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# Learning From Ferguson

Peter Gelderloos

December 2014

speak loud and clear about a world without police, so everyone will know there is another way, beyond the false alternatives of obedience or ineffectual reform.

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# Contents

an inevitable part of any healing process, and our society is nothing if not sick. Calamities like uprisings and riots can be important catalysts in processes of social healing, and liberated spaces, by forcefully casting aside the previous regime's norms and relationships, that only functioned to reproduce and invisibilize all the ongoing forms of harm, can give us the opportunity to create new, healthier patterns, and engage in conversations that previously had been impossible. Empowering ourselves to fight back against those who have traumatized us, like the police, can be an important step in upsetting oppressive relations, healing from trauma, and restoring healthy social relations.

This is, however, a dangerous proposition. Fighting back against the police, especially shooting back at them, as was happening in Ferguson, is not a safe activity. Change is never safe. And if we can successfully overcome the police to create a liberated zone, the State will eventually send in the military. Are the soldiers still loyal enough, after these last wars, to open fire on us? Has enough been done to encourage dissension in the ranks, or is the government firmly in control? There is only one way to find out.

It is understandable that many people would not want to face the extreme risks involved with uprooting the oppressions that grip our society. There is nothing wrong with being afraid, so long as you have the courage to admit it. Some people, however, do a great disservice by muddying the waters with myopic proposals that have no hope of making an actual difference.

In the streets, we need to learn how to seize space, to make sure that those who fight back are never isolated, to make collective responses possible so no one has to react in an individual, suicidal way again, and to build a struggle that has room for young and old, for the peaceful and the bellicose, for those who know how to fight and those who know how to heal. It will be a long process, and in the meantime, there is a great need to

who was robbing the store of a local, working class person (as were many of the neighborhood stores in Oaxaca), but they couldn't have stopped the neighbors themselves from looting a store they already had an antagonistic, classist relationship with, as was the case in Ferguson.

People in Oaxaca also had to defend themselves from police and paramilitaries, and they did so for five months. The topiles and many others were unarmed. They had to fight back with rocks, fireworks, and molotov cocktails, many of them getting shot in the process. Their bravery allowed hundreds of thousands of people to live in freedom for five months, in a police-free, government-free zone, experimenting with the self-organization of their lives on social, economic, and cultural levels. All the beautiful aspects of the Oaxaca commune are inseperable from their violent struggle against police, involving barricades, slingshots, molotov cocktails, and thousands of people who faced down armed opponents, over a dozen of them giving their lives in the process. In the end, the Mexican state had to send in the military as the only way to crush this flourishing pocket of autonomy.

If we learn from examples like Christiania, Oaxaca, and Ferguson itself, we can fight for a world without police and everything they represent, beginning here and now by creating blocks, neighborhoods, or even entire cities that are at least temporarily police-free zones. Within these spaces we can finally experiment and practice with solutions to all the other interrelated forms of oppression that plague us.

There is something beautiful about people finding the courage to fight back against a more powerful enemy, and people also flourish in surprising ways when they liberate space and take the power to organize their own lives. Neither of these things can be overemphasized. But neither should we romanticize. In the streets of Ferguson and other liberated spaces, much of the ugliness that infuses our society rears its head. But dealing with what had previously been invisible or normalized is



## The Nature of Police, the Role of the Left

A young black person was killed, many people brave enough to take to the streets in the aftermath were injured and arrested, and the only real consequences the police will face will be changes designed to increase their efficiency at spinning the news or handling the crowds, the next time they kill someone. Because amidst all the inane controversies, that is one fact that no one can dispute: the police will kill again, and again, and again. A disproportionate number of their targets will be young people of color and transgender people, but they have also killed older people, like John T. Williams, Bernard Monroe, and John Adams, and white people too. The Right has seized on a couple cases of white youth being killed by cops, like Dillon Taylor or Joseph Jennings, throwing questions of proportion out the window in a crass attempt to claim the police are not racist.

Essentially, the point being made by right-wing pundits is that the cops are killing everybody, so it's not a problem. The fact that they can make this argument and still retain credibility with a large sector of the population shows how normalized the role of the police is in our society. The true meaning of the evidence used manipulatively by the Right is that the police are a danger to anyone not wearing a business suit.

In a serious debate, however, it would be hard to deny that the police are a racist institution par excellence. They kill young black, latino, and Native people at a disproportionately higher rate than white youth, and the institution itself descended from the patrols created to capture fugitive slaves in the South and police urban immigrants in the North, as masterfully documented in Kristian Williams' landmark book, *Our Enemies in Blue*. What's more, the criminal justice system that the police play an integral role in, both feeding and defending the prison-industrial complex, grew directly out of the 13th Amendment's approval of slavery in the case of imprisonment,

illuminating the path by which the United States' advancing economy could leave plantation slavery behind, first with the pairing of sharecropping and chain gangs, and more recently with the pairing of a precarious labor market on the outside and booming prison industries on the inside.

However, though the police do not affect everyone equally, they do affect all of us. Everyone who is not wealthy can be a target for police violence, and anyone who fights for a freer, fairer world puts themselves directly into the cops' crosshairs. During the Oscar Grant riots in Oakland or the John T. Williams protests in Seattle, many journalists, closely echoed by progressive spokespersons, denounced the white people who took to the streets angered by police killings. With an underhanded racism, they cast "white anarchists" as the ringleaders of the mayhem, silencing the anarchists of color as well as the many young people of color without any visible ideology who were often the most active at taking over the streets or fighting back against the police. If they really cared about racism and police violence, wouldn't they have portrayed the young people of color as protagonists, rather than mindless stooges of "white anarchists," or simply erasing their participation entirely? Instead of discrediting the relatively few white people who did take to the streets, shouldn't the criticisms have been directed at all the white people who stayed home?

However, with the protests after the non-indictment of Darren Wilson, certain entrenched dynamics have started to change. True, the response to the killing of Oscar Grant did spread to other parts of the West Coast, and it was not successfully spun as an issue only affecting black people; but to a far greater degree, the response to the official announcement that the government approved of Michael Brown's murder spread across the country and included people of all races.

This is a good thing: more people are taking the problem of the police seriously, realizing they need to react, and exploring actions that they can take that will make a difference. The cir-



It is no coincidence that the same tools and capacities that allow us to fight back and free ourselves from policing are also the ones we need to protect ourselves from the forms of harm that capitalist democracies prosecute under the rubric of "crime". Crime and police are two sides of the same coin. They perpetuate each other, and they each rely on a vulnerable, atomized society. A healthy society would have no need for police, no more than it would lock people in cages and hide its problems out of sight rather than deal with the conflicts and deficiencies that led to an act of harm being committed in the first place.

The mutual relationship between police and crime was exquisitely revealed during the popular uprising in Oaxaca in 2006. In June of that year, police viciously attacked the massive encampment staged annually by striking teachers. But the teachers fought back tooth and nail, quickly joined by many neighbors. They pushed police out of Oaxaca City, which remained autonomous for five months along with large parts of the countryside. People built barricades, which became an important space for socialization as well as self-defense, and they organized topiles, an indigenous tradition that provided volunteers to fight back against police and paramilitaries as well as to look out for fires, acts of robbery, or assault.

The defenders of Oaxaca soon learned that the police were releasing people from their prisons on the condition that they go into the city to commit crimes. In protecting their neighborhoods against these acts, the topiles did not function like Western police forces. They patrolled unarmed, they were volunteers, and they did not have a prerogative to arrest people or impose their will, the way cops do. Upon coming across a robbery, arson, or assault, their function was not only that of first responders, but also to call on the neighbors so everyone could respond collectively. With such a structure, it would be impossible to enforce a legal code against an activity with popular participation. In other words, the topiles could stop a stranger

number of communal spaces. They also resolve their own conflicts, and with the exception of some aggressive incursions and raids, Christiania has been a police-free zone for most of its existence. Initially, the Danish government opted for a soft strategy, hoping that Christiania would eventually fall apart on its own. In the same era, the autonomous movement in the Netherlands and Germany was fighting major battles to defend their squatted spaces, sometimes defeating the police in the streets or burning down shopping malls in retribution for evictions. In context, the Danish approach made sense. However, Christiania thrived. Some suspect that the government was behind the crisis that threatened the autonomous neighborhood's existence in 1984 when a motorcycle gang moved into the police-free zone to begin selling hard drugs (soft drugs have always been widely used in Christinia, while addictive drugs are vehemently discouraged).

