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Beyond Violence and Non-Violence

Civil War, Whiteness, and Reflections on Militant
Anti-Violence For Our Times

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Over the past seven months in the territory known as the united states, we have experienced popular insurrection. As we are all well aware, the city of Minneapolis lit up in response to the devastating murder of George Floyd in late May, expelling the police force from certain parts of the city and burning one of their precincts to the ground. There were others, of course: Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Ahmaud Arbery were among the names in the hearts and minds of militants across the territory in the early summer liberating commercial and financial districts and confronting the state head on. Then, as wildfires raged through the forests and mountains of the west towards the end of the summer, so too did the uprising bring the heat to urban, peri-urban, and suburban settlements throughout the country.

After the national uprisings of the first wave largely subsided in many cities except Portland and a few others, the brutal police attack on Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin reignited the flames. Jacob Blake broke up a fight in a Kenosha neighborhood and was returning to his car where his children were waiting when the police shot him in the back seven times. The utter disregard for the life of this man and his family in the context of the world historic uprising against police brutality showed the state to be cruelly indifferent and callous towards all except the logic of capital, which is inherently a white supremacist logic expressed through what has been termed a morbid libidinal¹ drive towards the destruction of Black life.

Around this time, in Lafayette, New Orleans police killed 31-year-old Treford Pellerin and in Minneapolis the state murdered someone else through suicide. All of these men were facing away from officers at the time of their death. In response, multi-racial mobilizations erupted once again as people demonstrated their disgust with our police state and its defense of pri-

¹ “How It Might Should Be Done,” Idris Robinson, *Red May TV*, August 4, 2020.

vate property. The proletariat and the underclasses² surged to reclaim what was theirs, the fruits of their labor, and destroy the property that dispossesses us of our livelihoods. In Seattle, Portland, Charlotte, Madison, Los Angeles, New York City, San Diego, Denver, Cincinnati, Lincoln, Omaha, Chicago, Carbondale, Rockford, Washington DC, Detroit, and Providence, among so many other places, people rose again in the second wave that, together with the initial uprisings in the early summer, made 2020 maybe the year of the most powerful national mobilizations against the state as manifest in the police in the history of this country. In Kenosha, the department of corrections was entirely burned to the ground, destroying all of the paperwork of people on parole and probation and effectively liberating hundreds and maybe thousands from state surveillance and control. As we will see, we might understand this as revolutionary, anti-violent praxis.

Some worry that the election of a liberal waving rainbow flags may quell the insurrectionary sentiment and practice of the past seven months. I do not have this worry. Despite the fact that the uprisings have largely died down in the past month, I don't think there's any reason to believe that people will continue to stay inside pacified and tranquilized because of a Biden victory. There are still very real threats and material conditions that will cause people to realize the necessity of

² "Underclasses" here and onwards refers to all people largely dispossessed, exploited, disposed of, extracted from, and murdered by the state and capital. The proletariat, of course, refers to the exploited, waged working classes. The burgeoning "precarariat," defined by its total lack of security, the riskiness and unpredictability of its social reproduction, gig work and partial semi- and/or informal work, may be included in the working class or along with the lumpen as an underclass. It goes without saying that we have since some time ago transcended Marx's initial formulation of the lumpen (unemployed, houseless, neurodivergent, differently abled, precarious, career or petty criminals, etc.) as lacking consciousness. These are of course fluid categories and the most important point is that all are fucked by this system in one way or another.

Washington, we are increasingly experiencing the material fragmentation of society described through the language of civil war. Polarization is necessary in the dialectical struggle, but we must also recognize, as we are advised by the Invisible Committee,¹⁷ that highly militarized civil war will lead to our demise. We do not want the central aspect of the struggle to become military confrontations principally fought via armaments and firepower.

