of resources—of which, it is quite likely, the attackers do not have an abundance. It takes many fewer resources for the other side to pull off some kind of passive event. If one demo is blocked, they will call another on another day. Or they will hide in a parking garage for awhile, then emerge once the attackers have gone home.

The above two points comprise the core of my disagreement with the strategic imperative that goes by the name “no platform”, currently in vogue among many influential participants in anti-fascism, and which provides an undesirable negative affect to the anti-fascist movement as a whole. No platform, as a project, is comparable to the project of policing as articulated by Tom Nomad in The Master’s Tools. The exigency is to be everywhere at once, to prevent any instance of violation of non-situational placidity, a project which is necessarily impossible. For the state, the effort to realize this impossibility is, at least, productive. For anarchists in the anti-fascist movement, it is probable that we have better things to do, either inside or outside of the movement, in lieu of devoting all our time and energy to a project that will inevitably fail, and which will likely leave us feeling weak because of that failure.

8) Anarchists should not feel okay about marching behind Maoist banners.

This is meant literally as well as figuratively.

After the death of Heather Heyer, there was a memorial demonstration in Montréal, which began with a rally at Square Phillips. PCR-RCP cadre were there in force, as well as many anarchists. We found ourselves in the same place, largely for the same reasons, and this is actually fine; it is important for us to have spaces of encounter with those whom we do not like, rather than simply become more isolated from one another than we already are. But when we left the square, the Maoists did what they always do, which was to hoist their banners and hammer-and-sickle flags in the air, and thereby very effectively mark the demonstration as *theirs* as far as any spectator would be able to tell.

This didn't need to happen. Anarchists could have marched out of the square in a different direction. We talk a lot of shit about Maoists, and other tendencies, in our living rooms—but on the streets that day, we reflexively actualized left unity, rather than do something to develop our own autonomous capacities, and visibilize the ideas we presumably think to be superior to those of Maoism in terms of strategic, ethical, and even aesthetic thinking.

Besides, our mutual distaste would have had practical benefit that day, namely by making the anti-fascist movement less intelligible, less centralized, less repressible. Let's give kudos where it is due, and say that PCR-RCP cadre are ready and willing to fight cops and destroy property in pursuit of their aims. It is always better to have two potentially rowdy crowds wandering downtown Montréal than just one. A chaotic movement is a stronger one.

9) Anarchists should deviate from easy narratives that frequently fail to compete with the narratives propagated by fascists.

As soon as anarchist discourse becomes populist, it loses what makes it distinctly more valuable than the discourse of liberals, who have—through television and thinkpieces, podcasts and blog posts—propagated a powerful idea of what it means to be a good and ethical person in affluent, urban, and secular societies. Broadly speaking, *The Guardian* and your average Netflix sitcom actually have it quite right vis-à-vis their vision for compassion, empathy, and solidarity amongst people who are just struggling to survive in this world, same as anyone else. Alas, it is not enough to be right; the populist rhetoric of many fascists, which appeals to different emotions, is often more successful in shaping the collective action of the masses.

Given that anarchists acting populist today will not provide an outcome of popularity tomorrow (such is the power of authoritarian institutions' ideological conditioning), we should embrace our outsider status and, with it, the freedom to call things as we see them. This is, in some ways, a terrible freedom, because oftentimes the way we see things will be absolutely misinformed, and provide no immediately positive outcome. Regarding anarchists' involvement in the anti-fascist movement, perhaps the most relevant topic here is Islam, which many anarchists broadly oppose (usually along with all religion). The nature of this opposition, of course, is extremely varied, and it is certain that many espousing such a position are also woefully ignorant of even basic concepts relevant to the subject matter. In this, many anarchists are the same as white Québécois who have concerns about at least some aspects of Muslims' beliefs and practices.

Anarchism needs to be a space where it is possible to voice those concerns, which might begin a dialogue that corrects some misconceptions, and maybe suggests that there are bigger things to worry about than what some imam said one time. Fascists claim to be the only ones in society who will speak matter-of-factly about Islam-associated problems, while in fact routinely propagating conspiracy theories and other false information. There is no serious possibility that either liberals or Leninists will ever demonstrate by example that the fascists' claim to this effect are wrong, so the task is up to anarchists who are willing to take responsibility for saying things that other people (including people who can make credible claims of being more oppressed) may not want to hear.

10) The only way to stop random and autonomously planned violence is better policing.

Such better policing is, in fact, more or less the projectual aim of some particularly dedicated members of the anti-fascist movement, who investigate incidents of fascist activity, identify who is responsible, and take action against them. This project is entirely laudable, especially to the extent that it is motivated by genuinely altruistic sentiment—unlike the vast majority of activities pursued by actual cops, i.e. the state employees of whom every last one is a bastard. But the volunteer efforts of flawed and underresourced people who have bills to pay, addictions to nurse, all the rest of it, will never prevent atrocities like the Québec City mosque shooting from reoccurring.

Rather than indulge in honeyed talk of how this problem will disappear in the context of total anarchist triumph, it should be acknowledged that what will prevent such atrocities is better surveillance, better regimes of punishment and reward for bad and good behaviour, better algorithms to preemptively identify the person about to shoot someone. Obviously the medicine is worse than the disease, even if that's easier for some of us to say than others.

