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Black Bloc, Free Speech, and the Extreme Right Threat

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Intimidation, harassment, threats, and outright violence from the far right are increasing, enabled by Trump's bullying rhetoric and open bashing. White supremacists and right wing militias are emerging from the shadows, crawling out of their dens behind Trump's "America First" rhetoric, his defunding of Planned Parenthood, and Trump's various other dog whistles to spew hatred at immigrants, blacks, women, gays, Muslims, Mexican-Americans, Sikhs…

While the far right is still relatively small numerically, its rising attacks must be taken seriously. There's a growing polarization in the U.S. (and in Europe), and we're likely just in the early stages of a rising wave of white supremacist violence, tacitly sanctioned by Trump and supported by some other prominent Republicans:

- On May 20, a white "alt-Right" sympathizer, Sean Urbanski, murdered an African-American Bowie State University student, Richard Collins III, on the campus of the University of Maryland. Urbanski was a member of the Facebook group "Alt-Reich: Nation."

- On May 24, Greg Gianforte, Montana Republican Congressional candidate, body-slammed and repeatedly punched Guardian reporter Ben Jacobs for asking him a factual question. The election was held the next day; Gianforte won. Trump hailed the victory unconditionally and uncritically.

- On May 26 in Portland, a violent right wing racist murdered two men who intervened to stop his racist and Islamophobic harassment of two young women. *The chairman of the Portland area Republican Party used this tragedy as an excuse for calling upon armed right wing militias (the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters) to "protect" the public. Portland's leading Republican advocates a fascist solution.*

- On May 28, two Native Americans (members of the Quinault tribe) were run over and killed at a Washington State campground by a driver shouting racist slogans.

- On May 31, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, a prominent black writer, activist, and socialist, cancelled a series of public lectures: "Since last Friday, I have received more than fifty hate-filled and threatening emails. Some of these emails have contained threats of violence, including murder." The hate campaign was incited by Fox News, which had run an online story calling a speech of Taylor's an "anti-POTUS" tirade.‘

Let's keep this in perspective. We're not living under fascism. For example, last month the city of New Orleans tore down the city's four Confederate monuments. Also, Trump has yet to get significant legislation enacted, and the state's secret police are out to get *him*.

Although the far right is emboldened, Trump's popular supporting is shrinking down to his core base – and should his cuts

to one or more of {Medicaid, education, health care} go into effect, some of that core will surely defect. But there's no doubt that the white supremacists and other extremists are more visible, more confident, and appear to be ramping up their threats and their outright violence. So how do we take on the right now? How do we protect against racist violence? How do we blunt its growth?

To successfully take on the right, we need to act in several inter-related ways:

- First, we need to educate the public about what the Alt-right is and what it stands for. The American public still overwhelmingly rejects Nazis and fascism, but many (probably most) don't know that alt-right leaders like Richard Spencer advocate extreme bigoted and genocidal policies closely resembling – if not identical to – those of the Nazis and the Klan. [The alt-right have tried to present themselves as reasonable folks whose rights to free speech are being threatened by left-wing authoritarians. Unfortunately, some of the tactics employed against them have played into their hands. More on this below.]

- Second, we need to build a broad united front movement to oppose the violence and the attacks on the rights of immigrants, Muslims, black and brown people, the LGBTQ community, and all others targeted by the right-wing hate groups. We need to be the champions of civil liberties and democratic rights: freedom of speech and assembly, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, etc. We need to oppose the attacks on health care, Medicaid, education and abortion rights.

- Third, we need to make clear what we stand for. Of course, we stand for defending basic democratic rights;

for mass defense against deportation, terror, and victimization; for jobs, for health care, for education, for abortion rights, for defending civil liberties; for democratically organized mass mobilization. Those are the basis for a mass united front for defense against the right-wing attacks. But revolutionary socialists need to build a wing of the movement that goes beyond this: Left at this level the united front will be dominated by the corporate Democrats and their allies among the labor leadership and nonprofiteers, aiming at bringing down Trump-Pence and restoring the Democrats (Obama, Clinton et al) to power. But that doesn't solve the problem, it will just widen the disaffection of the displaced workers in the Rust Belt, Appalachia and elsewhere who see Obama, Clinton and the Democrats as the proponents of the neoliberal globalization that left them marginalized, desperate, jobless, and often evicted from their homes. So we socialists must build a wing that rejects the Democrats as well as the Republicans, and that rejects corporate globalization. We counterpose to this the kind of society that we're for: one in which the basic rights of the individual and individual freedoms are maximized, in which necessities are prioritized (health care, housing, food and water, environmental protection and renewal, education, etc.) and organized as much as possible through local democratic community and workplace institutions. We know that at first this wing will be small, but that's more reason to begin to advocate and popularize it now.

