

Guns, Cars, Autonomy

On The Finer Points Of The Recent Revolt in Ferguson, MO

Avalanche

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*The following is a transcript of a conversation between two friends shortly after the insurgency in Ferguson, Missouri. **Bart** was there and **Nikola** wasn't, but both have participated in anti-police uprisings in the last several years on the West Coast and in the Midwest. We're publishing this in an effort to explore the complexities of recent events in the United States, but also to contribute to the ongoing discussions and attacks against the existing order, everywhere.*

Nikola: One of the most interesting experiments by rebels in the Bay Area in the past years was the establishment of Oscar Grant Plaza (the home of Occupy Oakland also known as the Oakland Commune) as a police-free zone in the fall of 2011. The logistics of this experiment were actually fairly simple: whenever the police attempted to enter the encampment, a crowd would gather around them and force them to leave. At times this meant screaming, while at others it was merely a matter of informing the officers that they would have a riot on their hands if they intruded. People at the encampment took several measures to defend themselves from the presence of the police. Materially, communards stockpiled materials to build barricades and projectiles to be used against any unwanted police presence. They re-appropriated police barricades for their own purposes and built barricades of their own. They tore up the paving stones of the plaza to be hurled at police raiders. Culturally, the police-free environment reproduced itself by fostering hostility toward the police, and a culture of street-based resistance to them. When the camp fell under siege, the cops and their stations fell victim to a chaotic wave of retribution. As demonstrations and riots against the police reach their limits in time, we consistently ask ourselves how to sustain these suspensions of order longer than a few days. One possibility is that the cultivation of zones free from the police could provide an answer this dilemma.

If by maintaining a police free zone, the Oakland Commune offered a contribution to the struggles of everyone who works to create territories against the police – to make their homes, neighborhoods and cities entirely hostile to police occupation – it could be argued that the recent uprising in Ferguson significantly expanded upon this experiment. It seems as though the revolt in Ferguson is unprecedented in recent years, if not in many peoples' lifetimes, in terms of the duration but also the intensity of what happened. It also appears that, similar to the situation in Oakland, people in Ferguson were able to seize space and to create a police-free zone in a way more combatively than had been done before.

Bart: I would agree to a degree. I think there were steps taken towards creating a liberated space, or an autonomous zone. In general, I think a riot is a situation where a space is opened that is free of police or the State's laws. So every night that there was rioting there were these temporary lawless and police free zones opened up. What made this different from other riots though, is how sustained the rioting was. Also how after three days of rioting, people reclaimed the burned down QT as central hub of activity for the uprising. I think the significance of the QT was that it expanded the autonomy and lawlessness of the rioting at nights into the daytime. It would be dishonest to say the lawlessness and anti-police sentiment of the riots completely transferred to the QT. There were times when high ranking police officers came into the parking lot to make statements to the press. But it did at least create an environment that was incredibly hostile to them, and usually any time a squad car or low ranking officer came into sight, they were attacked or shouted out of the area. It was obvious to the police and to the participants of the rebellion, that the QT was our space, not the space of the police or the capitalists.

Nikola: It does feel like its easier for people who weren't there to see the more spectacular things – the looting, the arsons, the molotov cocktails – but unfortunately the efforts to create space without police is harder for people to see from afar. It seems obvious that this was really central to the ferocity of what was happening. What did it feel like to be at the QT? What was that space like? Also what were some of the more specific ways that people prevented the police from coming there or other areas that had been carved out?

Bart: Well for the most part the QT was this incredibly festive and joyful place in the daytime where people were doing graffiti, driving up with giant barbeques and giving away hundreds of hot dogs; everyone brought water to share, nothing cost money, everything was free. It be-came a weird cultural center as well. There were rappers, people break dancing, a teenage step-crew came in. There was a joyful street fair atmosphere at times. At the same time people would be handing out masks for the night, sharing stories from the nights before. At one point I hung out with a man who shared pictures of all the shoes he'd looted the night before and we traded stories. People were talking about what to do if they gas this way, what to do if they come from that way. So while it was this festive and celebratory atmosphere it was clearly also a space where people were forming strategies and talking and connecting. Since it was the central gathering point, everyday you'd come back and you'd start to see people and recognize faces; maybe you'd have talked to someone the night before or you'd engaged in something with them and you'd be able to see them again and talk; you'd begin to form relationships and share ideas. That was really exciting.