We must organize our communities; we must forge the commune; we must engage in asymmetrical warfare; we must hack their systems, reclaim the resources they've stolen from us and the world, shut down their supply lines, blockade transit routes, occupy buildings and land, plant gardens, create independent networks, and clandestinely attack our enemies: the state, capital, and their reactionary forces. We must coordinate decentralized and semi-autonomous affinity groups to take action towards the sustainable reproduction of our own lives and livelihoods and the demise of those that oppress us. We have to seize the means of production and create our own. We have to build infrastructure to connect rural and urban areas to supply the insurrection. We have to take all measures to eviscerate the state's ability to commit violence against us and our world. We must harness the socio-political fragmentation of civil war with a radically militant, anti-violent praxis towards total revolution.

The George Floyd rebellions and the insurrections that followed were groundbreaking multi-racial uprisings that reveal the revolutionary nature of the proletariat and underclasses of the so-called united states. This must be just the beginning. We must be more organized and better equipped to defeat our enemies. We must reject their terms and their terrains of struggle. Civil war is inevitable; we must ensure that it opens the horizon to total revolution and not to reaction or fascism.

¹⁷ *The Coming Insurrection*, The Invisible Committee, 2007.

because of their positionality within the white supremacist, cis-heteropatriarchal system, more than others and in different ways, but what is to be gained collectively is so much more.

The shortsighted focus on giving up individual privileges, which in reality are nothing short of crumbly and conciliatory manipulations of the state and capital, is not innocuous: it can propel a counterinsurgent force that drives the type of reactionary reality that leads people to demagogues like Trump, to nativist and ethno-centric white nationalist positions and false “white” consciousness. The Tiki-Torch wielding white supremacists at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017 were literally chanting: “You will not replace us!” What a sad reality to believe that the wellbeing of others is based on, and will lead to, detriment to oneself. There is nothing more colonial and nothing more white than this view, as for centuries it has been the case that the wellbeing of white people *as white* (which does *not* imply their wellbeing as actual, whole people) depended on the degradation and death of Black people and other people of color *as such*. This is the ethno-essentialist reality that contemporary popular identity politics reproduces for us. Instead of categorizing our societally imposed identities in a compartmentalized stack that adds up almost mathematically to how oppressed we are or how other we are, we must understand the historic and dynamic composition of our race, gender, and sexuality in relation to the dynamics of class, labor, property, and power to emerge collectively as historical actors.

Horizons

Many might think that civil war is yet far off. Others think it’s already here. With the assassination of Michael Reinhoehl and confrontations between fascists and anti-fascists in the streets, which recently led to another shooting in Olympia,

going out to the streets and confronting our oppressors. Under who was probably billed as the most progressive president of all time, Barack Obama, we saw some of the most massive demonstrations in recent US history, from Occupy Wall Street to the initial Black Lives Matter protests and movements. And Biden is no Obama. There may be a moment of quiet during the holidays and the transition of power, but soon enough, as COVID cases continue to rise, as the financial impact of the coronavirus recession continues to impact communities, as police officers continue to murder, maim, dismember, and disrespect people of color and poor people, the populace will rise again. We are now more prepared as this most recent cycle of struggle took decisive steps towards cracking state legitimacy and exposing whatever forces hold us back from realizing our collective future.

Meanwhile, Trump is busy in office trying to kill as many people as possible, from accelerating the executions of death row inmates to putting in supreme court justices sure to uphold his ultra conservative non-ideological genocidal positions. He just moved to expand the death penalty from just lethal injection to the gas chamber and the firing squad. What is more fascist than a gas chamber and a fire squad? What is a greater expression of the state’s ability to kill you than having a dozen of its agents line up in front of you and shoot you to death? This is exactly what they just did to Michael Reinhoehl. They are trying to cover their asses and wash their hands.

Massive and nearly unprecedented multi-racial anti-police (and anti-state and anti-capitalist) mobilizations and consolidating reactionary forces and fascist state power call upon us to critically consider the relationship of the state to the people and communities and the role that violence plays in their dialectical struggle. Here we draw on the legacies of theorists like Max Weber³ and Walter Benjamin and revolutionaries like

³ “Politics as a Vocation,” Max Weber, 1919.