- Finally, in both the broader movement and in the socialist wing posited above, we need to advocate and begin to organize workplace and community defense groups to guard against and combat the very real and already present danger of violent attacks from right wing indi-

workplace defense groups. But the black bloc is not out to build that type of movement. They seem to have contempt for it (e.g., their traffic blocking, their contempt for democratically agreed-upon decisions, their substitutionist practice).

Many activists seem to feel obliged to support the black bloc, or at least not to criticize them. But the black bloc tactics are destructive, and we ought not to close our eyes to them. We should also understand that the black bloc is not monolithic. There are many young people new to the movement who are still thinking things through, want to act out immediately against capitalism, and are therefore attracted to the black bloc. We should not write them off. But we will be writing them off, and worse still allowing the right wing to retain the initiative, if we don't openly reject the black bloc's anti-democratic elitism and work to build the kind of movement and society that we urgently need.

Also from Ayres: "If it's a worldwide struggle, if Weatherman is correct in that basic thing, that the basic struggle in the world today is the struggle of the oppressed people against U.S. imperialism, then it is the case that nothing we could do in the mother country would be adventurous. Nothing we could do because there is a war going on already, and the terms of that war are set."

That line of reasoning – if we can call it reasoning – was used to justify actions so over the top that even Black Panther leaders – hardly known for their moderation – called Weatherman out. Chicago Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, later murdered by the cops, had this to say about Weatherman's "Days of Rage" – a senseless riot they staged in downtown Chicago:

> "We believe that the Weatherman action is anarchistic, opportunistic, individualistic. It's chauvinistic, it's Custeristic. And that's the bad part about it. It's Custeristic in that its leaders take people into situations where the people can be massacred–and they call that a revolution. It's nothing but child's play, it's folly."

Weatherman's contempt for a democratically organized broad mass movement and their advocacy of sterile elitist and adventurist tactics helped destroy SDS, the most prominent mass militant antiwar in the U.S. in the 1960s. It 's unfortunate that the black bloc draws inspiration from them, and disheartening that black bloc leaders (e.g., the authors of *The Black Bloc Papers*) see actions like the Days of Rage as a model to hail and emulate. We have seen this play before, so we know how it unwinds: elitist functioning, adventurist actions, leading to divisiveness and demoralization.

Such actions, functioning, and understanding are counterposed to what's needed: a broad militant mass movement combined with democratically organized community and

> viduals and organized militias. The need for these will become evident to an increasing number of people as the right -wing attacks continue and escalate.

One might think that all of this is evident. But that's not the case. There's especially been a lot of unclarity about free speech: how, when, and even whether to advocate or defend it. And there has been a lot of controversy around strategy: building a broad inclusive movement versus antifa (black bloc) strategy of confrontation / smash / trash. I'll take these up next.

Free speech is a right, and an important one. We should whenever possible be the defenders of free speech – after all, it's an important concept in the kind of society we want to help create – and make it clear that the white supremacists and other right wingers are in reality the enemies of free speech. However, free speech is not the only important right; it doesn't exist in a vacuum, as a thing in itself, and so it can come into conflict with other factors. Just as no one has the right to yell "Fire!" in a theater, so no one has the right to terrorize or openly intimidate. For example: the Portland white supremacist yelled about his right to free speech as he hurled racist epithets at the two young women (and later, when he was arraigned in court) but he had no right to harass and terrorize them.

Right now, the left has been wrong-footed on the issue of free speech. The right-wing extremists are gaining in part because they have been aided by media coverage that – at least up until the Portland murders – portrayed them as victims being deprived of their rights to speech and assembly. Unfortunately, too many of their opponents have played into their hands by opposing not just free speech for Nazis, but the right to free speech in general – and I'm not just talking about the black bloc. For example, recently two leading UC Berkeley activists circulated a paper arguing that the Free Speech Movement (FSM) of 1964 turned the movement away from the needs of the black community. They go on to argue that the concept

of free speech provides philosophical underpinning for the far right, basing this on the example of John Searle, a retired UC Berkeley philosophy professor. Searle, who was active in the FSM, became a leading right wing philosopher. In fact, much of the FSM leadership came out of the civil rights movement (Freedom Rides; CORE) and remained active supporters of the black liberation movement. Searle, an accused serial harasser of women students, is not representative of the FSM leadership, many of whom came out of the civil rights movement and remained supporters of the black liberation struggle.