Earlier in Christiania's history, there had been a fierce debate about how to deal with the problem of drugs. Over intense opposition, a part of the neighborhood decided to request police assistance, but they soon found that the cops were arresting the users of non-addictive drugs and ignoring or even protecting the proliferation of hard drugs. After that, Christiania decided to keep the police out, and their autonomy was well established by the time the motorcycle gang moved in. The gangsters thought they had picked an easy target: a neighborhood of hippies who not only disavowed making use of the police, they actively kept the police out. These drug-pushers, however, had fallen for capitalist mythology, which presents us all as isolated individuals, vulnerable to organized delinquents, and therefore in need of the greatest protection racket of them all, the State. Christiania residents banded together, exercising the same principle of solidarity that was at work in all the other aspects of their lives, fought back, and kicked the motorcycle gang out, using a combination of sabotage, public meetings, pressure, and direct confrontation.



cumstances that forced this necessary step forward are tragic, but they are hardly a surprise to anyone with the slightest sense of history. Police killings and unwavering government support for the cops are an integral part of our society. They are not going away any time soon.

Logically, people would debate: what is to be done? However, this is a debate that mainstream journalists, progressive journalists, protest organizations, and left-wing figureheads have all studiously avoided, maintaining not so much a conspiracy of silence as one of vitriol and marginalization against anyone who challenges their unspoken tenets.

Those tenets are simple: all responses must be peaceful; and the only conceivable goal is piecemeal reform. Within this artificially fixed arena, we are allowed to squabble over all the details we want, from cop-cameras to citizen review boards, but we are never allowed to entertain opinions that transgress those limits. Those who use a wider lens to understand where police violence comes from and what role it plays in our society are ignored. If they are employed as journalists or academics, they have just made a poor career move, and they will quickly be drowned out by the ladder-climbing, cynical hacks who cover up this ongoing tragedy with banal and myopic observations. Those who actually attempt to explore other paths of action and change will be denounced as "thugs," "criminals," and "agitators," FOX and NPR will speak about them in the same terms, police and protest leaders will unite to suppress them.

That is how free speech works in a democracy. Fix the terms of the debate, distract the masses with fierce polemics between two acceptable "opposites" that are so close they are almost touching, encourage them to take part, and either ignore or criminalize anyone who stakes an independent position, especially one that throws into question the fundamental tenets that are naturalized and reinforced by both sides in the official debate. Noam Chomsky was one of several dissidents to

reveal this dynamic during the Vietnam War and demonstrate the unanimity of hawk and dove positions in media debates. The media follow the same rules today. In that earlier crisis, the fundamental tenet was that the US government has the right to project its power, militarily or otherwise, across the entire planet. In the current crisis, the unquestionable dogma is that the police have a right to exist, that the police as an institution are an apt instrument to protect us and serve us, and therefore they are a legitimate presence on our streets and in our neighborhoods.

In this debate, the Right claim that the police are working just fine, while the Left claim that changes are needed to get them working better. Both of them are united in preserving the role of police and keeping real people—neighborhoods, communities, and all the individuals affected by police—from becoming the protagonists in the conflicts that affect us. Similarly, we frequently hear leftists claim that "the prisons aren't working," exhibiting a willful ignorance as to the actual purpose of prisons. Sadly, for all their distortions and manipulations, the Right is being more honest. The police and the prisons both are working just fine. As per their design, they are working against us.

On the Left, we find a tragic mixture of the unconscionably cynical with the hopelessly naïve. No serious person can claim that any of their proposed reforms will make a real difference; and in fact most have already been tried. Racial sensitivity training only makes the cops better at hiding their racism. It certainly doesn't touch the underlying hierarchies that police serve to protect. Civilian oversight, at the very best, can lead to a few "bad apples" being forced to resign, and they have rarely even reached that level of potency. No matter; bureaucracies have always know how to make individual personnel expendable so as to protect the greater power structure, and no government in the world has given oversight boards more power than the institutions they are supposed to monitor, not



We have the examples of societies that thrived without police, which I mentioned towards the beginning of the essay. Those stories belong to other cultures. I don't think Westerners should use them as models or as ideological capital, but I think we should recognize their existence, to break the stranglehold that Western civilization has over definitions of human nature and human possibility, and we should also recognize that those other forms of being were violently interrupted by processes of colonization that are still ongoing. They are not marginal, idyllic stories of "primitive" societies with no bearing on modern reality, they are histories of peoples who are still struggling for survival. If, in the worlds we dream of, there is no room for them to reassert themselves independent of our designs, then whatever we create will only be a continuation of the thing we are fighting against.

More appropriate as inspiration for our own action are a number of stories of struggle in Western or westernized countries in which people created police-free zones on the ground. After all, a holistic critique of the police means that by the very nature of the problem, we cannot ask government to institute the needed changes. Real steps towards a world without police can be found in the riots in Ferguson and other cities around the country where people surpassed their self-appointed leaders and actually fought back, rather than just manufacturing yet another spectacle of symbolic dissent. The riots in Ferguson were not only important in an instrumental way, forcing all of society to consider the problem; they also suggested the beginnings of a solution as neighbors came together in solidarity, building new relations amongst themselves, and forcefully ejecting police from the neighborhoods they patrol.

Christiania is an autonomous neighborhood of Copenhagen that has been squatted since 1971. The area, with nearly a thousand inhabitants, organizes itself in assemblies, maintains its own economy and infrastructure, cleans up its trash, produces bicycles and other items in collective workshops, and runs a

ance of people who shoot back. Denying it only maintains the schizophrenic condition that forces us to pathologize a sensible human response to systematic abuse, preserves our psychological loyalty to a system that treats us like fodder, and prevents the development of collective measures.

There have been attempts in the US to develop and spread methods of resistance to police that are collective, that brook no compromise, and that are less dangerous, less suicidal, than the method of the lone gunmen. The best known is probably the "black bloc." And though it is clearly an imperfect tool, the bloc typically faces blanket denunciations by people who make no attempts to propose alternatives. In NGO-land, the trope that has been circulated is that the black bloc is the domain of young white men. Never mind that there are many testimonials by women, queer, and trans people attempting to counter this lie (and at great personal risk, since it requires speaking about personal involvement in an illegal activity); never mind that American anarchists have learned about the tactic not only in Europe but also in Latin America, where it is widely popular. The denunciations cannot be taken seriously as criticisms because they do not rely on realistic portrayals of the black bloc, they are formulated to silence rather than to engage, and they do not propose any alternatives for seizing space or collectively fighting back against police.

The extent to which this trope has been circulated by the corporate media reveals just how liberatory the thinking behind it truly is.

But the black bloc is just one possibility among many, and while it helps demonstrators protect themselves in rowdy street confrontations, it does not suggest to most people the vision of another world. Talking about a world without police in the here and now, without paving the way for our own cooptation is a big order to fill. Fortunately, the conversation is already ongoing.



when those institutions are vital to the smooth functioning of authority.

As for cameras, they would only increase the power of police by augmenting the intrusion of government surveillance into our lives. The murders of Eric Garner and Oscar Grant were caught on tape, and nothing changed. The fact of the matter is, the vast majority of murders carried out by cops are perfectly legal. How can this come as a surprise? The same people who benefit from police violence are the ones writing the laws or getting the lawmakers elected. The only real victim of cop-cameras would be people who choose to defend themselves against cops, an action that, no matter how justified, is never legal. If the cops wore cameras, anyone who raised their hand against them would be caught on tape. But the reformers aren't thinking about self-defense, are they?

And this is the crux of the issue. The question of self-defense against the police is one that we are not allowed to consider, yet it is the only one that makes sense. The police do not exist to protect society from generalized cannibalism and mayhem, as in some paranoid Batman fantasy. They exist to protect the haves from the have-nots, to maintain the State's monopoly on violence, and to make up for our atrophied capacity for conflict resolution, another of the many prerogatives the State has stolen from us (whether it's a lack of the ability to knock on our neighbor's door when they play their music too loud or to draw on a wider network of family and community ties to deal with an abusive relationship).

We can ignore the antagonistic relationship that the police have with anyone who is not trying or not able to make it to the highest tiers of society, but what we cannot do is reform that relationship away. This is why it is necessary to talk about self-defense against the police.

