
Turmoil and shipwreck on the Saint Laurent

A psychosociological analysis of conflicts between the main anarchist linguistic communities of Montreal
inside the Association of Kinds of Free and Imaginary Spaces.

Unanimously adopted
On September 1st 2008
At la Canopée

« In Montreal right now, there is a big divide between what we call the *capital-A* anarchists and the *little-a* anarchists. Capital A being a rather dogmatic, by the book, purist ideology, based on a lot of western European anarchist thought and texts by authors like Bakunin Kropotkin, and Marx. There is a tendency within capital A anarchy to reject national liberation struggles and to not be involved in race politics. In my opinion, we reject that here at the collective, we would consider ourselves to be *little-a* anarchists. I think that's reflected in the literature we carry. »

Aaron Lakoff, activist of the Alternative Bookshop
<http://www.mcgilldaily.com/view.php?aid=2301>

« Mais il semble que les membres du collectif de la librairie soient incapables de voir qu'à côté de leur île *anglo-étudiante politically correct* existe un mouvement anarchiste local implanté de longue date et qui joue son rôle, tant bien que mal, dans la société québécoise et dans le monde. En accusant ainsi d'être dogmatiques et puristes les *Anarchistes avec un grand A*, et en les excluant de facto de la seule librairie *anarchiste* à Montréal, le collectif de la librairie ne fait que reproduire une situation qu'il est supposé dénoncer. D'autant plus que la pseudo-analyse du milieu anarchiste montréalais que fait M. Lakoff ignore complètement la réalité locale d'ici, principalement celle des francophones anarchistes, mais elle ignore aussi l'histoire et la culture politique locale. Il s'agit d'une tentative d'exclusion de la majorité des anarchistes québécois sur la base d'une sur-valorisation d'une culture politique importée des milieux anarchisants états-uniens. Bref, ça pue le colonialisme à plein nez. »

Anonymous text
<http://www.cmaq.net/node/15594>

The theme of territory is as vast and deep as the subject to which it refers. To write about it is an ambitious project and we were pleased to accept Réfractions' offer. Admittedly, Quebec society, to which we belong despite us, celebrates this year four centuries of ongoing colonialism, after last year's lengthy discussions on integration under the phallocratic chairmanship of commissioners Bouchard and Taylor. Yet, we felt bothering you with traditional history was unsatisfactory. Although we make references to it in our text, we invite European readers to read a few classic historical books and news magazines to broaden their knowledge.

We have decided to make our political environment, Montreal's anarchist community, the subject of a study on conflicts between linguistic groups. We will look at the specific case of a non-profit organization that has long been the scene of internecine strife, which we believe illustrates perfectly the contradictions of contemporary Quebec and fits well with the theme of territory. Indeed, we will discuss the confrontation/collaboration between anglophones and francophones in the AEELI (French acronym for Association of Kinds of Free and Imaginary Spaces), owner of a building in downtown Montreal home to an important anarchist library, l'Insoumise, and other anarchist groups. We consider that the split that occurred in 2003 in the AEELI is the most revealing of an unavowed separation between anglophones and francophones.

Battles about small lots of land are of course not limited to the two main cultural groups of the island of Montreal. Their occidental conception of territory, seen as a property, also conflicts with North American natives' traditional conception¹. As territory is a vast subject, it would be easy to get lost, and we will need other opportunities to further explore it. For now, we will address the damage caused by the dominant ideology on our political environment. This way, we are launching a potentially interesting debate on the health of relations between francophone and anglophone anarchists and on the future of dialogue and the management of our political community.

In the early 1980s, some Montreal anarchists created the AEELI, a legal non-profit corporation, and bought a building on Saint-Laurent Boulevard. This era is marked in Quebec, as elsewhere, with a new economic cycle, neoliberalism. To this world's moroseness is added the particular case of Quebec nationalism, whose sovereignist and progressist base meets an important setback: the defeat of the 1980 referendum and the desertion of social democracy. The 60's and 70's have greatly changed Quebec society and the relationship between the two main groups. Francophones left the protection of the Clergy's cassocks and engaged in the development of the State and its economy. The flourishing francophone bourgeoisie joined the nationalist project, thus making an opportunist move to destabilize the English establishment. A part of the population of Quebec still aspires to the sovereignty, but the belief is spreading that the Quebec nation has emancipated while remaining a part of the English federal structure.