In contrast to leftist opponents of free speech, whenever possible we want to frame the discussion so that we are the defenders of free speech and it's the Nazis, alt-right etc. who want to deny it. We want to remind people of who the Nazis are, what they stand for, and to educate about what the other right wing extremists stand for – that they are racist, elitist, authoritarian thugs and worse. From there, we need to stress that the best defense against the right is to build a truly massive movement. This isn't a game: the extreme right is armed; it includes organized militias; and includes violent types recruited from ex-cops, the Aryan Nation, etc. To beat them, we need to massively outnumber them. And we can.

The murders in Portland and at the U. of Maryland and the threats to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (and to LeBron James) are clear: these are virulent racist attacks by white supremacists, and the need to condemn and defend against them is clearly understood by the public. On the other hand, the series of confrontations in Berkeley and elsewhere between the alt-right and the black bloc appear barely relevant to most people. It has allowed the alt-right to pretend that all they want is to be able to hold a peaceful rally in a park to assert their right to free speech. To many, it has the appearance of two street gangs rumbling over turf. Furthermore, although the organizers of right wing rallies in Berkeley and elsewhere are hard-core racists, they don't present themselves as such. Rather, they present

leadership of Students for a Democratic Society. This isn't a coincidence: black block leaders acknowledge the connection:

> "The Black Bloc can trace its historical roots all the way back to when- and wherever people comprising an oppressed class or group militantly rose up against their oppressors. Elements of the particular tactics of the Bloc were previously utilized by the Weather faction of Students for a Democratic Society (the SDS) in North America during the "Days of Rage" in 1969."
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> *The Black Block Papers*, David van Deusen & Xavier Massot (Green Mountain Anarchist Collective), Breaking Glass Press: 2010, p.10 (www.infoshop.org)

Weathermen held to an extreme version of the "white skin privilege" theory. The white skin privilege theory, put forward by Noel Ignatin and Ted Allen ("White Blindspot", www.marxists.org), argued that the ruling class policy of dividing the working class by favoring white workers over black workers could only be defeated if white workers put the needs of black workers ahead of their own. In SDS, this boiled down to the popular slogan "Give up your white skin privilege." That was problematic enough. But Weatherman pushed the white skin privilege line further, eventually concluding that the overwhelming majority of white people in the US, including white workers, were hopelessly corrupted by the system and were therefore lost to the revolutionary cause. In other words, all white people, except the few who followed them, were the enemy.

Weatherman leaders spelled this out. From Bill Ayres: 'The more I thought about that thing, "Fight the people", it's not that it's a great mass slogan or anything, but there's something to it.'

In the months since the February 1 Yiannopoulos protest, the alt-right has held four convergences in Berkeley, essentially rallies in local parks ostensibly to assert their right to free speech. The black bloc appeared at the first three in combat gear (hoods, masks, black garb) in what to most naïve observers must have looked at best like a gang rumble, and at worst like left thugs trying to forcibly block free speech and assembly. At the third of these rallies, on April 15, the right-wingers got the better of the black bloc in the fighting; and the right-wingers began to show their true violent and vicious intent. So what did the black bloc do? They resorted to a favored tactic: blocking traffic. This allowed the right wingers to step up as the defenders of beleaguered motorists, pushing the black bloc out of the way ("You can proceed now, ma'am. They won't be getting in your way again today.")

The black bloc leadership is fundamentally anti-democratic, adventurist and elitist. They usurp protests organized by others by marching in, masked and hooded, and going into attack mode regardless of what had been democratically planned. They describe their elitism and substitutionism, in their own words, in an op ed piece in the May 1, 2017 *Daily Californian*:

> "We understand that not everyone can join us in this fight. All we ask is that you understand why we take to the streets."
>
> ('Antifa aims to preserve safety of community through response', by members of Berkeley Antifa.

So they're the self-appointed Praetorian Guard, our self-conceived military arm, ready to take the offensive, smash and trash whether we like it or not. They are convinced that they know what's best, the rest of us be damned.

The black bloc approach is reminiscent of Weatherman, the vanguardist, terrorist group launched in 1969 by part of the

themselves as standing up for their rights and as protectors of the public from authoritarian leftist thugs. (And there's the black bloc, hooded and masked, looking every bit the popular image of terrorists!) Many of those who the alt-right brought to their Berkeley rallies were not themselves hard-core right-wingers, but believed they were there to defend free speech and liberty. So at this point tactically, our focus should be on protesting what our opponents do, not on their right to say it.