Toward the night the police would eventually push towards the QT, but the QT itself was about half a mile from where most of the conflicts happened, so often they'd only be able to reach it after hours and hours of street fighting. It took them so long because they were terrified of coming into the crowd, especially during the day when there would be thousands of people around. The St. Louis area has a history of police being shot at, and police are very aware of that. The police know people are armed and willing to shoot. From the beginning of the uprising, rebels made this very clear: one of the first things to happen after they killed Mike Brown was shots being fired into the air. And then Sunday, the first night of rioting, during the looting, people were again firing shots. I can think of one particular situation where the police tried to push in, and people formed a line to fight them off. As the standoff was ending, the police cowardly gassed the crowd and left. Instantly there were gunshots at the police all up and down that mile stretch of road. You could hear gunshots everywhere, and see people jumping out of cars to shoot; shooting at

them, shooting in their general direction. People learned that you didn't even need to shoot at them, but simply shooting in their general direction or making it known that you were armed was enough to keep the police back. So the guns kept them at bay. It was the first time in my life that I've ever seen that level of blatant armed action in a riot or demonstration or whatever you want to call what was going on up there.

Secondly, the other thing that I'd never seen before, specific to this situation was the car culture and the way cars were used in a few ways to confuse the police, block them and also just tie them up. West Florissant, the major street where all the rioting and looting and fighting was happening, is a four lane highway. And so up and down the strip people were using it as a cruising ground with countless cars packed with people, blaring music, with half a dozen kids on the hood, honking horns, and everyone screaming. This created a situation where it was impossible for the police to drive into the crowd; the cars were so dense. And also the general noise added to the insanity of the situation, so it was totally nuts to be out there. It was a situation that was completely uncontrollable and they had no idea what to do. If they came in on foot, they were attacked; if they came in cars, the cars would get stuck and they were attacked. Also a lot of the guns were kept in peoples' cars, so people were mobile and armed. At times cars were also weapons. On one night cars actually crashed into police lines. People would use the cars as barricades; everyone would drive and park their cars across the street and form lines behind them. I remember at one point two young girls parked their cars hood to hood blocking all four lanes of traffic and on the other side of the cars, facing the police, everyone had guns. The cars were used as barricades to shoot from, as a means to stay mobile, as celebratory parade vehicles, and in general a way to confuse and intimidate the police. So I really think these two things particular to Ferguson, the gun culture and the car culture, helped to create and keep this autonomous police-free zone. Not to mention the fact that there were thousands of people participating.

Nikola: I'm under the impression, from a few accounts, that it wasn't just the QT that the police were afraid to enter. I've heard that they mostly limited their activity to West Florissant and that there were certain streets and certain neighborhoods they wouldn't enter.

Bart: That's definitely true. Particularly the neighborhood where Mike Brown lived, Canfield Apartments, off Canfield Ave. The police would not drive down that street. People quickly learned that, but enforced that also. And so as the night went on and the police would force people off the main strip, people would fall back a block or half a block and that was often where people would shoot at the police from. They'd drive down the strip and get shot at from the side streets. Anytime a cop did come into the side streets, people would fall back further into the neighborhoods. If a cop tried to follow further they'd get shot at from the bushes, from the houses, from cars. People burned trash in the streets so they couldn't come in. And so it was a repeated thing, night after night, that people would be fighting in west Florissant until the overwhelming police presence (including teargas and rubber bullets) forced them off the main street. They'd then either fight to keep the police out of the neighborhoods or they'd wait until the gas cleared to go fight on the street again.