But we are not dealing with a open debate between two equal positions, reform or fight back. First of all, this is because the reformers consistently join in with all the dominant institu-

tions, including the bloody-handed cops they claim to oppose, to silence, marginalize, criminalize, or demonize anyone who chooses to fight back against the police. They do not engage in debate because they could only lose; instead they make use of all the lies, distortions, and the generalized amnesia perpetuated by the media specifically to avoid a debate.

Secondly, the reformers are parasites. They would not exist without those who fight back. No one outside their respective communities would ever have heard about Oscar Grant or Michael Brown were it not for the rioters. The recent nationwide protests were only possible because folks in Ferguson were setting fires, looting, throwing rocks and molotovs, and shooting at cops for ten days in August.

If the reformers were sincere, they would thank those who took to the streets for bringing the problem to the country's attention, then respectfully differ on the chosen tactics and goals, laying out a historical case for why peaceful tactics and reformist goals are better suited for achieving a real change. But this couldn't be further from their actual M.O. From parasitic celebrities like Jesse Jackson to an alphabet soup of NGOs, the leftists fly in, put themselves at the head of something they did not start, and work hand in hand with the police to try and calm things down. These professional activists don't have a program of their own; they are just professional fire extinguishers. And in the case of Ferguson, they are the government's most valuable tool. Because it wasn't the police or even the National Guard who succeeded in putting an end to the rioting, but these professional activists.

Their cynicism goes beyond the parasitical, backstabbing relationship they have with those who actually risk themselves fighting to eject police from their neighborhoods, and beyond their racist portrayal of local people of color who are at the frontlines of the fight as either "thugs" or the unwitting pawns of outside agitators. They will even go so far as to use the fam-



the beginning that the killing was justified, not even allowing a debate). The recent shooting of the two cops in NYC fits the pattern perfectly, but earlier cases like that of Christopher Monfort in Seattle, Eric Frein in Pennsylvania, or Christopher Dorner in LA also apply. None of this should be surprising. There is a certain schizophrenia in a society that glorifies the police and suppresses or distorts any honest conversation about what people actually experience at the hands of police and what sort of countermeasures are adequate or justified. If large numbers of alienated people feel entirely alone in their brutalization and dehumanization by police, collective resistance becomes impossible. The only people to express an active negation of the police will be individuals who reach a certain limit and then snap. By the very nature of the problem they are not going to be the stable ones, especially if mental health is defined as an infinite capacity to accomodate misery.

In Ferguson, rioters spraypainted the QT with the phrase, "free Kevin Johnson", referring to a black man from an aggressively gentrifying St. Louis suburb who is on death row since 2008. Johnson shot to death an infamous bully of a cop who refused to help his kid brother as he lay dying from a heart condition. There is a direct connection between what are portrayed as isolated outbursts of senseless violence, and the massive rebellions that force society to at least stop and pay attention. I don't, however, see the professionals making this connection. Typically they are either silent or help pathologize the lone wolves. The tragedy is, such incidents are only isolated as long as people in power AND people in social movements continue to actively isolate them.

Recognizing the basic legitimacy of these acts isn't to glorify the shooters as heroes. There is something sad in any death, no matter who the victim is, and we're in dire straits when the only available means of resistance that people think they have are directly suicidal. The point is, there is a direct connection between the systematic brutality of police and the appear-

do they direct people's attentions, particularly in a moment of social rebellion?

When such an organization, with paid staff, non-profit status, cred, but also rules to play by and bills to pay, proclaims that "We need to abolish the police and the prisons," what is the practical implication? "Therefore this organization should receive more grants and this law should not be passed," or "therefore these people who took up arms against the police deserve our support"? Clearly, it's not the latter.

A professional approach to tackling the social problems underscored by Ferguson rarely returns people's energies and attentions to the streets, where real change is created. True, most of the time, we don't have something like Ferguson going on, so a patient, gradualist method seems to make sense. However, the conservatism of the professional approach often leads activists to play a pacifying role when a moment of intense struggle arises, as we abundantly witnessed this August and again in November. All across the country, even where they refrained from denouncing rioters, activist organizations called for vigils and speak-outs, when it was clear that the time for mere words had passed. Directly or indirectly, these mobilizations allowed a middle-class constituency to monopolize the social response and prevent rioting, at a time when an unprecedented number of people were ready to fight back.

What's more, the assumptions are all wrong. Ferguson is only exceptional in its extension, not in its spirit. Not a month goes by when someone does not shoot back at the police in America. Most of the time, however, they are a lone shooter, they often kill themselves or die in the act, and the media always publish unsavory details about their personal lives, true or invented. They also portray the cops as heroes, no matter what kind of people they actually were, and they never entertain the possibility that the shooters were justified, as they always do when it's cops doing the murdering (actually, this is too charitable a description; many media outlets assert from



ilies of those murdered by police; in fact at this point it seems to be part of their playbook.

If the family calls for peaceful protest, as did the families of John T. Williams or Michael Brown, they lay it down like the law, and marginalize anyone who tries to respond in a more combative manner, maligning them as being disrespectful to the victim, heartless agitators who are taking advantage of tragedy in order to sow chaos. Yet families are not the only ones with a right to respond to police murders. How many of us would want our parents to write our epitaph? How many of us would trust our friends more than our families to know what we would have wanted, if we were killed? Though friendship is not a relationship recognized by law, the friends of a victim have also been directly affected, and they should have a say in what's the appropriate response. In fact, friends and peers have played an important role in many of the anti-police riots in the last few years, though their participation has been largely hidden by the media and the pacifists alike.

It doesn't end there. Neighbors and witnesses are also traumatized by a police murder; they also have an undeniable need to respond to outrage and reassert control over their environment, a control that walking in a peaceful protest flanked by cops cannot give. And if we are not dealing with an isolated murder but a systematic problem, as is the case with police killings, then everyone is affected and everyone has a need to respond.

It shouldn't be necessary to point out that *this affects all of us.* But the pacifying, paralyzing discourse of the reformers specifically breaks down solidarity. Instead of encouraging us all to feel harm done to another as harm done to ourselves, we are all supposed to take a backseat to "what the family wants." The level of hypocrisy is infuriating when you realize that the peace-preaching professional activists don't give a shit for the family of Michael Brown or anyone else murdered by the cops. Family members are just pawns in their agendas.

When Durham teenager, Jesus "Chuy" Huerta was shot to death in the back of a police car one year ago, his family rebuffed the police department's hollow gestures of reconciliation, and they did not denounce the people who fought with cops in anger over the killing. It's not a coincidence that local leftists were suddenly silent about what the family wanted. And after the non-indictment, when Michael Brown's stepfather Louis Head urged a crowd to "burn this motherfucker down!", how many reformers decided to actually follow his lead? Instead, they have all scrambled over themselves to prove he did not mean it, broadcasting an apology he issued about a week later, a reconciliation that might have been aided by the fact that Head was facing a criminal investigation and had already been demonized in the media for a reaction that, in Ferguson at least, was common sense for thousands of people.

This is a fine example of opinions we are not allowed to hold, and how the legal system, the media, and the Left all work together to punish and erase such opinions. It was a triumph for this triumvirate of social control that most of the protests around the country were tame, legal affairs that successfully quenched people's anger, but fires, riots, and highway blockades from Oakland to Boston indicate that that control is finally starting to slip. For it to fully fall away, we need to understand the true role of the legal system and the media, and realize the full hypocrisy of the Left.

It is an alarming but historical moment when the Right speaks more truthfully than the Left. While the reformers were talking about bad apples and sensitivity training, cops in Missouri hit the nail on the head when they began distributing and wearing bracelets that said, "We Are All Darren Wilson."

Even leftists who did not openly condemn the rioting fell into a tried and true holding pattern. The only way they could make the rioting palatable was to talk about police brutality against protesters. In fact, for much of the riots, police in Ferguson were remarkably restrained. It became commonplace for



within a greater whole, but the institutional formulae of applying for grants, publishing articles, and claiming concrete improvements all modulate those individuals' activity to favor a piecemeal worldview and to direct discourse at other power-holders.

It may sound like a platitude but I believe experience in struggle bears it out: you cannot abolish that with which you dialogue. State authority above all thrives on being present in every social conversation. A conversation with employers, legislators, grant-writers, or experts about the abolition of the police necessarily assumes the replacement of one form of policing with another.

The modern prison was born out of the abolition of the scaffold. Community policing was a survival mechanism after the defeats and the unpopularity of the police caused by the struggles of the '60s. The danger is real.