Let's get back to the AEELI. Very little documentation can teach us about internal conflicts, except some minutes, type-written and yellowed by time, and rare, unknown articles. In these circumstances, our investigation could have been based on multiple and significant testimonies covering almost thirty years of history. We tried to reach a dozen people involved to hear their stories. Unfortunately, only three anglophones responded to the call. The limited time we had forced us to rely on our own experiences and personal intuitions. The value of our text is affected, and yet we still have the privilege to start a discussion on a problem pent by its participants.

The AEELI and its library appear to us as a particular case. When we ponder the apparent difficulties of Quebec society to live in peace and without prejudice to itself and its new entrants, we have to ask ourselves the following question: how can internationalist anarchists propose such a deep change in society if they can't solve similar problems in their own environment?

This text is an unpretentious essay. Its logic is simple. We will first introduce you to the history of the AEELI. We will then develop our thesis, which will be supported by basic observations, in order to explain the true nature of political divisions between the two linguistic groups. Finally, our conclusion will spark a series of questions that could lay the foundations for a new dialogue within our community.

The history of the AEELI

In the late 1970s, a small group named Alternative is set up to open an anarchist library on the central street of Montreal, the Saint Laurent Boulevard, which traditionally divided Eastern francophones from Western anglophones.

The opening of the store is difficult: the shelves are half-empty and the building, on sale, is in poor condition. After the purchase of the property at a derisory price, an international call is made to raise funds for renovation. The goal is to provide a space for the library and then, secondly, to use the upper floors for political purposes. A non-profit organization (NPO) was born (the AEELI) and its board of administrators will be responsible for the project's management. Soon enough, the costs of renovation are too high for the association and it is decided to move the library to the second floor in order to leave the ground floor for a commercial tenant. A newspaper is produced and students of a francophone university join with the initial, mostly anglophone group. Meanwhile, financial problems accumulate. On the third floor, radical groups come and go, without paying the rent. In 1984, the building is closed down for the year to allow renovation. Over twenty years will be necessary to repay the mortgage contracted.

During the 1990s, disputes multiply². La Sociale, a Montreal ultra-leftist broadcaster, stops the distribution of many of the library's classics. The library, followed by its bad-payer reputation, finds itself unable to find low-price French books, and consequently offers more and more anglophone content. It also assumes the distribution of leninist content, provided among others by maoists, of pro-terrorism groups and of third world national liberation struggles. The AEELI's board of administrators, mostly formed of veteran members of Alternative, is split into two opposed groups. Within the minority faction, ghost-members having moved to Toronto still own shares in the building. To exclude them from the decision-making process, an anonymous lender uses his financial power, suggesting to buy their parts. The proposal was adopted by a one-voice majority, but due to threats of lawsuits, it will never be applied. La Sociale then informs its European contacts about the crooked procedures of the Alternative library's members. French broadcasters begin to boycott the library, which becomes almost exclusively anglophone. Members of the two opposed groups intentionally miss meetings to prevent others from reaching quorum. The AEELI falls in a fratricidal war. The library is unable to open on regular hours. An influent member uses the premises to organize Jewish religious events. Some well-known activists interested in joining are turned down. The larger faction tries to prohibit the presence of observers during meetings. Relations are tense in the anarchist community and many groups, like the "Collectif opposé à la brutalité policière" and the "Bureau international pour le Parti révolutionnaire", no longer limit themselves to discuss their oppositions with their comrades of the AEELI, as they start sending protest letters. An environmental group unsuccessfully tries to organize a sit-in inside the library while others fail to unite anarchists around a petition demanding more transparency and a better representation of francophones. In brief, from 1995 to 2002, Alternative's credibility is in free fall.