Frantz Fanon and George Jackson to gain insight into the material conditions that confront us, and our potential pathways towards freedom.

On Violence and Racialization

In contemporary political philosophy, the state is generally understood as an entity that has a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. To spare us an in depth investigation into the minutiae, we can understand that the legitimacy of the state's use of violence is substantiated legally, morally, and rationally. Legally, the state is allowed to kill, maim, and torture people in certain ways; morally, this is considered justified and the state is seen as ethical and honorable; and rationally we are told this is the only way to keep order in the world. Communities and individuals, on the other hand, are criminalized for the most minor transgressions against the order imposed by the state and enforced by violence. State sovereignty can be understood as the state's complete and exclusive control over all people and property within its delineated territory, which it executes through various material and epistemic means, including its monopoly on violence. The state expropriates and murders and does so in order to facilitate continuous capital accumulation. Communities and individuals must be controlled by the state through a monopoly on violence in order to protect and generate capital for the owning class. The state exists, to put it simply, to use violence to safeguard and augment the capitalist regime over and above the people.

We live in a world defined by racial capitalism, which is to say not capitalism plus a consideration of race, but an understanding of the inherent nature of racialization to the capitalist dynamic. Capitalism is built on an edifice of racial stratification and white supremacy is built into the logic and functioning of the capitalist system. Whiteness as a racial category within

wellbeing and livelihoods as human beings also depend on the overthrow of the state, and that to overthrow the state, they must repudiate and abolish whiteness. The white proletariat and underclasses in particular must realize the violence whiteness does *to them*. People racialized as white must enter the struggle to cast off the imposition on their being that is whiteness, and fight explicitly to no longer be white. The meaning of civil war towards the ends of social, political, economic, ecological, etc., that is, total, revolution in the united states is when a significant portion of the white population disavows their racial allegiance and joins the revolutionary Black and Brown proletariat and underclasses, leading to a direct confrontation with white reactionary forces and those of the owning class. This confrontation creates the possibility of total revolution and a sustained restructuring of our territory for autonomy and self-determination and against the state and capital.

Here it's worth mentioning some of the drawbacks of conventional identity politics. In its most popular iterations, identity politics reduces people's whole beings, their histories and their ancestors, their labor and class relations, the legacies of the forces that have propelled them through territories and communities, to a set of given identities usually superimposed culturally, designated based on a vague and superficial perception of phenotype and ancestry, and then sedimented nearly ontologically. Given this dynamic, people who are racialized as white, having been the racial beneficiaries of the inheritances of white supremacy and colonialism, are told that their principal role in realizing a more just world is to give up their white privilege for the benefit of racialized others. Within this framework, it seems as though their lives must somehow become worse for the betterment of people of color and Black and indigenous people in particular. This is a lie, and a dangerous one at that. The truth is that we are not free until we are all free, and each of our liberation depends on that of each and every other in all directions. Of course, we will have to sacrifice, and some,

sense of the term.¹⁵ In other words, when a Black person is killed by police, we know it's because they are Black. This collective consciousness and analytic framework, through years of oppression, exists. When a white person is killed by police, however, there is no popular analytic framework through which to understand this occurrence. It is rationalized as because the person did x or y thing or had a or b weapon, or it simply isn't thought about at all.¹⁶ The white epistemology is essentially atomizing, disarticulating material conditions from any community or legacy of territory or collective struggle, or violently distorting these histories and contexts to fit the narrative beneficial to the state and capital.

In reality, when a person who is racialized as white is killed by police there is a structural analysis that applies: it's because they were poor. For rich white people, it's virtually impossible to be killed by the state. People who are racialized as Black are, of course, disproportionately targeted by state violence as 1) a perpetual racialized underclass and surplus population managed to regulate labor relations, and 2) inherently criminal since their racialization as Black is based on being property, non-human, which they are not, making their very existence as human beings a transgression to the white gaze of the state and capital.