Even without a far-reaching reform that allows the powerful to regenerate their methods for accumulating power, radical discourses in professional channels present other problems. One I have already hinted at can be thought of as misdirection.

Let's imagine an organization that focuses on prison abolition. Their employees are sincere, dedicated activists, some of them proven veterans of past struggles. Nearly all of them are college graduates, and some might be academics; otherwise they stay in close contact with the experts who produce facts that make it easier to argue for prison abolition in polite circles. They produce many valuable materials that can be useful for supporting prisoners or changing people's opinions about the prison system, and they may even have a pilot project on a couple blocks in a specific neighborhood, designed to decrease reliance on the prison industrial complex.

Taken individually, all of these things are great. We need more people who are talking about a world without prisons. But the ideas that this hypothetical organization spreads, how

maps out the possibilities of prison abolition or an end to policing as we know it. But what is the actual meaning and effect of this discourse?

I would start by arguing that the vast majority of those who conduct this theoretical labor have good intentions. But we also know what they say about good intentions, and the paving stones on the road to hell are not nearly as substantial as the ones being thrown at cops in Ferguson and elsewhere. With this facile figure of speech, I actually mean to suggest a different criterion for evaluating our actions.

I gladly admit that the information produced by academics or activists who theorize about prison abolition or a world without police is thought-provoking and useful. I have cited a few examples of it in this essay. But just as we must ask why Time Magazine would sympathize with rioters, we should ask why there exist paid positions for people to study prison abolition. Either capitalism isn't a totality, or the prisons and the police are not an integral part of power, or power benefits somehow by studying its own abolition.

I believe the answer lies between the second and the third possibilities. Even though the abolition of prisons is not a likely future, from the present vantage, democratic capitalism increases its chances for survival by exploring contingency plans for extreme cases, and by giving opponents employment opportunities. The advantage is increased if "prisons" or "police" can be discursively transformed from an integral element of a whole system into a particular appendage that can be discarded or modified. And there are few methods of discourse more suited to carrying out this transformation than the academic—which favors specificity and an analysis of parts over wholes—and the activist—which tends towards single-issue messaging that favors the myopic over the radical.

Someone in the academy or in the world of professional activism can study the police for all the right reasons, personally holding a global analysis of the integral role of police



protesters to shoot at police with handguns, and in November, assault rifles even made an appearance, yet the cops did not shoot back.

This is an important step forward. In the face of a police institution that has carte blanche to kill, people are beginning to value their own lives over the laws of the elite. Yet for the reformers who cannot conceive of fully opposing any of the existing institutions, this narrative makes no sense. Normal people can only be victims, never protagonists. And criticizing the police means not talking about those moments when cops are actually scared for their lives and do not act with total impunity. The lack of strategic thinking is startling.

As far as governments go, the US is infamous for being particularly heavy handed and unrestrained in obliterating resistance. It militarizes its cops, it metes out sentences far longer than what would be considered just in most other countries, and it does not deign to engage in the balances of compromise and social peace like the social democracies do. To surpass the brutality with which the US government liquidated the black and Native liberation movements in the '60s and '70s, you'd have to look to Iran or China. Yet now, in Ferguson, and in many other cities this past November, the cops and their masters were scared enough that when people began rioting, looting, taking guns to protests, and shutting down highways, the authorities did not respond with a police riot or a military clampdown. To a great extent, their hands were tied.

Why? What were they afraid of?

It certainly wasn't a peaceful protest or a little bad media coverage.

Answering this question more fully, and putting the answers into practice, is the second step towards ending police violence once and for all.

*December 09, 2014*

## What's Worked in the Past

The announcement of the non-indictment of Darren Wilson caught me on the road, traveling to visit family for the Thanksgiving holiday. The next day I found myself in a protest, one of over a hundred occurring across the country. There I witnessed a scene that has played out many times before, and was probably being repeated at that exact moment in other cities.

A few protesters had just vandalized a yuppie restaurant on a strip targeted for heavy gentrification in that particular city. The windows were spraypainted with a slogan related to the murder of Michael Brown, and the restaurant's sandwich board was stolen and pulled into the streets.

"What are you doing?" a young white person complained, looking on with a combination of shock and disgust. "We're here to protest for Michael Brown!"

One of the offenders, identity obscured by a black mask, looked over at their interlocutor and laughed sardonically, "Oh yeah, gentrification and police violence have nothing to do with each other!"

"We have to do this peacefully!" the other marcher persisted.

"When has that ever worked?" the black clad anarchist scoffed.

"Um, hello? Martin Luther King!" She rolled her eyes as though she were stating the most obvious, self-evident fact in the world.

"Martin Luther King had armed bodyguards at his events, learn history!" the would-be rioter shot back.

The crowd was racially diverse. I wasn't counting, and the makeup of the protest was constantly shifting, but at times a majority were people of color. Yet the three times that I saw people object to "violence" (the use of fireworks, the vandalizing of the restaurant, and the dragging of a reflective barrier into the road as the march took to a highway, rather a safety oriented action if you ask me, given that it was dark and the



of banks. It's noteworthy that the media only begin to stomach property destruction when talk of shooting back begins to resonate throughout society. And though within the confines of American dialogue, it feels like a breath of fresh air that Time Magazine would sympathize with rioters, it is a more or less calculated move that functions to limit the growth of resistance. Even if the editors of a magazine are not scheming consciously and explicitly about how to maintain social control, they are still individuals with a vested interest in the current system. People fighting fiercely for their freedom, unlike those who compulsively walk in circles or stage die-ins, often force a recognition of their humanity and win a limited sympathy from their enemies. They also make the existence of a social conflict undeniable. In such a case, people in power may come to accept tactics that they had previously condemned, to acknowledge errors they had previously denied, but their condemnation of forms of rebellion that are irreversibly destabilizing will only crystalize. People can be permitted to blow off steam, even in illegal ways, but they cannot be permitted to blunt or sabotage the instruments of the State. And when the police confront an armed population, they are suddenly much less effective.

Another way that exceptional dissent might manifest is in the realm of discourse and research. I am by no means the first person to express the idea that the police should be abolished, nor is this idea entirely strange in acceptable discourse among people who are much better dressed than I am. However the elaboration of these discourses must be couched in certain ways to signal their usefulness to the State, and their separation from communities in struggle.

If we assert that it is not permitted to speak of a world without police, this is only true if we understand the police as one function in an interlocking system of domination, and the abolition of the police means the abolition of that entire system. Otherwise, there is a great deal of research and debate that

The seemingly subversive behavior of a few outliers is hardly unprecedented. In the recent insurrection in Greece, a large part of the media expressed sympathy with the rioters, albeit in a very formulaic way. In the media lens, young students were justifiably protesting in the streets after the police murder of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos, anarchists were hijacking the event to burn police stations, and immigrants were taking advantage of the situation to loot stores. None of these characterizations are based on fact. Millions of young people and old, Greeks and immigrants, participated in the uprising, in a variety of ways. Many students looted, many immigrants walked along with protests. A frequently expressed sentiment was that participation in the insurrection blurred all of these pre-established identities, in which case the media operation clearly intended to reassert them. With all three subjects, the media caricature refers to a prefabricated figure that the entire population was already familiar with—the socially concerned student, the pyromaniac anarchist, the criminal immigrant—that only ever existed on the glowing screen, because it was the media themselves that created it. That's the brilliance of the media: they rarely have to verify their claims, because they operate within a virtual universe that they themselves have created.

In the Greek example, it is obvious why the media would sympathize with student rioting: to discourage non-students from participating or identifying with the uprising; and to establish a limit of acceptable tactics, implicitly criminalizing the looting and the attacks on police stations. After all, the intensity of street fighting over three uninterrupted weeks was forcing the government to consider calling in the military. They were willing to tolerate burning barricades and illegal protests if things didn't go further.

Likewise, when people start to bring guns to protests as in Ferguson, there will be those among the forces of law and order who begin to see the wisdom in tolerating the smashing



protesters needed to warn off the oncoming traffic), the peace police were white. Meanwhile, the people who could be seen shooting fireworks at cops, dragging obstacles into the streets, insulting the cops, and yelling things like "burn it all down," or applauding any of these actions, were black, latino, and white.

While I did not see any white people lecture any people of color that they should be peaceful because "Martin Luther King," it is something I have seen happen elsewhere, and it is a message that constantly gets reinforced subtextually.