In 2003, opponents organize into a Broadcasters' Coalition, formed of La Sociale, la Mauvaise Herbe, students of the Association Syndicale Étudiante (ASÉ), the Northeastern Federation of Anarchist Communists (NEFAC), the newspaper Le Trouble, some autonomous individuals and other allies. Alternative is invited to the first meeting, but replies that its participation is conditional to the exclusion of one of the coalition's member, which was refused. A large boycott of the library is subsequently launched. Flyers accuse the store of poor financial management, of leftist drifts and even of colonialism. Without evidence, Alternative retaliates by accusing the coalition of having committed thefts and destroyed the building's windows. A grand assembly of the AEELI is organized in the summer where nearly a hundred people are present. Alternative mobilizes anglophones, closer to the anti-globalism movement than of anarchists, in order to counterbalance the Coalition. The meeting has an intense psychological effect. Two groups are clearly opposed: one, strongly francophone, against the other, anglophone, which is in slight majority. The latter, at Alternative's request, refuses to open the AEELI's board of administrators.

The opposition, discouraged, stops the campaign, while some of the ASÉ's members continue the protest. Constant efforts are necessary to gain access to the internal regulations and the minutes, which have mysteriously disappeared from the building. A member of the AEELI manages to compel the corporation to provide access to its documents, but it is forbidden to take them out of the building to make copies. Despite Alternative's accusations of police surveillance, photos are taken to allow the opposition to study the legal situation of the NPO. This will prove useful, showing that an important meeting held in 1990 had not been properly announced and didn't have quorum. However, during this meeting, major changes were made: a two-thirds vote was now necessary to amend the chart, and a minimum of members of Alternative should be part of the AEELI's administration board. Thanks to its excellent communications, the opposition convinces two inactive members to resign from the board and, as a result, obtains the majority. In April 2004, two special general assemblies are held on the same evening. A vote deems the 1990 meeting illegal. The corporation is opened, and about twenty persons become members of the NPO. New administrators are elected. The disagreement is full-blown. Alternative quits with the books and shelves, leaving behind a large debt and a room filled with graffiti. One of Alternative's members even steals some money.

The library is renewed and becomes l'Insoumise. This overthrow will prove truly beneficial for the library, which changes its name and opens itself, putting aside the affinity-group functioning for a confederal operation. Moreover, as with the AEELI, multiple anarchist schools of thought share the space, the incomes and the responsibilities. This openness has also facilitated the lease of the other premises of the building to anarchist groups or allies. To this day, the AEELI has become one of the most important broadcasting centres for anarchist ideas in North America. Although its meetings are conducted in French, many anglophones spend time in the building that is no longer the subject of a boycott, at least not an official one. Managers excluded in 2003, who were not all anarchists, did not return, and their friends seem to sulk the place.

A case of discord still remains around the famous Montreal Anarchist Book Fair. Indeed, it is another project managed by an exclusive group controlled by Anglophones where we could openly debate our disputes and resolve them for the better. Efforts must be made in order for the AEELI's quiet revolution to spread to Montreal's Anarchist Book Fair. It would benefit from modeling its structures on the AEELI's, hence getting rid of its affinity-group functioning. Or should the AEELI take care of the Book Fair itself.

Thesis

In the Montreal anarchist environment, which includes all groups or individuals claiming anarchism and left-wing libertarians of any political movement, like in Montreal, Quebec, or Canadian society, there is a separation between anglophone and francophone communities. Obviously, this appears in all communities that define themselves in relation to what differentiates them from others, but we want to make it clear that although trivial, this separation should not have its place among anarchists. We consider this to be a latent problem, even a taboo.

We do not believe that a different language explains this separation. If it does make communication between groups and individuals more difficult, it does not explain the political frictions. Other factors have to be considered. To better understand this dynamic of confrontation, we need to study all cultural differences affecting the moral and religious legacies of societies, as well as the socio-economic origins of individuals. For example, living in the Mile End (multicultural district of Montreal) involves openness to difference greater than in Hérouxville (a small, ordinary, white and francophone village in Quebec). Or, an upper-class background can lead to a greater sense of guilt for leftists and a stronger belief in individual freedom.

Let us temper our words: the findings we will present you are normative, they are general observations. There obviously are exceptions that we will not mention here. The purpose of this normative analysis is to identify dominant trends.

Our thesis is that the dominant ideology - adjusted to the local culture - produces itself the fragmented and harmless political theories that pretend to impair it, and neutralizes subversive individuals. Separations between anglophones and francophones serve the interests of the bourgeoisie, which cultivate the so-called racial³ tensions. Our vision of the problem between the linguistic groups is hence focused on the cultural differences insidiously maintained by society, and more specifically on the consequences of such a reality within the anarchist community.

