

I'm a left-wing anarchist. Guns aren't just for right-wingers.

The long, forgotten history of pro-gun left-wing groups.

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Contents

Leftist gun ownership is about protecting marginalized communities	3
We can't depend on the police to protect us	4

Right-wingers have held an unearned monopoly on gun culture for too long. Whether it's in the halls of legislative power or in the comments under "gun bunny" photos on Instagram, there is a prevailing narrative that pegs guns and armed self-defense exclusively to Republicans, racist libertarians, and other generally Constitution-obsessed weirdos. It maintains that those on the left want to take away everyone's guns and swathe the entire country in bubble wrap. But I'm an anarchist, and I call bullshit.

I'm of the firm opinion that it's time to not only arm the left but challenge the narrative that all leftists are anti-gun. Many are, and that's a position I can understand and respect. But there is also a long history of armed community self-defense among the radical left that is often glossed over or forgotten entirely in favor of the Fox News-friendly narrative that all liberals hate guns. That's simply not the case — though as history has proven, the only thing that scares the reactionary right more than the idea of losing their guns is the thought of us having them.

I grew up with guns, and my familiarity with them is a big part of why I view things the way I do. My family hunts for sustenance, and gun safety was taught to me before I was tall enough to see over my dad's workbench. I can understand why people who weren't raised around them would view firearms with fear and loathing, but for me, a gun in the hands of someone I trust is a comforting sight, because I know the power it holds.

When I was in Charlottesville, Virginia, protesting the Unite the Right rally in 2017, the only time I truly felt safe was when members of Redneck Revolt — a working-class, anti-fascist, anti-racist armed community defense group — showed up open-carrying and secured the park where a number of us were gathered. The police may have stood by and done nothing as a neo-Nazi murdered one of us, but Redneck Revolt was there to offer protection — and the fascists steered clear of that park because of it.

In Stone Mountain, Georgia, when a group of us marched through the streets to celebrate the cancellation of a Klan rally on February 2, we were accompanied by local activists with rifles and ARs slung over their shoulders; the police kept their distance, which was an extraordinary sight for someone used to New York City's ultra-aggressive, hyper-militarized NYPD. As the black militant liberation group the Black Panthers showed back in the 1960s, as the Zapatistas showed in the '90s, and as anarchists in New Orleans showed during the aftermath of Katrina, when cops and other fascists see that they're not the only ones packing, the balance of power shifts, and they tend to reconsider their tactics.

To be honest, the thought of a world in which the state and their running dogs are the only entities with access to firearms sends a shudder down my spine.

Leftist gun ownership is about protecting marginalized communities

Not everyone should have access to guns — domestic abusers, for example, have proven by their actions that they cannot be trusted with that kind of responsibility — and not everyone needs it. No one without a significant amount of training should be handling a firearm at all, which is why I think designated community patrols made up of well-trained, highly trusted individuals who are chosen by and held accountable to said community (and who do not hold any or less power than anyone else due to their position) is a far better and more equitable defense model than messy "everyone gets a gun!" rhetoric.

I'm also not interested in creating a parallel cultural universe wherein balaclava-clad "gun bunnies" pose for the 'gram (I'd much rather shore up support for Rojava's all-women YPG Women's Defense Unit). I'm interested in reclaiming the notion of armed self-defense from those who have long used it as a cudgel to repress dissent and terrorize marginalized communities, and emphasizing its potential as a transformative tool toward collective liberation.

There is a long history of leftist gun ownership, and a concurrent theme of state repression against it. As author and anarchist Scott Crow notes, "our current gun control laws disproportionately hobble poor communities and communities of color." As far as the state is concerned, black people were never meant to own guns at all; the Second Amendment was intended in part as a means of controlling the enslaved black population and suppressing possible uprisings.

That sentiment has proven to have quite a bit of staying power. In 1967, the Black Panthers staged an armed demonstration on the steps of the California state courthouse and launched an occupation in protest of the Mulford Act, which banned open carry in the state. Said law was written by a Republican Assembly member in response to the Panthers' cop-watching "police patrols"; shortly after the protest, state legislators rushed to enact tougher gun control laws, with the full support of Republican President Ronald Reagan and the National Rifle Association.

In a stark contrast to its current bloodthirsty propagandizing, the NRA was once a firm proponent of gun control, and was a key component of the passage of 1934's National Firearms Act, which imposed restrictions on machine guns. That began to change in the 1960s; the NRA continued to support gun control, but its members — who had begun buying guns more for protection than for hunting — started to protest. The shift crystallized in 1977 with the ascent of Harlon Carter, a former immigration agent who'd killed a Mexican teenager in his youth and went on to shape what still fraudulently insists on referring to itself as "the oldest civil rights organization in the country" in his racist image.

Now the NRA's insistence that it fights for the civil rights of legal gun owners rings hollow. Lest we forget, Philando Castile — a legal gun owner — was still killed by cops, inches from his partner and child. He'd informed them that he was carrying, and it proved to be a death sentence.

With that, as well as the endless extrajudicial killings of black people by cops in this country in mind, some may wonder how anyone can responsibly suggest that more guns are the answer. I defer to the work of groups like the Huey P. Newton Gun Club, the now-defunct Black Women's Defense League (who approached the issue through a black feminist lens), and Denver's Brothas Against Racist Cops (BARC), who frame gun ownership as a civil rights issue and emphasize the need to protect their communities from those who wish them harm. As BWDL organizer Niecee X told Vice in 2017, "At the end of the day, we have a common goal, and that common goal is ultimately liberation, but at the very least the well-being and safety of our sisters."

We can't depend on the police to protect us

Marginalized communities know best how to keep themselves safe; depending on law enforcement to protect them from racist and fascist attacks is a losing strategy (especially considering how often that particular call is coming from inside the house). "The problem is guns, bullets come from guns," BARC founder Eric Randall told the Guardian in 2016. "But the main problem is who is holding the damn gun. No one had a problem with people killing us until we started arming ourselves."

I don't have all the answers, but the bare fact of the matter here is that violent right-wing extremism is a continuing threat that has been allowed to spread unabated in this country — a country that is itself rooted in the oppression of people of color. The police will not protect us; neither will the military, or well-meaning liberals, or your favorite oh-so-progressive politicians. It is not in their interest to do so, and recognizing that is imperative to the survival of those who reject this vile status quo.

The way that leftists engage with the subject of firearms, conflict, and power within our own communities needs to shift toward a place where guns are considered just another tool in our struggle for collective liberation, not the sole focus. Until we live in a world with no police, no military, and no state, we're at the mercy of all three — and I, at least, don't think it's fair to expect us to confront them empty-handed.

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