There is a very real debate to be had about tactics and strategies when we take to the streets in response to police killings. As I argued in Part I of this essay, that debate is largely shut down by those who seek to regenerate the police by reforming, rather than talking about abolishing the police; such reformers have the habit of vituperatively attacking others who raise that question.

It was dealt with more honestly in the streets of Ferguson, though. According to one participant's account:

"anytime I heard someone say we shouldn't throw things at the police (not because it was wrong, but out of fear they'd shoot us) I was able to have good conversations—saying it's a way we take power from them and give it to ourselves. Even when people were super upset, by the end of the conversation even if we still didn't agree it was clear we respected each other."

Wherever order reigns, however, the non-debate plays out as I have described above. There is a widely held belief, among white people anyways, that history has already spoken, and that the only effective and ethical response to systemic injustice, and especially racism, is meek nonviolence, because, well, you know, "Martin Luther King."

Beyond this discursive chokehold lies a very complex history that has been, in large part, falsified, and a problematic relationship between white people and people of color that seems to be repeating itself, revealing tragic parallels between white peo-

ple's involvement in the Civil Rights struggle and white people's involvement in the unfolding movement against police violence today, even as many of those same white people cite a distorted version of the earlier struggle's history, stripped down to exclude all the failings and all the lessons that might be learned.

I could start by pointing out how the form of nonviolence that is pedaled by the mostly white progressive Left today is a pathetically watered-down, superficial, meek comfort-zone politics compared to what was being used during the Civil Rights movement, but I will leave that to the pacifists. It's not my responsibility to get nonviolence back into fighting shape, since I don't believe in it anyways, given that it has always been complicit with state power, it has always been parasitical and authoritarian towards other currents in the social movements it joins, and it has always tended to water itself down over time.

Instead I will start with the argument made by the protester in black, that "Martin Luther King had armed bodyguards at his events." Such a comment will be perplexing to most white people, but in fact it is historically accurate. Coincidentally, it has only been in the past year that a certain fact has been rescued from the memory hole: that the Civil Rights movement was an armed movement and that nonviolence was a minoritarian exception—some might say aberration—within that movement, as well as in the lineage of movements against slavery and white supremacy going back centuries. Previously, only radical historians, ex-Panthers, anarchists, and followers of C.L.R. James dealt with those forgotten episodes of history, but recently the memo has even gotten to NPR with the publication of books like This Nonviolence Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible, by Charles E. Cobb, Jr. or the forthcoming Dixie Be Damned: 300 Years of Insurrection in the American South.



to avoid an actual revolution. The reason that these movements always stop after an incomplete reform, and that the most ineffective sectors of these movements tend to get the credit, is because the reformers have a tendency to throw the radicals under the bus, helping the State eliminate them in exchange for access to power in its newly reformed configuration. After all, who better to discern what reform will best fool the people on bottom than someone who has recently come up from the bottom?

I previously mentioned that a police apparatus cannot exist without a hierarchical society, a prison system, a justice system, and some kind of culture industry, whether religious or mediatic. All of these institutions defend a ruling structure against the conflicts generated by its antagonistic position towards society. Modern democracies go a step further, however; if conflict with society is inevitable, why not manage it rather than trying to suppress it?

In Ferguson, the managers of social conflict were in large part those activists who preached nonviolence and denounced the rioters, as I mentioned in Part I. But there is an important kind of management I neglected to mention.

Those of us who are critical of the mass media may have a hard time explaining the sympathetic position that Time Magazine or Rolling Stone occasionally took with the rioters. Of course, a couple articles hardly make up for thousands of syndicated columns objectively refering to rioters as some kind of pathological parasite, radio hosts calling looters "idiots" and worse, TV spots spreading fear about savage hordes of demons and outside agitators, days long NPR marathons urging peaceful protest, and so on. Nonetheless, the phenomenon is curious as well as significant. In the case of Rolling Stone, we could suppose that this old establishment rag is afraid of all the ground it has lost in the risqué news niche to dynamic newcomers like Vice; however the explanation would be insufficient.

people to espouse tepid, inane suggestions for reform that are completely untenable and unrealistic. But as long as proposals for meager reform are taken seriously, that's what we'll get.

We can't get rid of police brutality without getting rid of the police, and we can't get rid of the police without getting rid of an entire system based on exploitation, oppression, and hierarchy. There is no easy, band-aid solution to this problem, and bandying them about only perpetuates the problem. Foregrounding difficult, far-reaching changes does not mean, however, fixating an abstract gaze on a pre-designed future and blinding ourselves to immediate problems. On the contrary, we need to focus on how we fight now for a better world, and part of that means avoiding forms of action that make real changes even more improbable.

As I argued in Part II, most of what was achieved in the Civil Rights movement in terms of short-term changes was achieved when people armed themselves, took over their streets, and fought back without worrying about ruling class taboos against lower class violence. If we fight for total social transformation without proposing naïve reforms, those in power will trip over themselves trying to buy us off with quick fixes and opportunities to participate in the system.

This in fact is how most social movements in history have gone down. Whatever improvements have been won were actually won by those who fought for radical positions, using uncompromising methods and aggressive tactics, though the victories were claimed by the reformers, who tend to be a combination of dissident members of the ruling structures, opportunists who wish to climb the social ladder, and sincere people who have been duped by a discourse of pragmatism. Their own methods are too sedate to shake things up and force a change, in fact their timidity demonstrates to authority that they are ultimately a loyal opposition undeserving of repression. They must ride the coattails of the radicals in order to be in position when the rulers realize that some change is necessary in order



In a summary of the former, we can read: "Visiting Martin Luther King Jr. at the peak of the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, journalist William Worthy almost sat on a loaded pistol. "Just for self defense," King assured him. It was not the only weapon King kept for such a purpose; one of his advisors remembered the reverend's Montgomery, Alabama home as "an arsenal." "

For a long time these have been forbidden histories, and I believe they were intentionally silenced, and largely by white people. Not only those working for the same power structures that have been trying to disarm people of color for centuries, but also those who hold power in social movements, who since the repression and the defeats of the '60s have preferred a progressively more comfortable vision of "change". It is unfortunate for the authorities that these forbidden histories are being resuscitated now, just in time for a post-Ferguson society, but we still face an uphill battle to return this historical memory to the collective consciousness. (Most protesters in the streets, for example, are still unaware). And one of the chief obstacles—perhaps executioner would be a more accurate term, since they hardly play a passive role—to the dissemination of this knowledge are the same progressive whites who are always ready to whip out a pithy "Martin Luther King!" faster than a cop can draw his handgun.

So far, the histories that have hit the mainstream still maintain the myth of the dominant character of nonviolence in the movements of yesteryear. In Cobb's book, valuable as it is, armed self-defense is still auxiliary to a movement of civil disobedience. And while proponents of nonviolence should know that civil disobedience has never worked against a murderous enemy—like the Klan or the cops—without making recourse to armed self-defense or falling into a symbiotic relationship with a combative wing of the same movement, that is ultimately their problem. I would not be worried about nonviolence having fallen to such an absurd level of patent ineffectiveness if

they didn't try to extinguish the struggles of people who actually believe in fighting back against oppression, rather than negotiating with it. Or staging ritualistic die-ins in front of it, or better yet, working for it (see the relationship between Gene Sharp's protégé Otpor and global intelligence company Stratfor).

There was an underlying tension throughout the Civil Rights movement between nonviolence (albeit an armed nonviolence) and paths of struggle that foregrounded self-defense and did not seek compromise with the existing power structures. After all, the nonviolent practice that emerged in the movement at the end of the 50s and early 60s was largely imposed by the SCLC, the SNCC (in its first incarnation), and the white New England liberals who provided most of their funding.

Beyond the Deacons of Defense, who organized armed protection to many desegregation campaigns throughout the South in the 1960s, there is the example of Robert F. Williams, president of the Monroe, North Carolina, chapter of the NAACP, one of the few chapters of the national organization that was predominantly working class. Having fought in World War II, Williams led his local chapter in advocating armed self-defense after a nonviolent campaign for local desegregation failed. In his book, Negroes With Guns, he describes one occasion when he had to protect himself from a lynch mob.

As the mob is shouting for gasoline to be poured on Williams and his friends, and begins to throw stones, Williams steps out of the car with an Italian carbine in hand.