What must happen, then, is that people who are racialized as white must realize their own stake in this struggle; that their

¹⁵ This false "white" consciousness is embodied most visibly in overtly white supremacist, white nationalist, nativist, and ethno-fascist positions and groups like Identity Evropa, the Patriot Front, and, more complexly, the Proud Boys and conspiracy theories like the white genocide or extinction myth. In other ways, we may understand the false white consciousness to permeate and shape all aspects of our society and form the very foundation of this country as such, but a more in depth investigation of the its constitution is beyond the scope of these reflections.

¹⁶ Of course, reactionaries apply this same individual analytic to Black death, but more and more people, at least somewhat by this point, know better.

capitalism has consolidated around its synonymy with property, domination, and dispossession. Importantly, whiteness in this way is categorized as the pure antithesis of blackness, which has consolidated in the hegemonic episteme around its synonymy with criminality, savagery, and subversion. In its counter-position to the criminality and subversion of blackness, whiteness, therefore, is not only property, domination, and dispossession, but is those things in a rightful and justifiable way, legally, morally, and rationally. To put it in a complex but more complete way, we can understand whiteness, beyond its superficial illusion as a discrete racial category, as the ontological⁴ distillation and dispersion of the state into a totalizing structural and aesthetic social, political, and economic phenomenology. Basically, whiteness is the state; it represents the state and functions as its proxy. Blackness, on the other hand, is everything that poses a threat to the state. Blackness is the commons that whiteness expropriates. Blackness is the freedom that whiteness seeks to dominate for the sake of capital. Whiteness is the right to capital; blackness is the threat of its destruction. Whiteness is violence; blackness is anti-violence.

Blackness as a racial category was constructed to refer not to human beings, but to property, a means of production. Black peoples' simple existence, life, and freedom, then, is a transgression and subversion of the capitalist order. Racial capitalism, therefore, operates on the basis of an inherent contradiction: it is predicated upon the dehumanization of those upon which it depends for its existence. The Black proletariat and underclasses recognize this contradiction and recognize that as they are defined in direct opposition to the genocidal tendencies and necessities of capitalism, their teleology leads us to liberation. Understanding whiteness as the embodiment of capital, through the right to property and dispossession, and

⁴ Not that it is actually ontologically distinct, but that it seeks to make this claim.

the extension of the state's responsibility to protect it, it is no wonder that the state tacitly and increasingly explicitly supports white supremacist, white nationalist, paramilitary, and pseudo- or straight up fascist groups who are armed to defend their whiteness, meaning to act as the state in defending capital and in subjugating and murdering Black people and others deemed subversive.

Some of these individuals may operate within a libertarian ethos and we must just keep in mind that the state is not synonymous with the government.⁵ Others see themselves as self-made police and, essentially, they are. The state extends its monopoly on violence to certain citizens within racialized categories in order to more effectively maintain its dominance on a population. Hence, we have white ethno-nationalists and pseudo-fascists like Kyle Rittenhouse driving cars into demonstrations and bringing semi-automatic assault rifles to murder people in the street. Through the operation of whiteness, the state extends its sovereignty to people like Kyle, if only briefly.

Given this understanding of the racialized character of the state's monopoly on violence, might we understand the insurrections of the past year better through a framework beyond myopic binary polemics between violence and non-violence? Of course, 2020's uprisings were condemned as violent by conservative and liberal rhetoric alike and the abysmal news media because of the destruction of private property and the direct confrontations with state agents. However, might it be helpful to take the state's monopoly on violence literally and challenge the possibility of violence as such when perpetrated in opposition to the state? In what way might we understand that people in our bare humanity, as people, as individuals or collectives,

⁵ The state is a much deeper project, structurally and historically, than the constellation of bureaucratic pencil-pushing and electoral charades that is our government, but this is a topic for a different time.

unemployed, poor people, proletarians, and precariates and begin to take material risks alongside insurgents of color to disavow whiteness and its false gifts, to negate their deal with the devil and forge a deep class solidarity to depose power and overthrow the ruling class. This is what Michael Reineohl did. This is what John Brown did. This is what countless others have done in this most recent cycle of multi-racial rebellion.