For anglophones, heirs of the Protestant religious universe and of the belief in individual power, anarchism will be influenced by individualism, by the liberal ideology of law and free will and by the belief in the possibility of choosing an alternative lifestyle inside the system of oppression. Moreover, in the context of Anglo-Saxon cultural domination over the world, their tendency to feel guilt in front of the many populations oppressed by the American and British Empires can lead anglophones to support various forms of national liberation movements. Propensity to this type of internationalism is facilitated by the fact that these oppressed peoples have learned English and are thus easier to approach for an anglophone. Yet, this internationalism is selective, because only some chosen peoples are worthy of anarchist support, and it is not the case of Quebec nationalism, deemed bourgeois or reactionary.

Among francophones, heirs of the catholic religious universe and of the belief in the powerlessness of the individual and in this faith to sacrifice for others, collectivist and conservative ideologies are dominant. The class-war movements, whether unionism, council communism, proletarian statism or synthesist federalism, all tinge the ideology of francophone anarchists, which agree for the most part with the idea that social change is made possible by a mass movement. To this are added the influence of state collectivism and leftist support for the Quebec national liberation project. Indeed, many francophone anarchists were first influenced by the independence movement before adopting the anar-

chist ideology, which has predisposed them to collectivism and to the rights of majorities. This predisposition may also suspect the anglophone cosmopolitan ideology, deemed to be colonialist, which focuses on the minorities' rights.

We are contaminated by the dominant ideology and its variants aiming to divide us. The racist component of the system is the cornerstone of an understanding of cultural tensions in North America. Produced by capitalists, it justifies the exploitation of immigrants and divides the proletariat. Racism takes different forms in different linguistic groups, yet all are victims. Although anarchists tend to denounce it, there remains in many institutions, the traditional family to name one, a hatred of other linguistic communities that can leave traces.

These preliminary findings seem to be confirmed by observation. The type of social involvement of individuals varies according to their culture - of which language is a foundation - and thus reflects their moral and religious heritage. Political demonstrations and meetings in Montreal have allowed us to observe the larger participation of anglophones in indigenous and immigrant struggles. Anglophone activists are more prone to identify with the *Do It Yourself* tendency and in general with the counterculture identities coming from American music. As for francophones, a little less affected by counterculture, they are generally involved in working-class organizations and in reformist struggles (environmentalism, welfare, unemployment, housing, community, etc.).

These political differences are present in anarchist literature. Propaganda, adjusted on the larger historical currents of protestation, plays a role of separation on the ideological level. For example, we think about the influence of ideas from the 1871 Paris Commune on francophone literature compared to those of the Black Panthers on anglophone literature. Let us also note that there is a gap between the economic conditions of the two studied linguistic groups⁴. However, we lack the objective data necessary to analyse the extent of the impact those material conditions have on the political disputes between the linguistic communities.

Furthermore, we know that counter-culture plays an important role in the youth's political awakening. For the vast majority of politically aware people, the first contact with revolutionary ideology is not the result of an emancipated political group's rational action. Rather, it is by groping that we become anarchists. Assumptions accumulated throughout attended meetings chaotically add up. The spirit of revolt develops gradually and we end up landing in our first demonstration, probably reformist. In North America, young anarchists first identify with a counter-culture of misanthropic tendencies. It is therefore from the relative unconsciousness of youth that the first anti-establishment prejudices will be crystallized.

We think that the key to understanding the problem between linguistic communities relies on the use of the concept of leftism. Unlike leninist or alter-globalization analysis which define leftism as extremism, we see it more as the tendency of anarchists wanting to ally to leftist movements in general, which are characterized by their restraint or their support for some forms of state or religious organization, etc. We remind you that one of the Coalition's main criticisms is against Alternative's leftism.

The involvement of anarchists in partial struggles ends up influencing their thoughts. In the absence of revolutionary struggle, anarchist activists are divided between the radicalization of political movements and the defence of oppressed minorities. The most violent separation among anarchists is there and that is why we think that leftism is the key of the analysis. The split between linguistic communities goes through the analysis of the differentiated consequences of leftist influence on the various cultural groups, which led to ideological conflicts, above which the cultural variables pasted themselves. In short, an anglophone anarchist tends to develop an ideology different from that of a francophone if he or she is influenced by the leftism in his or her belonging community, and we have seen that this is quite inevitable.