"All this time three policemen had been standing about fifty feet away from us while we kept waiting in the car for them to come and rescue us. Then when they saw that we were armed and the mob couldn't take us, two of the policemen started running. One ran straight to me, grabbed me on the shoulder, and said, 'Surrender your weapon! Surrender your weapon!' I struck him in the face and knocked him back away from the car and put my carbine in his face, and told him that we didn't



archical, militarized force such as the police, or an institution like the prison designed to remove conflict and transgression from the social sphere, only makes sense where there is a parasitical social class that exists in antagonism with the rest of society, and needs to manage social norms of right and wrong and monopolize violent force in order to preserve its power. Such a class also needs a justice mechanism, such as courts and a legislative body, to formalize its conception of right and wrong, and a propaganda mechanism, whether a state religion or mass media, to ensure that the exploited majority identify with their masters and reproduce the norms of the elite. When a normal person speaks out against throwing rocks at the police or destroying businesses, they are expressing values that originate at the top of the social pyramid.

Of course it gets more complicated when you realize that interests are always subjective, and people often get more out of identifying with a larger community, no matter how fictitious, than they do out of having food to eat or a roof over their heads. In the end, everyone from the CEO to the news anchor to the taxi driver or homebum with conventional ideas all participate in reproducing the same system, and they probably all sincerely believe in the positions they espouse, but some clearly have more influence than others, and can be identified as originators of certain aspects of the present system.

Therefore, we are not speaking for the masses when we assert that the police and the prisons exist to control them, but we should also not shy away from espousing a radical position just because it will be unpopular. We need to have faith that a great many people might eventually come to support radical positions regarding the police. Many people already support parts of these positions intuitively or implicitly, and the reason that more people don't, at least not expressly, is that so few people currently dare to declare the police an intractable enemy of freedom or to openly advocate a world without police. At this juncture, the last thing that we need is for more

to get rid of the police entirely, and we want to live in a world where police are not necessary.

Far from being a naïve position, I believe it is the only one that can withstand serious scrutiny, whether in the form of a comprehensive historical analysis of the role and evolution of police and the effectiveness of reform movements, or of an examination of the breadth of possibility that human societies have already demonstrated.

No one can effectively argue that the police are necessary in an absolute sense. They are a relatively recent invention, as far as institutions go. The only question is what kind of society needs police, and whether that kind of society makes the systematic murders, torture, beatings, and surveillance worth it.

Dennis Sullivan and Larry Tifft have compiled a great deal of information on societies that use various forms of conflict resolution in which an organization such as the police has no place. From the Diné (Navajo) to the Semai, there are dozens of societies—all of them impacted to varying degrees by Western colonialism—that have practiced restorative or transformative justice, dealing with cases of conflict or social harm without ever having to be so brutal as to lock people up in cages or create an elite body designed to surveille people or mobilize organized violence against those who transgress set laws. They compare neighboring societies that face similar socioeconomic conditions but use different strategies for dealing with harm, as well as Western societies that make minimal usage of policing and judicial apparatuses.

A pattern that becomes immediately evident is that police and prisons are only necessary in societies that are based on exploitation and inequality. The police are not an instrument fit to protect a society; on the contrary they are an instrument fit to protect an elite, parasitical class from society. Any society with a minimal practice of cooperation and solidarity can protect itself from individuals who would harm others. A hier-



intend to be lynched. The other policeman who had run around the side of the car started to draw his revolver out of the holster. He was hoping to shoot me in the back. They didn't know that we had more than one gun. One of the students (who was seventeen years old) put a .45 in the policeman's face and told him that if he pulled out his pistol he would kill him. The policeman started putting his gun back in the holster and backing away from the car, and he fell into the ditch.

> "There was a very old man, an old white man out in the crowd, and he started screaming and crying like a baby, and he kept crying, and he said, 'God damn, God damn, what is this God damn country coming to that the n***s **have got guns, the n***s are armed and the police can't even arrest them!' He kept crying and somebody led him away through the crowd."

When Williams was expelled from the NAACP for his militant views, the local chapter simply elected Mabel Williams as their new president, and continued their practice of armed self-defense. Highlighting the importance of economic injustice, both Williams developed a socialist politics and lived in exile in Cuba after fleeing the country to evade trumped up kidnapping charges.

The Black Panther Party, which was demonized in the media at the time of its existence, is obviously well known, for it plays a different function within the process of historical amnesia. The BPP has become a symbol for all forms of black militancy in the '60s, even though there were hundreds of different strains and currents of revolutionary thought and practice in the movement. And what is remembered about the Panthers is little more than their style. Their program, their splits and conflicts, their relations with other groups and movements at the time, their eventual evolution into the Black Liberation Army,

and all the lessons that can be gleaned from this knowledge, has been consigned to the memory hole. They were merely the ones with the afros, the berets, and the rifles, who met with a tragic end, reconfirming the pacifist contention about the futility of violence.

The Panthers are either romanticized or vilified. To me, they were an authoritarian and macho organization (though no more authoritarian and macho than King's SCLC) composed of many intelligent, brave, radical individuals trying to take an important step forward in the struggle, achieving some accomplishments and committing some errors.

More interesting to me are the nameless ones, the people who did not participate in any formal organization, yet who played a critical role in the few gains the Civil Rights movement achieved. More disparaged even than the BPP, these individuals have been consigned by the dominant historiography to the mob. Just like the rioters of Ferguson, whom we all have to thank for keeping Michael Brown's memory alive, without whom this conversation would not even be possible, those who were assigned mob-status in what are portrayed as the darker moments of the Civil Rights movement are presented as cruel, unthinking, self-destructive, and demonic.

In fact, the mob member is nothing more and nothing less than the archetype for a person of color, in the white supremacist imagination. It was this same archetype that was drawn on to create the concept of race, primarily in the Virginia colony, as transplanted aristocrats had to divide and conquer an unruly labor force of exiled Irish, kidnapped poor from the English cities, Africans stolen from their homes, and enslaved Natives. In the early years, these enslaved underclasses often ran away together to the mountains or the swamps, and from time to time they rebelled together, killing their masters and breaking their chains. It is this image that is preserved in the figure of the mob, and this elite fear that we reproduce when we also spurn, disparage, or avoid such a formation.



## A World Without Police

In two previous essay, I discussed the role of the Left in protecting the police through cautious reformism, and the effectiveness of a pacified, falsified—in a word disarmed—history of the Civil Rights movement to prevent us from learning from previous struggles and achieving a meaningful change in society.

The police are a racist, authoritarian institution that exists to protect the powerful in an unequal system. Past and present efforts to reform them have demonstrated that reformism can't solve the problem, though it does serve to squander popular protests and advance the careers of professional activists. Faced with this situation, in which Left and Right unwittingly collude to prolong the problem, the extralegal path of rioting, seizing space, and fighting back against the police makes perfect sense. In fact, this phenomenon, denounced as "violence" by the media, the police, and many activists in unison, was not only the most significant feature of the Ferguson rebellion and the solidarity protests organized in hundreds of other cities, it was also the vital element that made everything else possible, that distinguished the killing of Michael Brown from a hundred other police murders. What's more, self-defense against state violence (whether excercized by police or by tolerated paramilitaries like the Klan) is not an exceptional occurrence in a long historical perspective, but a tried and true form of resistance, and one of the only that has brought results, in the Civil Rights movement and earlier.

What remains is to speak about possibilities that are radically external to the self-regulating cycle of tragedy and reform. What remains is to speak loudly and clearly about a world without police.

We don't want better police. We don't want to fix the police. On the contrary, we understand that the police work quite well; they simply do not work for us and they never have. We want

An honest conversation about tactics and strategies in the streets is sorely needed, and at a broader scale than has happened in the past. A long list of manipulations and clichés makes that conversation impossible, aided by the fact that many people still trust the media as a forum for a social conversation, or they don't notice when discourses crafted in and for the media (often by academics and NGO activists who are seduced by the power of a sound byte) infiltrate their own thinking. The media weigh in heavily on the side of nonviolence, finding purchase in the common misconception that nonviolence has worked in the past.

If we can resurrect subversive, or even just factually vigorous, histories of the Civil Rights movement and other struggles, and rediscover the thread of continuity from those times to the ones we currently inhabit, we can lay the groundwork for a much more intelligent discussion of how to move forward.

But moving forward requires us to think about where we are going, and the artificial consensus on nonviolence pales in comparison to the consensus that has been manufactured around the police; good or bad, they are necessary, and at the very most they must be reformed.