For these people, state repression is severe, since they pose the most fundamental threat to the existence and reproduction of the state and capital. As George Jackson advises us,¹⁴ we must be prepared for this repression and use it to raise the consciousness of the people and build broader and deeper solidarities. Civil war means a fundamental ceasing of the status quo and a crack through society that restructures the way power had previously been organized. It necessitates a reorientation of the factions that have been ordered by and for contemporary and historical hegemony into a new orientation. This new orientation can be revolutionary or counter-revolutionary, but it is necessary.

To ground this discussion concretely, Trump, in an effort to delegitimize the uprisings, said that the police kill more white people than Black people. His intention was to inspire white people, and particularly his conservative white base, to say: "so there's no reason for Black people to be rising up like this!" How do we arrive at the point in which the fact that the police kill more white people than Black people makes white people say, instead: "Fuck the state, we gotta rise up too!"?

The fact is that whiteness itself precludes the latter response through its inherent allegiance with the state and capital, which precludes class consciousness and only allows for the development of a particular and illusory form of "white" collective consciousness, a false consciousness in the Marxian

¹⁴ *Blood In My Eye*, George Jackson, 1972.

Here we may return to our reflections on the constitution of whiteness, blackness, and racialization more generally. Whiteness as a racial category synonymous with property, domination, and dispossession does not, as we must all be well aware by this point, ensure people racialized as white wellbeing in any sense of the term. Instead, it might at certain moments advantageous to the state barely offer them a particular position of pawn on the chessboard of capital and imperialism, among such other pawns as those representing “exceptionalist” narratives and a laundry list of other embodiments and victims of epistemic warfare. Whiteness as the illusion of power, or the perception of “power over,”¹² locks the majority of people racialized as white into exploitation, precarity, dispossession, and inhumanity in the capitalist world-system. Whiteness is a false bargain weaponized by the state and capital to split society’s working and underclasses and ensure continued domination. Whiteness is violence *to all involved*.

When one’s social position as a worker or unemployed, a member of the proletariat, the precariat, or a lumpen, is conditioned by a racialized social positioning, revolution is predicated upon the rupture of these conditioning categories and the forging of solidarity as poor and working people. This cannot happen without an (anti)violent¹³ fragmentation of current social allegiances and categories. Whiteness, as the structural and phenomenological distillation of the state and capital synonymous with property, domination, and dispossession, is inherently opposed to and by definition precludes class solidarity and revolutionary possibility. People who are racialized as white, who are the majority in this country, must realize their common interest with Black and Brown comrades as workers,

¹² *Gewalt* may come to mind.

¹³ Again, there is the potentiality of anti-violence in this fragmentation, but it is not inherently so. We must work to ensure that the visceral fracturing of racial allegiances manifests in an anti-violent praxis. The forces of violence, on the other hand, will certainly be present.

can be harmful and cause harm, but that violence necessarily only emanates from the state, its mentality, and its cronies?

An in depth interrogation of the composition of violence historically in relation to the state and the people is beyond the scope of these inquiries and reflections, but we may broadly invoke Benjamin’s⁶ position that *violence* as such only arises when it enters into *moral* relations, and *moral* relations are constructed and conditioned by law and order, securing violence as immanent in law and order. Violence is then inherent to the state dynamic itself as the creator and guarantor of law and order as such. Hence, the state’s pure monopoly on violence, as law itself is created through, necessitates, and justifies violence. For our purposes, we might take up Benjamin’s postulation, resonant with that of revolutionaries like Fanon,⁷ that non-violence is not a possibility in relation to the state because of violence’s inherence to the state’s very existence and constitution. Understanding how morality, which conditions the appearance of violence as distinguished from non-violence, derives from law and order, which is created and maintained through state violence, we might question how a refusal of this law and order, a refusal of the morality of the state, leads to a praxis that transcends violence and non-violence and opens up explicitly anti-state horizons.⁸