Conclusion

We are aware that our work is unsatisfactory, because the reflection is not sufficiently subject to a field investigation. We satisfied ourselves to make a portrait of common alienation around the theme of territory. Our decision to minimize the analysis in order to further develop our intuitions about the problem has several advantages of which the principal is certainly to allow the refutation or confirmation of our ideas in a subsequent debate. Some might say that our thesis is of an absolute triviality. However, our originality resides in the fact that we address this topic while others unconsciously repress it.

The influence of leftism among protesters constitutes a reciprocal neurotic base. It takes different forms following the individuals' social origin. The problems between francophones and anglophones are rooted in ideological differences, which are themselves essentially determined by our respective psychosociological contexts (institutions and interpersonal relations). The leftist activism in question is the materialization of the last psychological links maintained - virtually or practically - with our group of origin. Leftism has dug and is still widening the ridges of sectarianism that divide the anarchist movement by separating us from each other.

In fact, individuals carry out a reflex identification to the cultures that determine them and vary depending on the power struggles. In other words, culture, subject to the dictates of economy, loses its substance while individuals continue to define themselves in relation to their specific past. The anarchist community has the same problem. The actual social conditions force us to intervene in reformist movements in order to establish links with the people and defend it from the most outrageous excesses of capitalism. These links end up distorting our practice because some anarchists associate it with our revolutionary policy itself. This means that few anarchists truly seek to define a new and inclusive practice likely to simultaneously make the society and their community progress.

We must also highlight other facets of the anarchist struggle that are overshadowed by these quarrels, if only to honour them: feminism or the sexual liberation struggle, resistance to the ethnocide of indigenous nations or environmentalism, which are important elements of the oppressive context, but that are ignored or subordinated by the leftist orientation taken by the conflict between the territory's two main cultural groups. In fact, let's not be afraid to say that the Montreal anarchist community has its way of going through the problems of the whole Quebec society, whose obsession with the national question ruins ipso facto its development potential.

Finally, we can say that the Montreal anarchist community lives on the inside the social tensions of Quebec. Anarchists are affected by the folkloric cultural divisions that still exist in society. The history of our small territory is revealing of the typical contradictions of anarchists who, when comes a concrete internal problem, turn their ideology into an alibi. We believe that separations based on language hinder the development and influence of anarchism, in the same way that borders affect the solidarity between peoples.

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With the special collaboration of Sacha Desautels
Thanks to Philou for the English translation

² Although Native societies have various levels of hierarchy before colonization, private property does not yet exist. The vast majority of these populations were organized in rather egalitarian and democratic communities.

³ Conflicts related to the choice of distributed content will be constant within the AEELI.

⁴ In America, the use of the term race to name the different cultural communities is socially accepted, despite its scientific gaps and its fascist history.

⁵ See attached table for more details on wage inequalities.

Addendum

EVOLUTION OF THE INCOME DISPARITIES BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT LINGUISTIC GROUPS IN QUEBEC BETWEEN 1970 AND 2000

Linguistic group	Income in 1970	RRC	Income in 2000	RRC
For men				
Unilingual anglophones	8 171	1,59	34 097	1,15
Bilingual anglophones	8 938	1,74	38 745	1,31
Unilingual francophones	5 136	—	29 665	—
Bilingual francophones	7 363	1,43	38 851	1,31
English-speaking allophones	6 462	1,26	27 216	0,92
French-speaking allophones	5 430	1,06	21 233	0,72
Bilingual allophones	7 481	1,46	33 097	1,12
Other allophones	4 229	0,82	20 146	0,68
For women				
Unilingual anglophones	3 835	1,24	23 002	1,11
Bilingual anglophones	3 956	1,28	26 247	1,26
Unilingual francophones	3 097	—	20 786	—
Bilingual francophones	3 842	1,24	26 644	1,28
English-speaking allophones	3 329	1,07	18 996	0,91
French-speaking allophones	3 241	1,05	15 551	0,75
Bilingual allophones	3 881	1,25	24 034	1,16
Other allophones	2 342	0,76	15 379	0,74

RRC = ratio to reference category (unilingual francophones =1)

Source: http://www.cdhowe.org/pdf/backgrounder_103_english.pdf