

Always More People Than Cops

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CLARK STREET, CHICAGO, AUGUST 26, 1968. The smell of tear gas hangs in the air south of Lincoln Park, which the cops have just gassed out. People have scattered, mostly heading toward the central Loop. The air is heavy, still war at 11PM. Down Clark Street, almost deserted, a cop car glides slowly, blue-and-white paint reflecting the street lights. Half a block from me, a loud POP — a brick has hit the windshield. The car jerks to a stop, its doors fly open, then there's a splatter of crashes, white stars blossom in the door panels. The doors slam shut and the car flashes past me, still accelerating as it dwindles. Soon it's gone, Clark Street is quiet, young voices laugh at a distance in the summer air.

“Revolution is a festival of the oppressed,” wrote the 19th century historian Jules Michelet. Chicago '68 was indeed a festival, but not the Yippie “Festival of Life” that drew some participants to town. The real festival came in moments like this, when the balance of force turned over and the real balance of power stood revealed: there are always more people than cops. To a young radical of the time, the week's events taught that lesson and many others — about power, politics, and class.

Power

In front of the Conrad Hilton, downtown Chicago, probably Wednesday, August 28. A kid tosses something at a cop, and he flips and chases the youth through the front line of demonstrators, which immediately shuts behind the cop and begins to close in a circle around him, people screaming, “Kill him! Kill him!” He runs, head ducked low, legs stretching out, back toward the line of his comrades, who reach through the demonstrators and pull him to safety.

After the convention, liberals tagged the events a “police riot” to turn the blame on the cops, away from mayor Richard F. Daley and the Democrats. Though it contains some truth — the cops and national guard bloodied and manhandled thousands during the six days of August 25–30 — the “police riot” idea is false for two reasons. First, most times when cops charged the crowds they were acting in a disciplined way, under orders, not “rioting,” but carrying out the policy of the state. Second, more important, it was our riot.

Through the week, there were repeated clashes around three flashpoints: Lincoln Park, two miles north of the Loop, where many out-of-towners were camping and gathering and which the cops gassed out on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, August 25–27, enforcing an 11PM curfew no one ever heard of before; Grant Park, across Michigan Avenue from the delegates; headquarters at the Hilton, where there were confrontations every day but particularly on Wednesday, August 28; and the south end of the Michigan Avenue lakefront, at 12th Street, the route for several attempted marches to the convention site at the Chicago Amphitheatre, all blocked by the cops.

Probably only a few hundred demonstrators were oriented to street fighting from the start. A larger number were committed to non-violence at any cost. But probably the largest number wanted to mount standard protests, marches, and demonstrations in front of the Hilton (we called it the “Hitler”)-but were ready to fight back tactically when stopped, wherever they had the advantage. This situation created Chicago '68 — a mass protest that became a mass riot for hours or just minutes at a time, then resolved to protest again, only to become a riot once more.

Nobody planned, this violence (unlike the cop violence). There were mass numbers and mass impetus. For example, on August 28th, cop brutality at a rally in Grant Park led Tom Hayden, of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the anti-war Mobilization Committee (MOBE), to

call for a move on its own. Cut off in the park (which is divided by a lagoon) by cops blocking the bridges to the Michigan Avenue side, the crowd rushed north, crossed an undefended bridge, and returned south to the Hilton, also trying to spill up the side streets around it. The cops controlled the perimeter, but not the confrontation scene itself, and at such moments they lost tactical control on a local scale.

Our riots, then, were a mass action, part of a shifting of public emotion. They succeeded when the pre-existing readiness of some people to mix it up was answered by the accumulated rage in the crowds and where the crowds had local superiority because of numbers. They were not a guerilla, affinity group, or “black bloc”-type action.

Politics is about power; revolutionary power is about power in the streets; revolutionary anarchist politics is about popular, mass power in the streets. When street actions have mass backing – as they did in Chicago, among the thousands demonstrating – then they can win local control over the streets. When such actions have large-scale support in a society, this is technically called a revolutionary situation,

On the other hand, the support has to be there: a good leader with tactical sense can smell when it’s there and not. The popular support can’t be created just by daring actions. So there was a negative side to Chicago’s lessons too, which unfortunately trapped some very good radicals.