Nikola: Thinking back to the Oakland Commune encampment, it is obvious that creating a space where police couldn't enter was crucial to that struggle. But what I found especially wonderful was that it was more than just a defensive zone; that it became a base of sorts from where other attacks could be carried. On several occasions demonstrations would leave from the camp; because media cameras weren't allowed in, it was relatively safe for people to change clothes and put on masks there. On probably a dozen instances in the first few weeks of the

camp, nearby police offices and vehicles were trashed. Do you feel that the space carved out in Ferguson, at the QT and elsewhere, helped to spread offensive maneuvers, beyond being a space to gather and to defend?

Bart: I think there were bits of both. There were points at night where people would be there, and would get organized to go loot somewhere further away. And maybe people would have taken the initiative to do that even if they hadn't been in Ferguson on that strip, but I really do think that everyone being there together allowed people to begin to act collectively. We were out there one night and people started chanting "Walmart! Walmart!" and everyone started running to their cars, doing donuts, and peeling out. Walmart was four miles away from where the riots were taking place, and so without the context of a place where people could discuss "oh we should go loot Walmart!" and feel safe and comfortable enough to do that, I don't think that would have happened. In some ways it did allow for that type of spreading. But, in other ways I think it didn't, because people were so attached to this space they'd liberated (and it did really feel like a liberated space) that people couldn't imagine expanding or leaving. People were so focused on the QT and Canfield and West Florissant that it seemed hard to imagine the rioting spreading to somewhere else. That space had become so important to people, and because of that people were willing to do a lot to defend it. So to a degree it was used as a space to plan out attacks or expropriations in other parts of the city, but the rebellion never really spread far beyond that central area.

Nikola: Its inspiring to hear you talk about part of Ferguson as a liberated space because this is the same way that many of us thought of the Oakland Commune encampment. The first thing that happened when we took the plaza was to change the name to Oscar Grant Plaza, and with that it was almost as if a spell had been cast over the space. Things felt different when you were within it. A lot of people talked about time feeling different when in that space; the concerns and pressures of their relationships and jobs and all the things that would usually weigh on them seemed to melt away when people walked into the camp. I think that in that space more things felt possible and to me that was something I haven't experienced elsewhere – this immense opening up of possibilities and the ability to talk to people in a way that previously felt impossible. It feels like an entirely different world, so far removed from a life of work and responsibilities and indignities. In a sense this is maybe what's at stake in creating spaces like this: creating magic places where we can discover new things about ourselves.

Bart: Definitely. In a lot of ways it felt similar. One of the small roles anarchists had was to push for a name change for the QT; people start-ed calling it Mike Brown Plaza, sort of reminiscent of the occupation movement. It was clear knowledge that we hadn't been given the right to assemble or protest or whatever. Everyone knew we could only do what we were doing because we had taken it. And because of that knowledge that we had taken the power away from the police, Mayor and Governor, the space became incredibly important to people. So yeah, a similar thing happened. Time didn't make sense there. Some-how you'd be there and all of a sudden eight hours would have disappeared. I remember one night, we were all hanging out, there had been a lot of looting, the liquor store was on fire and we were all just sitting around watching it burn and this man said "fuck, what time is it!? I have to go to work tomorrow." Our friend laughed because she also had to go to work in the morning and she asked, "do you really want to know?" and he replied "no, fuck that; time doesn't matter. Fuck work, that doesn't matter." and he just went back to partying. So yeah, things changed, and like you said, the ability to talk to people really changed. St. Louis is an incredibly segregated place where racial tension is visceral and

real, but up there the tension eased. People could see who was there. People could see, oh you're here, I'm here too, this is a thing we share in common and can bond over. This was especially true between the militants in the uprising. A mutual respect was developed between people who were fighting. So it became much easier to talk to people. These identities, these constrictions that society puts upon us to keep us separate, began to fade away, even if for the briefest moments. Obviously there were still pretty intense dynamics around race and gender or peoples perceived backgrounds or motivations, but in some way it did begin to dissolve.