There is a place for hunting down individual fascists and making their lives more difficult, which will remain the main activity of some people and which others should try to celebrate, but it is problematic for this to become a markedly favoured tactic of the movement, never mind a strategic-ethical imperative. Not because the anti-fascist movement would have become “a state in waiting” or an arm of the extant state, but because making the world a safe place for everyone is a project beyond our capacities. The degree to which we can respond effectively to things is largely limited by cultural and geographic distances, and if we decide that we have our own lives to live, too, which will not be well-served by developing the mentality akin to that of a heroic but tortured cop, then the burden of that personal choice is that we will be more limited in our capacity to effect social change.

11) Theories of fascism are politically and emotionally motivated.

In other words, they are never entirely honest.

In intellectualizing fascism (and its relatives: crypto-fascism, proto-fascism, quasi-fascism, Nazism, etc.), the intellectual is typically unable to separate personal bias and agenda from the work at hand. This is why many anarchists call Leninists “red fascists”, why Leninists might say anarchists are “fascists in effect”, why the enemies of the anti-fascist movement proclaim

that “antifa are the real fascists”. None of us are actually wrong, because wrongness can only be measured against the definition being used.

Occasionally, a clinical definition emerges, usually in an academic tome or an overconceived blog post, which takes out all the moralizing and provides a rigorous and well-reasoned diagnostic framework—but such rarefied definitions never catch on in common discourse, because the pragmatic function of the word “fascist” is to rally groups of people to destroy an enemy that deserves no ethical consideration; people will continue to identify things they don’t like as fascist, never mind what any expert says.

Without imagining that we can delete the word from English or French, or even from our own speech (for our emotions will sometimes demand that we denounce a thing in the strongest possible terms), anarchists should use different terms, preferably more precise, to identify the enemies of the anti-fascist movement wherever possible. When we choose to use the word “fascism”, we should be clear that our choice is informed by convenience and, to some degree, arbitrariness—not truth (for if we do think that our choice of words is “true”, we have a bigger problem, which is that we have constructed a semantic reality for ourselves that satisfies our own desire to always be right).

In this move away from theories of fascism, which are typically too large in scope to be practical, we can:

1. encourage a less alienated relationship to people’s very reasonable hatreds, which do not need to be justified with historical narratives or political ontologies;
2. build a cultural resilience against the immanent threat of anarchists being identified as “fascists” by authoritarians who want to control everything, a predictable outcome of the contemporary and largely Leninist-animated anti-fascist movement achieving broad success in its goals; and
3. continue to use the word “fascist” in much the same way as we have been doing, but perhaps with fewer frustrations with ourselves and others as to whether the word is being used correctly

12) Participation and engagement will produce better knowledge of the anti-fascist movement than intellectual approaches ever will.

Don’t trust anyone who has a pretense to superior knowledge of history, metaphysics, and how to live your life. That includes yourself. Walk with the anti-fascist movement for a bit, or don’t, as you like—but do it as an anarchist.

Concluding Thoughts

I have one reading recommendation to conclude with, which is “Combating the Reactionary Forces of Liberalism” by Common Cause Anarchist Organization, published in *Mortar* #3 in 2015. It is an imperfect article, but it does a very good job at identifying the difference between La

Meute and smaller outfits like Adelante or the Fédération des Québécois de souche—namely, that La Meute lacks a revolutionary and anti-systemic core, that it is in fact perfectly willing to work within the general framework of the Canadian state. Thinking to the United States, it seems that many defenders of the Confederate flag would probably fit this description as well.

Common Cause’s argument is that these people require a different response than fascists do, and I think I buy that, though I don’t think there will ever be much hope of establishing a clear vision of who, precisely, is or is not a “reactionary liberal”, as opposed to those who come from a genuinely revolutionary and anti-systemic perspective, albeit a pessimistic nationalist one. It is clear enough that many people with one foot in the anarchist scene have another foot in the social-democratic scene, but it is harder to speak of actual individuals with any certainty. Our capacity to tell the difference will be even more difficult when assessing the anti-fascist movement’s street-level enemies, but Common Cause has made the best effort I’ve yet seen at realizing a practical taxonomy.

Peter Gelderloos and Seattle Ultras, respectively, provide two decidedly more lively texts that I think warrant some attention: “Fascists are the Tools of the State” in the first case, dating from 2007, and “Class Combat” in the second, from this year. Both of these take a decidedly less intellectual approach than either myself in this text—I promise I am less aloof from the matters I like to discuss if you hang out with me in real life—or the collectively written, democratically approved text produced by Common Cause.

Finally, I recently had the opportunity to see a few well-preserved copies of a magazine issued out of Toronto in the late 1990s, *antifa forum*. The first thing to say is that, rather than it being some brand-new phenomenon, the North American anarchist scene has been fascinated with terminology issued from the German radical scene for well over two decades (and of course, this is where we get some other terms, such as “black bloc”). Secondly, I think a lot of people would benefit simply from being aware of the existence of older materials like these, even if they have no particular interest in the content. I found many of the theoretical questions and tensions of today coming out in these older texts. I suspect that for younger radicals, like myself and those born even later, these older printed materials will provide a historical sense of the issues that we otherwise just aren’t going to get anywhere else.

And with that, I suppose I’ll conclude. As always, please feel free to discuss these points in the comments, tell me how much I suck, point me in the directions of the best gay saunas in the North American anarchist scene, and tell me what you’d rather I talk about.

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Montréal Counter-information

This text is characterized by interstitial paragraphs, written in italics, that tie together the seemingly disparate 12 theses; these paragraphs are not marked in the table of contents.

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