To truly challenge the state’s monopoly on violence, to engage in a militant praxis to depose state power and obliterate its claims to legitimacy, to eradicate the possibility of domination, authority, and violence as such from our world, we cannot operate within the bounds of violence and non-violence. Violence may be revolutionary, in the sense of deposing one

⁶ “Critique of Violence,” Walter Benjamin, 1921.

⁷ *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon, 1961.

⁸ It is important to note, as well, that what is translated as “violence” in Benjamin’s writing is “*Gewalt*” in German, a term that can also refer to power, control, domination, or authority and carries connotations of legitimacy and “the public.”

state, but it will always lead to another. We have seen this throughout so-called revolutionary history. Benjamin outlines a number of different varieties of violence, from law-making, to law-preserving, to mythic and the infamous divine violence. Law-making violence, as well as mythic violence, may be the people's challenge to the perceived injustices of their current state and the exhortation to reform the current constitution of law and order (they can also be explicitly fascist). Law-making and mythic violence in this way, however, birth new forms of law and order, reproduce the logics of power and domination inscribed in the state, and seek to seize or reshape power as we know it. If we yearn to abolish the conditions for violence in our world, the conditions that facilitate genocide and hurl us towards obliteration, we must reject any reformulation of the state and reject the terms of its morality. This is what Benjamin identifies as the thrust of the proletarian general strike, a force operating outside the bounds of violence as conditioned by the state.⁹

Taking these inquiries seriously, then, in the same way as we may be familiar with the invocation that we cannot simply be non-racist in the face of racism but must be actively anti-racist, seeking to dismantle and uproot the core of racism in every way, we can come to the conclusion that we cannot simply be non-violent in the face of state violence but must be actively *anti-violent*. We must be anti-state violence, which means actively destroying the state's means and ability to enact violence. We must do all in our power to preclude the possibility of the state continuing to commit violence on people, communities, and territories. This means abolishing the state and crippling its ability to realize its monopoly on violence. We must harm the state; we must destroy its infrastructure; we must stop its agents and completely subvert and erode its power.

⁹ Although he mis-identifies it as non-violent. In reality, we might better see it as anti-violent.

This means burning down departments of corrections, police precincts, court houses, cop cars, and the like. This means destroying surveillance technology and attacking the police. This means rejecting reformist narratives and attempts to seize state power or capitalize on its void. These are all critical and decisive actions that rebels and militants showed us in practice over the summer and fall. Beyond narratives of violence and non-violence, then, we might see crucial elements of this national militant anti-state uprising as *anti-violent*. It yearns for a world beyond violence and recognizes the immediate and material steps necessary to get there.

Civil War

Careening through the dialectical (anti)violent¹⁰ struggle between the state and the people, what we are experiencing in the occupied territory known commonly as the united states in this moment is an increasing socio-political polarization. Fascists of all stripes, Proud Boys, and white nationalists and magots are taking the streets to demonstrate in support of their demagogue and the state's monopoly on violence. Anti-fascists are organizing militant resistance to preclude the state and reactionaries' ability to commit violence on our communities. Many view the dynamic that we are currently approaching as one of civil war.¹¹ Given the racialization of the class structure in the united states, it is postulated that revolution cannot occur without civil war, and that civil war, intimately related to the state's extension of sovereignty to certain racialized citizens, is in many ways an inevitability.

¹⁰ I put "anti" in parentheses because the struggle is essentially between violence and anti-violence, if anti-violence is in fact a present factor, which is not necessarily the case in every struggle.

¹¹ "Prelude to a New Civil War," Shemon and Arturo, *Ill Will Editions*, November 2nd, 2020.