Nikola: Thinking back again to the Oakland Commune, and how important the camp was in creating these types of possibilities and relationships, it becomes obvious that the downside of course is that so much seemed to disappear after the camp was raided and taken from us. Once the police enforced a total militarized occupation of the space and made it impossible to reclaim, it did really feel like the beginning of the end. From there it felt like any attempt to create similar spaces or keep up momentum were outright crushed. So I'm wondering how the eventual fencing off and re-occupation (by police) of the QT affected what was going on in the riots, if at all.

Bart: I mean it could be a coincidence, but it felt real that the day they fenced off the QT (ten days or so after the initial rioting), was the first night that social peace returned to the streets of Ferguson. Once they'd taken this space away people didn't feel the ability to congregate and lost this very socially important space. So a lot of the combativeness disappeared. Also people were tired and the national guard was on the streets, and so this combined with recuperation by leftists and religious leaders helped to end things. It was a really big blow to the uprising to lose the QT, and then lose the streets of West Florissant.

Nikola: For me, this brings up the questions of anarchists' relationship to spaces like these where previously unimaginable types of rebellions are playing out. Others who've participated in moments like these, where the activity of everyday people vastly outpaces what anarchists are doing, have posed the question of how to act alongside them or not. It seems as though there are two ideas. One of which is to be there, among others, to share the knowledge and tactical perspectives we have; to be within the crowd helping to push things where we can. Another idea is that rather than participating in the streets in these specific places (the plazas, etc), we could be advancing our own projectuality elsewhere and could find other openings and moments to act and carry out our intentions. Based on your experiences in Ferguson, how do you think about this question?

Bart: I don't think this is really a dichotomy where you have to choose one or the other. In Ferguson I think it was incredibly important to be up there, particularly as a largely white group, to take steps to dissolve the segregation and racial tension that exists in this city by acting in solidarity with others; also to make connections. Also many of us have never experienced this type of rebellion and I think it was important for people to get that sort of experience in the streets; to experience what it feels like to collectively struggle and fight back. I don't think that necessarily means that people shouldn't do other things too. When we were up there, we found ourselves rapidly outpaced by other rebels. So even if you believe in an anarchist vanguard, that wasn't a possibility because people were already so much more advanced than what most anarchists were prepared for. Also, due to certain racial tensions, those perceived as white outsiders needed to limit their ways of engaging, to follow rather than take initiative. It was such a tense environment that things could really go any direction in any moment, which felt really weird. At the same time it felt amazing to be up there with people struggling together. So I do think it was very important for us as anarchists to be participating in the heart of the uprising.

In addition though, as anarchists we have developed this set of specialized skills we've learned over the years as anarchists in the streets, and we should be thinking about how to use these skills in critical moments in different parts of the city that could have a big impact or help things to spread to another place. One of the cooler things that happened in a different place, involved all the gas and pepperspray supplies being shipped in. There was a distribution center in Minnesota where wildcat workers refused to ship any gas to Ferguson. Not that this is necessarily specific to anarchists, but it is interesting to note that there are key places where our enemies can sustain a critical blow by not getting the supplies or reinforcements they need in the streets. It can limit their capability to act. I think anarchists should be doing both, we should be in the streets and we should be thinking of ways to help the situation expand and last longer; to sabotage the attempts of the police to regain social peace; to imagine ways things can spread; to watch and study the city for other sparks that could be fueled; showing signs of disruption all over the city, even graffiti or small attacks – everything was noticed in those weeks.

Nikola: It seems like some of the other things anarchists can do in these situations include encouraging people to wear masks, attacking surveillance systems, trying to undermine more sinister or subtle types of recuperation or leftist attempts to seize control. These things are almost constants that we should expect and have some strategic perspective around.