There's another factor at play here: political correctness. Many leftists (and left liberals) are in practice opposed to allowing points of view that differ from their own. They think that they know "the truth" (sometimes justified by referring to "scientific socialism") and this gives them the moral authority to silence those with whom they disagree. There have been campaigns on several campuses to ban courses or forums by those with right wing – but not fascist o r white supremacist – views. Where does one draw the line? At Milo Yiannopoulos? At Ann Coulter? At Pat Buchanan? Recall the slippery slope down which the Bolsheviks slid: shutting down opposition press; then banning opposition parties; then banning party factions. And the hectoring and harassment by the political correctness police isn't confined to right-wing targets. Consider the case of Bret Weinstein, a "progressive" professor at Evergreen State University (Olympia, Washington) who supported Bernie Sanders and Occupy Wall Street, but fell afoul of the political correctness crowd, who are now campaigning to have him fired and threaten his safety on campus (see "When the left turns on its own", NY Times, June 1, 2017).

Of course, there are grey areas. In my opinion, there's no universal answer to the question of how to react when a Richard Spencer or a Milo Yiannopoulos come to speak (nor to other "grey areas" – that's precisely why they're grey). But as a rule of thumb: I'm for in advance urging organizers to challenge them to debate; I am for going to the black community, women's groups, immigrants' groups, LBGTQ groups, etc. and urging

them to help build mass protest. When the extreme right converges to terrorize or openly intimidate, we should help build direct opposition. When they advocate harassment, intimidation, victimization or worse, we can choose to heckle and / or disrupt.

Finally, we need to take up the actions of a prominent but overall negative force: antifa (more popularly known as the black bloc). The black bloc dates to the European autonomist movement of the 1980s. It first came to prominence in the U.S. during the 1999 "Battle of Seattle", when they trashed the retail stores of multinational corporations including Starbucks, the Gap, and Old Navy. Smashing and trashing private property is a favored tactic that some black bloc affiliates have elevated to a principle.

Back to the present: On February 1 in Berkeley, a planned talk by Milo Yiannopoulos was met by two thousand protesters; in contrast, there were only a small number of Yiannopoulos supporters present. The demonstration had been democratically planned to be militant but non-violent, but the black bloc had no regard for that. About 150 of them, hooded, masked and dressed in black – marched into the rally and unilaterally imposed their tactics on the demonstration. They set a generator on fire (perhaps accidentally), fired projectiles from slingshots at cops on the student union roof, and smashed windows. Then, after marching to downtown Berkeley, they smashed windows at a couple of banks and a Starbucks (Starbucks had just announced that they would hire 10,000 immigrants.) This was not a one-off: they have done the same thing before and since (most recently, on May Day in Portland – where the cops initiated the violence, but the black bloc retaliated in the middle of a demonstration that included families with kids, putting them at risk, trashed downtown stores and, from footage in their own video, threw a smoke bomb into a crowded Target store. Similar black bloc trashing occurred on May Day in Chicago.)

The smashing and trashing is a recurrent feature of black bloc actions: Seattle, Genoa, Oakland, Berkeley, Portland, Chicago, etc. Despite the fact that it often acts to alienate large sectors of the community – motorists stuck on freeways; residents who need to clean up the broken glass and overturned trash cans; small business owners whose property was vandalized) – the destruction of property has not only been recurrent, it has often been hailed as essential to the struggle against capitalism. Why? Here's how one black bloc collective put it about fifteen years ago:

> "When we smash a window, we aim to destroy the thin veneer of legitimacy that surrounds private property rights … After N30 [30 November], many people will never see a shop window or a hammer the same way again. The potential uses of an entire cityscape have increased a thousand-fold. The number of broken windows pales in comparison the the number of spells – spells cast by a corporate hegemony to lull us into forgetfulness of all the violence committed in the name of private property rights and of all the potential of a society without them. Broken windows can be boarded and eventually replaced, but the shattering of assumptions will hopefully for some time to come."
>
> (ACME Collective, quoted in Paris Review, 2003)

That's clear enough: smashing windows breaks the spell spun by bourgeois ideology and shatters its assumptions. This approach can only lead to isolation, demoralization, and still more adventurist individualist action. And unfortunately, it's not just the black bloc that is tarnished by their tactics. In the public's mind, it's associated with much or all of the left.