Field Notes from a Protest: Toronto, Ontario, June 26, 2010, G20 Summit Protests

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But there's always sunshine out there somewhere, and this weekend instead I'll be viewing the Chinese Terra Cotta Warriors at the ROM in Toronto, and possibly getting a chance to see the protests for the G20/G8 summit, because they are confined to the area of Queen’s Park, a mere few meters from the ROM. I am wearing my best sneakers so that I can run when they drag out the sonic cannons and tear gas. Ah, the life of an anthropologist! (June 24, 2010)

Laughing about wearing sneakers in an anticipatory blog post outlining my intention to attend the G20 Summit protests in Toronto validated my all-too-infrequent divinatory capabilities.

My daughter and I had tickets in-hand for the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) to see the Terra Cotta Warriors on loan from China. We left in what I thought was plenty of time to catch some of the mobilizations on the G20 front, not counting on doing the “QEW crawl” (the Queen Elizabeth Way traffic jams) on the way. We ended up detouring through the city, got off the Gardiner at Trafalgar when the traffic started to slow, and headed in on Dundas to Bloor. That was the least of our troubles.

We did our usual park at the Islington Toronto Transit Corporation (TTC) station and took the train in to the core. The media warned the public to be prepared for extended times, to take water and food with you, as there might be slowdowns or stoppages on the trains. As we were traveling the conductor announced that all subway lines had been closed southbound from Bloor and that St George would be the last stop eastward on this line. We looked at each other, Chris looked at the map, and we figured we were fine, as the ROM is a block from St George station.

We hit the ROM at St George station around 2:30, so we decided to head down to Queen’s Park to see the scheduled “official” protest march. As we passed through the north of the park, we noticed that there was absolutely no one there. When we hit the front of the Legislature building, we saw a line of police and a barricade at the front, nothing sinister, just police, and just past them, the port-a-potties I so desperately needed to use after the trip. We walked right past them and I used the facilities while my daughter clicked pictures of them protecting the building.

As we emerged, we heard the sound of the returning march, so we headed over to try to catch some video and talk to folks. One lone man stood at the intersection of College and University holding a Tea Party sign, and we could not figure if that meant he was in favor or not. The atmosphere and ambiance of the returning protesters reminded me of “back in the day” as my daughter called it, the late 60s early 70s era of war protests. A myriad of causes written on a multitude of banners, a range of all ages and genders, some laughing, some serious, children and balloons and chanting, and I stood in the middle of it all with my video camera rolling (Fig. 1-4). A folksy-style band performed in the back of a truck – some old Wobbly songs, Joni Mitchel’s Big Yellow Taxi, stuff like that. People lolled about, tired, against trees or on blankets and under

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1 Group of Twenty Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors
One ambitious group performed a dance and chant near the buses, lined up all the way from the point of Queen’s Park north to College, with logos indicating they were from everywhere. It was heartening. Soon, too soon, however, it was time to head to the ROM. It was 3:45; our tickets were for 4 pm, so off through the crowds we went. I remarked to my daughter that I noticed something unusual, something not much like “back in the day” – people from different groups were photographing one another, each set posing nicely with signs and banners indicating their cause, smiling, some flashing two-fingered peace signs. My comment? It seemed as if it was more important to be recorded as having been there for future upload than it was actually to partake of the protest. Odd.

When we exited the ROM at 5 pm, however, things had changed. We had no way of knowing about the burning police cars, the Black Bloc\(^2\) rampage through the core, the heightened police presence. As we stood on Bloor and Queen’s Park, we saw clots of police starting south, riot helmets and tear gas masks attached to their belts. It took only a second for me to acquiesce to my daughter’s request to follow them. Video rolling, we passed three police cars at the side of the ROM (Fig. 5), one of which had a person in the back seat to whom some of the police were talking. Several other pedestrians headed in the same direction as we did. Now, I must admit I move a little slower than I did when I was younger, so keeping up with the riot police and my daughter took a little bit of effort.

Queen’s Park north: again, no one. The police cut through the park, and we followed. As we came even with the Legislature Chris pointed out that where there had once been a line of police, there was now a line of something that looked like it came out of a movie – fully suited riot cops with shields and helmets. My thought was that they reminded me of the video for System of a Down’s song *BYOB.* But on we went.

There could not have been more than 50 people milling in south Queen’s Park, 50 of “us,” and hundreds of riot police, police on horseback, all with helmets and shields with soft-tie handcuffs attached, hanging like a warning sign. Behind them came another line, and another (Fig. 7-8). The entire city block behind them was filled with police. Chris got bold, and stepped up to within 20 feet of the lines of cops to photograph them (Fig. 9). People milled about, talking, making phone calls on cell phones. A street vendor had his cart up against the subway entrance (the TTC was closed south of Bloor, which is where we were). Chris pointed out a pile of black clothing on the ground and sidewalk to the right of us as we faced College (Fig. 6), and we wondered aloud who would leave their things lying around like that. We would find out later that it was alleged to be the outer clothing of several Black Bloc protesters, shed under cover of their friends and left so they could walk out into the diminishing crowd, supposedly to confuse the police. We would learn that the police were not confused at all, nor were they discerning.

