

## On the Canucks Riot, Protest, and Division

by kevin harding - Thursday, June 16, 2011

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I was saddened and disappointed to watch Vancouver burn last night. Disappointed because the Canucks played so poorly and lost a game that they didn't deserve to win, saddened to watch how the people in the streets 'reacted' to the game and went on a rampage, and I'm disappointed and saddened to watch the online--and traditional media--reaction to what happened. Yesterday was a weird day; one that ended with me being temporarily restricted from updating [my Twitter](#) because I was posting too much, one that kept me up all night as I watched the part of the world that I really consider home burn and get smashed, one that scared me as I tried to contact my friends who were downtown.



But, in short, I'm not surprised there was a riot. I'm not an accredited hockey commentator, and I don't watch a huge amount of it myself, so I'm not really able to comment on the psyche and social construction around the games extensively--other than I wonder how the pressure on the players to 'fight' and play a physical game could possibly translate into how reactions and responses are created after the game. Not to mention the narrative around 'hockey riots'--and there's a lot. And, sadly, I'm not overly surprised at the extent of the geographic-based bashing in the media, both online and traditional, that seems to hold people who can afford to live in the City of Vancouver as some kind of sacrosanct class of citizens who would never dare to harm another.

Even more sadly, I think that the confluence of these events highlights a dominant narrative these days, one of division and antagonism and a willing ignorance of our collective humanity. It is a narrative that is aptly employed by capitalism to keep us from working together, and willing to exploit one another, and it's a narrative that's used by overly commercialised professional sport to continue its business endeavours.

Perhaps the only bright light that comes out of the Canucks Riots of 2011 is the response to the reaction that happened today; with people travelling together to the downtown core to clean up the disaster that was last night. But even that bright light is tinged with some darkness.

And it's something that we probably all need to talk about.

*(click read more to continue...)*

This all started rather mundanely. Tia, another one of the contributors on PoliticsRespun, had suggested that we might want to liveblog the hockey game. Sounds fun, right? [We thought we'd snark our way through the game, making fun of the hockey players like we'd normally do, and I'd declare the game over after four minutes.](#) Sure, that was fun and all, but soon we started noticing on social media the reports of bottles being thrown and cars being smashed and then there were cars on fire and the Bay and then everything.

Vancouver isn't exactly a stranger to riots. We had one [in 1994](#) when the Canucks lost game seven in the Stanley Cup finals, and [we've had them in the past in response to police crackdowns on protest.](#) Indeed, hockey riots certainly aren't anything new; Montreal seems to have them all the time - even when its team *wins* games.

But why? What's the import of a hockey game that causes riots? Don Cherry, whilst winning the award for the most tasteless statement, blamed the riots on "left wing pinkos in government" who apparently restricted police from beating the shit out of the rioters in the streets. But I think that Cherry plays a certain amount of a role in what happened - he's well known for encouraging hockey players to fight on the ice, often yelling that the referees should just "let 'em fight!" This Stanley Cup series was particularly bloody, with a number of players suffering severe concussions or fractured vertebrae. If it's fine for hockey players to play an incredibly physical version of what could be a beautiful game, why is it not okay for the fans to react to their team playing horribly in a similar way to the players?

Dave Zirin, [while quoting a number of Vancouver activists, notes that the downtown area had been effectively turned into a city-sanctioned zone of ridiculousness.](#) He quotes Vancouver activist Harsha Walia:

"It's ridiculous that even a hockey riot needs a scapegoat. A deliberately created media circus of sports fervor, millions of alcohol advertising dollars, and City-sanctioned street party zones all over downtown will unsurprisingly lead to a massive street brawl."

Zirin also quotes Dru Oja Day of the [Media Coop](#):

"If you ask people to pour all of their emotions and anger into a game, then a major event (Montrealers have rioted after first round game 7 wins!) is going to occasion some outbursts. Hockey commentators like Hockey Nights' Don Cherry are constantly associating hockey with the troops overseas (he went to Afghanistan and fired a live shell, for chrissakes) and promote fighting and big open ice hits. We shouldn't be surprised."

So perhaps it's not surprising that a hockey game erupted into a riot. There's even a clichéd joke about Montreal - "they held a riot and a hockey game broke out!" - but why is this the cliché?

The reaction to the riots tells us a little more.

This morning, Twitter and the internet were ablaze with people posting complaints that it wasn't "Vancouver people" that engaged in the rioting downtown. The implication was that it was people who lived outside of the arbitrary geographic zone that is the City of Vancouver who broke windows. The implication is that the suburbs are the ones that spawn troublemakers and hoodlums and hooligans.

There's the narrative at work.

What does a little bit of geography have to do with riots downtown? Well, there's a distinctive thing at work with geography in the Lower Mainland of Vancouver: the further east (out of Vancouver) that you go, the lower the cost of housing tends to go. By the time you get to places like Maple Ridge or Surrey, housing is closer to affordable. So, is there an implication that the people who can afford to live in the geographic zone of the City of Vancouver aren't as likely to riot? That perhaps they're just better people? They're generally more wealthy, certainly, but unless we've just given up all of our pretences, that doesn't really mean that they're less likely to riot.