Just over a year later, in October 1969, the Weatherman faction of the then-divided SDS held the “days of rage” in downtown Chicago. Ignoring the tricky situation that created mass defiance in ’68, they believed one could “create two, three, many Chicago’s” simply by going into the streets and defying cops without popular support. They believed several such actions, through the power of example, would “build a core of ten to twenty thousand anti-imperialist fighters.” (Weatherman manifesto, quoted in Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties*, pg. 392)

Aside from the fact that their ideology was fully Stalinist-Communist, Weatherman’s strategy alienated thousands of people. They barged into high schools to harangue working-class students and ended up jeered at and roughed up by the students. In the days of rage,” 200 activists, without a shred of support, trashed property and fought cops and didn’t gain a shred of support from anyone. Weatherman actions appeared to people just as craziness, something no sane person would have anything to do with. The actions isolated Weatherman and helped build, in response, the explicitly liberal “Moratorium” movement – which held a Washington rally of about one million people the month after the days of rage.” As much as anyone besides Nixon, the FBI and COINTELPRO, Weatherman helped kill the radical anti-war movement.

Politics

Outside the Conrad Hilton, probably Tuesday, August 27. The convention demonstrators have linked up with a caravan from the Southern Christian Leader Conference’s Poor People’s March on Washington and try to march toward the Amphitheatre, but Michigan Avenue is choked by cops at 12th Street. We end up back in front of the hotel. “Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!” the front ranks of the crowd keep screaming at the cops. At the same time faces are turned upwards, toward the hotel windows, where delegates can be seen leaning out. Some of the delegates are making V signs for peace, and hundreds of demonstrators here on the street below – the same ones screaming at the cops – hold their hands and heads, making the V sign back to those elusive faces,

The real nature of the Democratic Party seems the hardest of all lessons to learn here. To a minority of demonstrators, including my friends and me, the Democratic Party stands revealed as the enemy, the party of the ruling class, left and right; the “peace candidates,” Eugene McCarthy and the late Robert Kennedy, only disguise its real nature. But many more protesters who came here sympathizing with McCarthy or the memory of Kennedy, as well as SDS members and other radicals can’t get rid of the idea that the Democratic Party really belongs to us, that it is the party of the underprivileged or should be or can be — if not its mainstream wing, than its liberal wing. And so they flash the V sign to the windows

For a while, it seems as if Chicago has taught the lesson. “At the end of the week,” Todd Gitlin writes later, “the McCarthy people had spilled out into the streets — not because anyone had persuaded them to be anti-imperialist, but because the Democrats’ door had been slammed in their faces.” (*The Sixties*, pg. 264) But people haven’t learned that Kennedy-McCarthy are part of the ruling-class political process; when protest goes strongly into the streets, the ruling-class liberal party will generate a left wing to win them back.

Cut short in 1968, this process plays itself out over the next few years. In 1972, George McGovern is the Democratic nominee on an out-of-Vietnam platform. Though he loses miserably to Nixon, he serves the purpose of coaxing the anti-war movement back into the Democratic Party. Nixon, himself, pulls out of Vietnam. Overall, the US ruling class is willing to sacrifice Vietnam, a minor interest, to keep control of domestic politics. That’s the lesson not learned in Chicago in 1968.

Today, the manifesto for the August “Counter Convention”(to the Democratic Party’s National Convention) announces “Active Resistance will turn its back on the electoral circus taking place in Chicago and explore instead our vision of real direct democracy.” Unlike the protest organizers in 1968, Active Resistance (AR) recognizes that no wing of the Democratic Party is for the people, but AR also implies that the convention is irrelevant, and that’s not true. The convention is not an “electoral circus,” it is a decision-making meeting of our enemies.

Though its easy now for radicals to dismiss the Democrats as irrelevant, that’s really a sign that struggle is low. The Democrats are a party of the ruling class that, historically, has succeeded in disguising itself as a party of the people. When struggle heats up, people will approach the Democratic Party with the same mix of hate and hope as in 1968. It will be up to the revolutionaries to join in protests and convince the participants that the Democratic Party, as a whole, is the vehicle of our oppressors.