The line of police began to advance on the park, a meter at a time. I would turn to talk to Chris, and when I turned back, they were closer. And then again, closer one more meter (don’t blink, blink and you’re dead). The people in the crowd began to look

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\(^2\) The Black Bloc is not a group, but a series of tactics employed by supposed anarchist activists to call attention to a cause by dressing in black clothes and black hoodies, forming a formidable presence. Some participants can get violent, but that is not the main ideology behind the practice. They utilize CMC and text SMS to coordinate and gather (Schumin 2010)
nervous, twitchy, and doubtful. A young man with a duct-tape medical aid cross on his sleeve moved through the crowd, calling out “Is anyone here hurt? Does anyone need attention?” I started to get worried – there had been no trouble here, why would anyone need a medic? It dawned on me that whatever changed in the time we were gone, it was violent, and was met with resistance. This was definitely not good.

With each advance of the line, we stepped back another meter or so, still filming, still photographing. Chris wanted to go closer, to photograph the gas masks she noticed they were starting to put on, and I said no. If they were dressing for war, I did not want to be there.

I asked a CTV reporter there (I knew it by the large icon logo on the microphone that hung from his waist) what was over to the right, on College, where the raised voices were emanating from. I explained to him that I was from out of town, and the little ROM gift bag I clutched in my left hand certainly must have given me away as a tourist. He said there was nothing, he guessed that it was just the place the police had them penned in. I asked what had happened since we went in to the ROM, and he did not answer. I suggested perhaps we should leave – the police now were several meters closer and up past the sidewalk onto the grass, and had ordered the vendor to move out. In fact, as Chris was photographing one of the police yelled out to “move!” and she got nervous, but they had been yelling at a man near her, not her. The CTV reporter thought our leaving was a good idea, so we walked, backwards at first, slowly, not wanting to alarm anyone.

Suddenly a voice called out to our rear “Look to your backs! They are coming behind you!”

Bless that man, whoever he was. As we turned, we saw a double line of riot-gear clad police coming towards the crowd from the direction of the Legislature (Fig. 10-11). We walked, and kept walking. They stopped just as we were even with them, perhaps 50 meters away to our right. We walked a little faster, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw them break into a run, batons in the air. Chris yelled “run, Mom, run! Run!” My response flew out: “You don’t have to tell me twice!” We ran to our left up the road, not listening for footsteps, not caring where we ran, just that we ran. I had trouble with my right ankle all day, and now it was going to hold us up, but pain or no pain, we booked.

Just when we were about even with the Legislature we stop running. There were several older Iranian women there, still holding the signs from the earlier afternoon protests, walking away from the crowd. I stopped and turned to them, asked them if they are alright, and one woman responded with what sounded like a mix or fear and resignation that they were okay. We kept walking away, stopping only briefly to photograph a line of maybe ten paddy wagons on the underpass (Fig. 12). They had every intention of arresting everyone in that park right then. I looked at Chris, she looked at me, and we sped up a bit.

We could breathe a little easier as we hit the north of the park. There were two officers near a police car blocking traffic at Wellesley and Queen’s Park West, but no others. “Mom, is this what it was like back in the day?” I could honestly tell her no, it wasn’t, I was never fearful then, but this time I was.

We reached Bloor without incident, and sighed in relief. Our plans to have a nice dinner were gone. We couldn’t take the train anywhere, and walking to Yonge to eat didn’t sound safe. Chris suggested the Eaton Centre, but thankfully for this old tired
overheated body I told her it was too far to walk. We settled on McDonald’s – it was right there and we were both far too hungry to care. It was here we learned what had happened. The TV was on in the upper level where we sat surrounded by families playing cards and laughing. The news broadcast (Fig. 13) showed video after video of police cars burning, of looting and smashing along the core, of police rushing the crowds. It is here we learned that the Black Bloc had cast off piles of clothes. It is here we learned that the Eaton Centre was in lockdown with 200 people caught inside. We looked at one another in relief, finished our meals, and headed back towards the car.

That night I read liveposts on blogs from the Toronto media, one of which chronologically listed what went on where. I scrolled it back to the time when we were in the park, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. Quickly I texted my daughter to ask what the time stamp was on her last photo, and she told me 5:51 p.m. According to the reports, and confirmed by later news articles, it was a mere minute later that the police surrounded the people in the park and began shoving them to the ground or reaching through the lines to grab people and pull them back for arrest. It was a mere ten minutes before reports of tear gas were first made, before allegations of rubber bullets commenced (Fig. 14-15). The rest of the story is on YouTube, Toronto media web sites, on Reddit, in a million places available to us in a digitally connected world.

We were lucky, so very lucky. Others weren't. Passersby were hauled in with protesters. Couples out to dinner were jailed simply for being on the sidewalk. People denied medication, food, water, and sanitary conditions. Bleeding bodies untended, people shivering in overcrowded “cages” without counsel or charges made.

We were back in Toronto yesterday (July 3, 2010) for Improv in Toronto, NewMindSpace and Pride. I have to tell you, the sight of police officers on the street actually made me recoil. It may be a long time before I am not afraid of them again.
*Images 14 and 15 are from CTV and print media in Canada, not my camera. I was long gone by then.