The rocks on which the present movement will founder and break apart, or which it will climb to finally leave behind the cesspool of problems that have cycled and recycled for centuries, is the question of a world without police.

If we can effectively engage with this question, we might be able to surpass the miseries of reformism that devoured the Civil Rights movement and left us with the problem of police killings that haunts us today.

*December 19, 2014*



I do not believe that my enemy's enemy is my friend, but I do believe that my enemy's nightmare can serve as a figure of hope or beauty. Colonial society's obsession with law and order, its fear of the dark Other, which coalesce in its absolute condemnation of the mob, illuminate another way forward.

In the Civil Rights movement, the story of Birmingham provides a perfect example of the intelligence and effectiveness of this acephalous, decentralized formation of resistance, a true hydra, to refer to the writings of ex-Panther and prisoner Russell "Maroon" Shoatz or historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker.

Most people only know half the story. In 1963, a civil disobedience campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, the bastion of segregation in the South, forced the desegregation of the city and paved the way for the Civil Rights Act, which was the major victory of the Civil Rights movement, as far as legislation is concerned.

What fewer people know is that the Birmingham campaign was a repeat of SCLC's 1961 campaign in Albany, Georgia, which turned out a complete failure. King was banking on being able to fill up the jails and still have recruits willing to engage in civil disobedience, shutting the system down, but the authorities simply made their jails "bottomless" by shipping detainees elsewhere. A couple years later, black residents of Albany rioted, suggesting what they thought about their experience with nonviolence (these riots are not mentioned in most chronologies of the movement).

In Birmingham, the 1963 campaign was unfolding the same way, and King was running out of recruits willing to offer themselves up for arrest. Then the riots started. Thousands of locals fought with police, injuring many of them, burned the very white businesses that were refusing to desegregate, and took over a large part of downtown, holding it for days. By fighting back directly, they instantly made a desegregated, cop-free zone in the center of their city. Anxious to keep other people

from learning the same lesson, Birmingham business leaders and politicians immediately agreed to legislate the desegregation that rioters had already accomplished (in fact they had won something even more potent: not only could blacks enter white businesses, but they didn't have to pay for anything). President Kennedy finally started paying attention and urged Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act. It was the rioters who won civil rights.

Some veterans of the SNCC write about the decreasing effectiveness of civil disobedience in those years:

"The philosophy of nonviolence hit shakier ground when SNCC began its period of community organization in the South, having to face continual threats of perhaps deadly violence from whites. [… ]As a result, once strict guidelines of nonviolence were relaxed and members were unofficially permitted to carry guns for self defense. […] Eventually whites began to understand the tactic, and nonviolence became less powerful. […] If there was no more public violence for SNCC to rise above, SNCC's message would be weakened. Thus, protesters were no longer beaten publicly. Instead they were attacked and beaten behind closed doors where newspaper reporters and television cameras could not reach. As southern whites intended, discrete violent oppression began to destroy the image of martyr that SNCC had carefully constructed through nonviolent protest. […] Soon after, the Harlem Riots took place. It was the first urban race riot, and brought the topic of black-initiated violence into public debate. Such actions were no longer assumed to be counter productive. This event, and eventually the rise of black power, led to the fall of nonviolence in SNCC."

So whenever somebody says "Martin Luther King," the message should be, "We know, we know, nonviolence doesn't work." Even King was moving away from a strict attachment to nonviolence, speaking in favor of rioters and the armed Vietnamese, before they killed him. This was after 1963, years in which he doesn't appear in the official histories, when he was



the grassroots and the more radical currents, could help avoid major betrayals during the process of forming relationships across difference.

At a minimum, solidarity in this current struggle dictates that we do not constrain the choices of those who are most affected by police killings (though I think the label of "most affected" in this case excludes not only whites but also economically mobile activists of color who fly in from across the country). One way that white people might fail at that is by starting a riot every time locals were trying to organize a vigil. That didn't happen in Ferguson. What did happen was that progressive whites, together with professional activists of various races, tried to criminalize and prevent non-peaceful responses. They faced an uphill battle in Ferguson, but they succeeded in pacifying solidarity events around the country, preventing protesters from taking the lead of folks in Ferguson, experiencing rage at the same level, or engaging in the same bold process of taking over space and learning how to fight back.

It's a shame that this happened, because a multiracial crowd can accomplish things that other crowds cannot. I have mentioned how police in Ferguson and St. Louis were uncharacteristically restrained, and did not open fire on rioters and looters the way they did in L.A. in '92 or New Orleans in '05. Perhaps they held back this time because there were more white people in the streets, or because they feared a wider insurrection, or both. In any case, if more white people took part in fierce, combative responses to police killings rather than constraining those responses, the State would either have to step back as crowds pushed cops out of entire neighborhoods, allowing communities to experiment with police-free zones and other forms of autonomy, or they would have to start shooting more white people, which would drastically undermine one of the most important hierarchies for upholding State power in this country.

then claim they're in solidarity with "Ferguson," as though that were some homogenous body.

I think true solidarity can only exist between people or groups that have their own autonomous struggles. And while white people will never know what it is like for people of color in this society, I don't think I can trust a white person who does not have their own reasons for hating police. If they make all the right choices that white people are taught to make—go to university, get a high-paying job, be a good citizen, and if you must protest, do it peacefully, if you must riot, do it at a sports match—they may not have had any experience with a cop worse than an argument over a speeding ticket (although I think a certain dogmatic view of white privilege erases the experiences of poor whites or whites with mental health problems, who often have demeaning run-ins with cops, and who are frequently attracted by right-wing discourses, perhaps because only the Right will grant them victim status).

But if they do not make the normalized choices, if they do not accept the limits of what is supposed to pass for freedom under democratic capitalism, they will learn firsthand, either in their own bodies or watching it happen to loved ones, about prison, police torture and beatings, surveillance, repression, and the presumption of guilt. In other words, they will learn the nature of police.

Once I understand the nature of the police, it makes sense to me to respond every time the cops kill someone. Solidarity means that I seek out others who are facing the same problem, albeit inevitably from a different perspective. Naturally, those who prefer peaceful methods will link up with others with the same preferences, just as those who prefer combative methods will find each other. It makes for a more robust struggle if people with different methods also form relationships and learn how to complement rather than denounce one another; however the historical lesson that reformists and those who seek institutional dialogue and advancement will inevitably sell out



doing things and saying things that white progressives never refer to.

For example, King told Alex Haley in 1965: "Over the past several years, I must say, I have been gravely disappointed with such white "moderates" [those who consider themselves "enlightened" and "sympathize with our goals but cannot condone our methods of direct action"]. I am often inclined to think that they are more of a stumbling block to the Negro's progress than the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner."

This quote raises an interesting question. What was the role of white people in the Civil Rights movement? They seem to be absent from the stories above, as well as the best known episodes of the movement. The only real exceptions are Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, two white New Yorkers killed in Mississippi alongside James Chaney.

In fact, a large number of white people participated in the movement, working alongside King in the SCLC, taking part in other organizations like CORE, going on Freedom Rides, and above all, helping fund the movement and putting pressure on media and politicians. There were also mostly white organizations like SDS and Weatherman that formed a part of the larger constellation of social struggles that were influenced by the Civil Rights movement and fed back into the continuing battle against racial oppression. Weatherman, for example, maintained ties with the Black Panthers.

And though many white people did go to prison, only a few faced the level of repression the FBI brought down on the black liberation movement (and usually it was white people who had engaged in armed struggle, like David Gilbert or Harold Thompson). In other words, many more white people survived the struggle intact; what's more, they were able to become influential academics, politicians, or business leaders. The implication is that they are the ones, above all, who have written the official history of that era, a history that has been amputated, distorted, and falsified. And while they may have been

radicals in their youth, they and the generations they have influenced have become increasingly like the "enlightened" moderates King warned about.

Mumia abu-Jamal writes about how Dr. King was "calming" for the white pysche, whereas the Panthers were frightening. And in many ways, the white middle class was the audience that a large part of the movement was performing for. They constituted, and they still constitute today, a virtual public, mobilized by the media, that lays down the norms for acceptable civic behavior. They determine whether a dissident social group is granted some legitimacy, or whether the police will be justified in annihilating them.