Bart: I can say for sure that anarchists did create a culture – almost single handedly – of wearing masks. Where the first few nights people were openly saying “why would I wear a mask!? I'm proud of what I'm doing, I want people to know I'm doing this” while committing crazy felonies, later in the week it was almost a fashion statement to have a shirt tied around your head. I think another way anarchists helped to create a safer space for people to engage in more combative action was by attacking the media crews and pushing them out of the streets, or at least back towards police lines. Before this happened there would be dozens of film crews, taking footage of looters, many of whom had no masks on, or had visible tattoos.

Nikola: It seems like there are potentials when these situations erupt—both in the epicenter and at the margins—for all sorts of people, including anarchists, to find some sort of individual self-realization and also to push their own projects further. In doing so they might also help to spread the social conflict and I think it is at the intersection of these possibilities that some of the most exciting things happen. It feels pretty clear that a lot of what we've talked about already has been in one way or another about identity and I think that its in these conflictual situations that we can actually understand how identity works against us. A basic contention that a lot of people coming out of struggles in the Bay Area, whether the Oscar Grant rebellion or the occupations, is the idea that identity is a tool of the state used to keep people apart and to enforce the social roles that people are expected to play. It also becomes clear that, in these moments of rupture, identities start to break apart and collapse. As a consequence, this is where the state tries to regain control first, through the logic of identity and through a reimposition of the identity categories that were previously falling apart. It seems, from your account and others, that this was also at play in Ferguson.

Bart: This is definitely true, and I think the state in the Bay has perfected the modern day use of Identity as a form of control, especially in situations like the Oscar Grant Rebellion. Having watched what happened there, it is really interesting to see the parallels, word for word, in how the state responded here. After the first night of rioting, almost instantly the Sheriff came out and said “this is a small group of white, anarchist, outside agitators that came in and stirred things up”. To me it was obvious that this was an attempt to try and preemptively put a stop to any

sort of racial unity. Historically, racializing situations has been one of the first measures the state takes to put down rebel-lions. Whether it was class rebellions against the state in the sixteen and seventeen hundreds or anti-police rebellions in the past decade. The term “outside agitator” was actually first used in the US in the 60’s by a southern Sheriff to describe whites coming down to collaborate and struggle with blacks against segregation. Being in this uprising was the closest I’ve ever felt to people taking real steps to break apart their identities based on race, gender, class, anarchist, etc. Obviously these identities weren’t actually gone, and there were still many dynamics at play based on them, but they started to weaken. And so that was one of the first things that the state (and the many micro-states, or anyone who sought to gain control of the situation) attempted to re-instate. It was visible when the police talked about ‘white anarchists’ and instantly some leftists groups picked up this same language. There was also a strong push by more ‘radical’ groups such as the Nation of Islam, and the New Black Panther Party, to racialize things. They were in the streets trying to push a line that this was a black issue, and it was a struggle for black power. Unlike the leftists and politicians, these groups were in the streets every night, but it was still obvious that their attempts to racialize things was only to gain control of a crowd and push their political agenda.

Nikola: It seems like gender was also a key factor. I’ve heard accounts of Al Sharpton and others calling for “strong black men” to step forward to help police the demonstrations, and for the young men participating in the riots to “grow up and be a man” by helping to end the rioting, or also calling for women to go home “to be with their children”. It seems like gender was an obvious axis along with race that politicians used to try to put things down.

Bart: Yeah, it was actually really funny to see the back and forth of these same groups. The leftists who were trying to gain control would be out there talking about how all the rioters were young men and there weren’t elderly people or women in an attempt to discredit the riots. Firstly, this just wasn’t true, there were so many types of people out there fighting. Even funnier was that their response was to create things like Al Sharpton’s ‘disciples of justice’ who were 100 black men that he called on to control things. They were really pushing these gender roles that women needed to go home or fall to the back, “there are women and children out here, its dangerous” or one night the Nation of Islam was out there saying “take your women home!” When you step back and look at the situation its apparent that the people discrediting the riots for being largely men in their 20’s were either the same parties or working with the same parties who were trying to push women and children off the streets at night, trying to stop the fighting in the name of defending the “women, children and elderly” that were in the streets. But the thing is, in the streets at night, when it was conflictual, people just weren’t taking it. Any time people were trying to racialize things or enforce strict gender roles that men should be the combatants and women should go home, people would actively refuse it, shout at them, tell them to go home, say “fuck you, this is our struggle”.