However, the narrative at work here is a narrative of division. The people who live in downtown Vancouver, according to this narrative, *aren't* the kind of people who would riot. They're better than that. So the rioters *must have* come from such unsavoury places as Port Coquitlam or Port Moody or Richmond, or... *shudder*... Richmond or Surrey or Chilliwack.

Nationalism is the result of a narrative that says that some people, who can claim membership of a group whose membership is based upon a common claim to being born in a specific geographic location and those who can claim a 'legal' right to the same kind of membership. People who are members of this group are different from people who aren't - in extremes, members of one nation are *more human* than others. Add things like class ("he works in the *mines* for a living! Glory be.") or race (another socially constructed category based on skin pigmentation, for heaven's sake) and you get multiple fractures and divisions and segments of humanity. All of which are turned against each other. Neighbourhoods and geographic regions in the Vancouver area reflect and are the result of some of these divisions - Vancouver is an expensive place to live, and some places, like the *British Properties* (so named because you once had to be a Brit to own land there) are stratified to the point where only rich white people live there. The suburbs are more affordable because they're further away, and many of them have ethnic neighbourhoods. Divisions at play, with neighbourhoods in Vancouver reflecting and reacting to the divisions in society that we've created.

So when this riot happened yesterday, there was instantly blame being assigned. It couldn't have been people from Vancouver. It had to be the people from the suburbs. Why? Well, it probably wasn't a conscious decision in the minds of many people who made this argument, but the assumption is that people who don't make as much money, or who don't have as much money, who live further away from Vancouver, are just more likely to engage in rioting. To be criminals. The people who live in Vancouver couldn't possibly be doing this kind of stuff. There we have it, those divisions at work. Assigning blame after an alcohol-fuelled riot.

These divisions are really troubling. They're used by *capitalism* to legitimise how we exploit one another -- if someone isn't a member of one arbitrarily defined group of people, then they aren't as important, and

they could be exploited more. In the past -- and *still today* -- this has been powerfully used, with people of African heritage used as slaves in North America, or the fact that Vancouver is still unceded Coast Salish territory. Capitalism requires that labour be exploited, and there's no better way to make that exploitation flow better than by setting an explicit group that's better or different and putting them in contention with others. The impetus to divide people is necessary, because if we worked together, we might work together and prevent capitalism from really screwing us over.

What's worse is that the CBC and CTV spent a large amount of time last night labelling the people participating in the riot "protestors." Here, there's a new kind of division going on - people who *protest* are people who smash windows in while wearing Canucks jerseys or burn cars with a bandana on. Never mind the fact that *legitimate protest* is almost always based on the principle of highlighting these created divisions between us and trying to fix them. A lot of people who protest protest because they don't want people to be divided based on their gender or their sex or the colour of their skin.

And a *lot* of people protest the impacts and effects of capitalism. Some of them -- anarchists -- believe that the State, the thing that legally reinforces capitalism and memberships in imagined communities and divisions, is part of the problem and shouldn't be there. But the capitalist system doesn't like that, so the divisions have to be reinforced. People who protest are violent, and good people aren't violent, so good people don't protest. That's why, for a while, the riots downtown yesterday were labelled as protests.

There are plenty of reasons for radical protest in the world. I just don't think, really, that a hockey team's loss was one of them. But now, with the labelling of the riots as protests and the people who took part as protestors, the idea of protesting, of joining together to try and make the world a better place, might just have a little less lustre, because now the very idea of *protesting* is a new mode of division between us.

There are, of course, some hints towards a bright light at the end of this particular tunnel. People streamed into the downtown core today to clean up the city. They worked together to try and put the city back together. I had friends from Burnaby and Surrey and Vancouver work together as they picked up glass and trash downtown.

Narrative of division defeated?

Maybe, maybe not. The show of social solidarity, with people working together to clean up the mess downtown, was coloured with statements that "this wasn't my city," or that "the people who did this aren't from around here," or "they were all anarchists and protestors." The VPD today said that the same people who protested the Olympics were the ones that rioted last night. And there were calls to go and shop downtown - because that's the best way to help the city 'recover.'

Are our efforts to clean up the aftermath of the riot just going to reinforce the divisions that put the riot into play? That gave us people a basis for smashing things? Will capitalism - shopping downtown - put an end to the exploitation? Will this scapegoating of the suburbs and "not here" stop the stupid divisions that are created between us?

Will we see, instead, how we can work together for change in the world? And how protest - not pointless riots - can play a meaningful role in this?

I don't know. But it's probably a conversation we should have. And we should probably talk to each other, ignoring whatever created divisions there are between us.

Maybe we can take a lesson from amateur sport, sport for fun. Yes, there's competition and points and a winner and a loser, but people play for fun. For real enjoyment. Rather than reinforcing divisions, people find commonality in the joy that is shared humanity. Something that capitalism prevents and destroys.

And that's definitely a conversation we should have.