The same dynamic is reproduced today as white progressives essentially audit the rebellions that are sparked by the inevitable casualties of heavyhanded policing in poor neighborhoods primarily inhabited by people of color. They can refuse to see those rebellions as acts of resistance, instead fearfully dismissing them as senseless race riots, as was generally the case with the L.A. Riots of 1992. Or they can participate, in order to tame them, to make them more comfortable for the typical white person who does not have to put up with daily police violence.

I am absolutely not saying that nonviolence is a white thing and violence is what people of color use. I don't believe that race predetermines people's opinions or experiences, though it does generate patterns in terms of what people are subjected to by a racialized society. I know that within black communities of resistance, to name one example, there are still debates on what lessons to draw from the Civil Rights and black liberation movement. I personally take inspiration from the thinking of certain ex-Panthers, like Ashanti Alston, Russell "Maroon" Shoatz, and Lorenzo Komboa Ervin. There are also veterans of the more militant wing of the struggle who still believe in a hierarchical, Maoist-inspired method, and there are still those who believe in nonviolence.



from the danger, shouldn't we at least be talking about whether it is preferable to the one-sided war that police, in times of social peace, are continously waging against some of us?

Leave it to Fox News to denounce those who take up weapons as mindless thugs or demons. I think people who live on the frontline of the war being waged by police know exactly what they're about. I also think we should grant them the respect of placing them in the same tradition as Robert Williams and the Monroe NAACP, the Panthers, and militias of freed slaves a century before that.

There are also plenty of black people in Ferguson or beyond who have chosen to respond peacefully. Some have the very real fear of being shot by police. Others are careerists, or belong to vanguardist organizations like the New Black Panther Party (pretty uniformly denounced by members of the original Panthers). Some want to make a nonviolent strategy work in the present circumstances. Others wanted to give the courts a chance to right the wrong of Michael Brown's murder, and have since given up on a peaceful response.

As a white person, I have to ask myself how to relate to this struggle. White proponents of nonviolence will typically try to cast other whites who engage in riskier and more combative tactics as privileged and racist, while they cast themselves as "allies" following the lead of people of color. However, those they tokenistically claim to follow are the ones the media have given the loudest voice, and those who are preaching the exact form of peaceful protest they already have a preference for, that won't require them to go out of their comfort zone or face a level of confrontation with police that their privilege usually protects them from.

Clearly, people on the ground in Ferguson have responded with a variety of forms of resistance. It turns my stomach when outsiders basically go shopping and choose the form that fits their preconceived preferences and notions of resistance, and

This is not a coincidence. Policing is crucial to the gentrification of a neighborhood, as well as to the maintenance of slum status in poor neighborhoods like Ferguson that the system intentionally neglects. And while many aspects of police strategies in these two kinds of neighborhoods differ—"broken windows" theory and hyperaggressive policing against quality of life offenses in the former, military-style operations, denial of services, and even complicity in the drug trade in the latter—both strategies result in the killings of people of color.

Though the media and the other institutions that educate us have cut us off from our histories and achieved a widespread social amnesia, we are affected by the past, and we continue to play out dynamics that began a long time ago. Whether we reference dominant histories or subversive histories—people's histories—determines whether we learn from past mistakes or repeat them.

Nonviolence has the dubious honor of narrating people's histories that are almost identical to the official history. Nonviolence worked, the Civil Rights movement won, and so on. In the Ferguson solidarity protest I attended, a young black person, before urging us to "burn everything," said "this has been going on since Emmett Till." He was referencing a much different history than the white person who tried to stop a few vandals by spouting "Martin Luther King!"

Many people in Ferguson and greater St. Louis have decided to take up arms against the police, first in August after Michael Brown was killed, and again in November after the non-indictment of Darren Wilson was announced. Both the proponents of nonviolence and the media have been downplaying the use of weapons by protesters, but the gunfire, aimed in the air or directly at police, has been a transformative characteristic, setting Ferguson apart from previous responses to police killings, and presenting a real danger, and therefore a limit, for the cops, as well as a danger for the protesters (several of whom were injured by friendly fire). Rather than shy away



While I do think that an honest reading of history disproves the commonplace that "nonviolence worked," which is basically what white people mean when they exclaim, "Martin Luther King!", I don't think that history is univocal, that it leads to any single, correct answers regarding how to create a better world. What's more, how could there be one answer? Every individual and every community has different needs, and everyone faces different consequences when they go up against this system.

A person of color is going to face a higher risk of injury or imprisonment if they fight back than I would. This means that I cannot make tactical decisions for anyone else. But in the hands of many white progressives, this fact turns into the argument that fighting back is "privileged," something only white people can do. This assertion is as patronizing as it is inaccurate. While the "Black Bloc" method of rioting is still carried out mostly by white people—after all, it was imported from Germany—this is only one of many ways that people choose to fight back. In fact, a politics of comfort, the ability to dissent without being punished, is one of the defining privileges of whiteness, though white people have to play by certain rules to enjoy it. And peacefulness is chief among those rules.

When something like Ferguson happens, people of color will suddenly appear in the media in greater quantity, urging nonviolence. White progressives take this as confirmation that their stance is not inflected by race, and in fact their comfort politics is just a way for them to be good allies following the leadership of people of color. But that is exactly how they are supposed to react. The legitimization of nonviolence is nothing but a spectacle, and they are the intended audience.

I don't know if the activists, ministers, and scholars cast in the role of "community leaders" by the media engage in fair debates within their communities, if they're making good tactical decisions in their circumstances, or if they even believe what they are saying. It isn't my place to say. Regardless, they

are used as figureheads by white media to deliver a reassuring message to a white audience. The same activists, with the same credentials, would not be given any air time by the big media corporations or the big NGOs and protest organizations, mostly reliant on white philanthropy, if they questioned the validity of nonviolence. Like consumers with a big budget, white progressives are determining the kind of products that are being sold to them without ever being aware of the marketing. Whether it's designer shoes or protest strategies, the dynamics are the same, and above all they reinforce the worldview where buying and selling are normal activities and the market is understood as a natural force.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to view these opinions as products, at least when they are being packaged by the media. At every level of the spectacular treatment of this conflict, property relations are asserting themselves over and against human life. When kids are getting shot down in the streets, some vigilantes are taking up arms not against the police but against the looters, to defend "property rights". By other means, proponents of nonviolence are doing the same thing, since a condemnation of the riots is above all support for the sanctity of property over life.

I think it can be a good thing that more white people are finally reacting to police violence and taking to the streets, but not if they participate in the unfolding movement in the same way as they participated in the Civil Rights movement.

After all, the current movement is in many ways a continuation of Civil Rights. And the latter was just one manifestation of the centuries-old fight against oppression and domination, which in this country has largely been about race, due to the way North America was colonized. There is a strong argument for the assertion that the Civil Rights movement neither won nor ended. If the shared goal of the movement was to end racial inequality and oppression, it was principally the legal-minded, college-educated portions of the movement who were asserting that the focus of that goal should be change at an institutional, legislative level. Their assertions have proven false. Perhaps the only concrete victories of the movement were to end Jim Crow segregation, institute a legal basis for racial equality, and substantially increase the percentage of registered black voters. At least as far as statistical evidence is concerned, these changes have not been accompanied by an increase in the quality of life for black people and other people of color, nor a substantial decrease in the disproportions between white people and people of color in any significant criterion from income to incarceration and police killings.

Jim Crow segregation is over, but a subtler form of segregation that had already been developed in northern cities from New York to Chicago by the time of the Civil Rights movement is the law of the land. As city administrators smelled the changing winds in the '50s and '60s, they applied for federal "urban renewal" grants and demolished thriving black neighborhoods across the South, from places like small, rural Harrisonburg, where I used to live, to southern Harlems, cultural centers like Richmond and Miami. In their places they built highways and incinerators, or they constructed new buildings for white businesses, and located new housing projects for the displaced black residents in less desirable neighborhoods. Housing and Urban Development proved to be a much more potent weapon than the Ku Klux Klan for the maintenance of a white supremacist system. And who needs the Ku Klux Klan when you have Google? Even more efficient than a powerful government bureaucracy, tech companies like Google or Microsoft are rapidly gentrifying historically black and latino neighborhoods from San Francisco to Seattle.

If you consider that the outer boundary of San Francisco's gentrification is Oakland, these two beachheads of the new style of gentrification line up with sites of some of the fiercer and more innovative battles against police killings in the last five years: the cases of Oscar Grant and John T. Williams.