Class

52nd Street and Cottage Grove Avenue, on Chicago’s South Side, Monday August 26, 1968, about 4:30 AM. A couple of dozen bus drivers, most in their light-blue summer uniforms, gather around the Chicago Transit Authority’s Cottage Grove bus barn in the city. CTA is on strike, the strike called for convention week by a mostly-black rank and-file caucus that organized an inconclusive earlier strike in July. I am there, working as a summer-replacement driver. This first morning, there’s a strong initial show of pickets, then when it becomes clear that management won’t try to get buses out, the pickets dwindle.

The strike issues needn’t be detailed twenty-eight years later. They involve both oppressive working conditions and democratic representation within the union; originally a rank-and-file

issue, the strikes became a race issue as the largely Black workforce faced a white, union leadership and most of the minority-white drivers stood aside or backed the leaders.

A young radical brought away in memory the pure blue of the sky on those early summer mornings — a clarity that seemed to stand for the immense power of the working class. I had already sensed that power at the beginning of the first strike, when an older worker stepped up into my bus as I passed the barn midway in my shift to say, “Finish this trip and pull in; we’re on strike,” and the city’s bus traffic halted like that, with quiet spoken words.

Each day during the convention, I am at 52nd and Cottage in the morning and at the convention protests later, if I can get down there. But the two movements remain separate. While the drivers know about the protesters — quietly chuckling over the papers and the TV news, liking the protests and bemused over some of the fighting and rhetoric—the protesters have seemingly never heard of the strike.

On one night they do hear, briefly. The strike meeting that night is at a North Side church, not far from Lincoln Park, and a decision is voted to march to the park to show support for the protesters. But the meeting goes on too long and by the time a few hundred drivers march east on North Avenue toward the park, the demonstrators are marching away from the park toward some other target. The two lines of march actually pass, on opposite sides of the street, while I go to the march captains and explain what is happening. An SDS leader, Nick Eagleson, takes the bullhorn and crisply announces that the strikers have come to show solidarity and we will join them in a common rally. So the students turn round, the two crowds hold an impromptu rally, and we celebrate a moment of unity between the protest movement and the working class.

But in the long run, the separate marches are the right symbol; our movement, as a whole, disdained the working class. One heard that the workers were bought-off, white, prosperous but nobody talked to the drivers I worked with Weatherman proclaimed that “the long-range interests of the non-colonial sections of the working class lie with overthrowing imperialism” (Weatherman manifesto)...but this was just a way of justifying their actions in Marxist jargon. Neither Weatherman nor most other factions tried to understand workers, Black or white — or most other Black people — except to harangue them.

After 1968, my friends and I tried for many years to organize a revolutionary wing among Black and white US workers. We were wrong about how possible this would be in our generation — but not in our belief that only such a movement could defeat the state and organize a humane society. In contrast, the majority ideas in the 1960s peace movement — that one could organize a peace-and-social change wing inside the Democratic Party, or make a revolution in the US without a popular base, as an outpost of Third World revolutions — were fundamentally, morally wrong. Today as much as in 1968, the link-up that didn’t quite happen on North Avenue that August night has to be created, or there will be no social revolution.

The lessons of August 1968 lie both in what did happen and in what didn’t. People went face to face with the state power and, on a local scale, won some victories; people launched a mass protest against the ruling wing of the Democratic Party and understood that the DP are warmongers, oppressors; a group of workers and a mass movement of students and youth were in a struggle at the same time and, briefly, made contact. But people didn’t learn street action depends on mass support; they didn’t reject the Democratic Party as a whole, and organize others to do so; except for a few, they didn’t go on to dedicate their whole lives to building a revolutionary movement in the working class, which would have made the generation of ’68 one to be remembered.

An anarchist movement worthy of the name has to learn the lessons of Chicago '68: anarchism is not about alternative politics but about power; power lies in control of public spaces; the contest for public space requires winning people away from the Democratic Party and building a revolutionary movement in and of the working class.

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