Nikola: There’s a really subtle way, that is also very intentional, where we can see in the Bay and in Ferguson, where the state, the media, the leftists, the police, are all pushing the same line. It is an attempt to take this crazy racialized violence, this day to day campaign of extermination against primarily young black men, and to turn it into this limited “issue” about a few racist cops or the need for a handful of small reforms to policing or prosecution. In doing so they mystify the fact that race isn’t an ‘issue’ but that race and racial violence is the foundation of...

Bart: American society!

Nikola: Yeah, all the misery that is inflicted on people here.

Bart: Yeah, it makes sense why they immediately try to reduce things to an issue. Because these rebellions and moments like this really break open the potential for what can happen. People were talking about how this isn't an issue, it isn't just about Ferguson, it isn't a black and white thing. It's a people versus the blue, it's a systemic thing. This is way past an issue, it was a breaking point. This wasn't just an antipolice riot, it was an insurrection against dominant society, against the way things exist, against class, against white supremacy. It was no longer just about a bad cop, or justice. What people want is freedom, and up there we were starting to figure out how to take steps to get that. And this is terrifying to the leftists and the politicians and anyone with any sort of comfort in this world that they might lose. So it makes sense that these groups would join forces in order to calm things down and restore peace. The left talks about taking steps toward reform and all this bullshit, but people could see through it, that it was an attempt to push them back into the same 'ole cages they always are in.

Nikola: With that, another way of thinking about the question is the look at the question of anarchist identity. And that in the same way that the gendered and racial barriers that keep us apart and prevent us from acting in certain ways, the anarchist identity also dissolves in these moments. On the one hand you have all sorts of people, anarchists or not, spreading anarchic activities, arson, looting. And then on the other hand you have all sorts of people who weren't anarchists being called such by the media. So for those of us who are anarchists and choose to participate in these struggles, it almost stops mattering who is an anarchist and who isn't. Or maybe it matters to us, but in the broader sense doesn't.

Bart: Ideally I'd like to think that the anarchist identity would also dissolve in a situation like this. When there's an uprising it makes sense to lose one's identity; Not to lose one's ethics or ideas or desires or the tensions one holds with the world from an anarchist perspective, but to lose the way that any identity can be used against us. We saw this play out when the state labelled people as anarchists and tried to use that to separate militants out in the street. I think it's important to let go of these identities and let go of any social baggage we have from participating in an anarchist scene, for better or worse. One thing that I can think of, and by no means do I intend to talk shit, but I can remember during the London riots, a situation where the whole country is burning, the FAI claimed responsibility for an attack against two or three cars. And while I highly respect the attack and the individuals who risked their safety to carry this out, it doesn't make sense in my mind to isolate oneself and set oneself apart in that way. We should be acting, but we shouldn't be acting in order to separate ourselves from people. So yeah, I think it was important for the anarchist identity to dissolve alongside all other identities.

Nikola: In a certain sense, moments like these are clarifying in terms of why we fight and why we do what we do. I'd say that for anarchists, especially those of us who desire insurrection, what is at stake is not a fight to affirm an anarchist identity or ideology, but to actually fight for anarchy.

Bart: Definitely.

Nikola: The final thoughts and questions I have are about what's to come in the coming months and what's to happen now. The space that was created in Ferguson is gone but the tensions that led to this revolt still exist. And the thousands of people who participated in this revolt carry with them their experiences and the self-transformations they went through. All that continues, and so it seems intuitive that things will continue also. It is just a matter of how we can make things spread and also how those of us not in Ferguson can express our solidarity when it is needed.

Bart: Firstly, I just don't know. The city feels like it will never be the same after this uprising. Things feel different and the tensions are still there. In ways it feels like a steam cap was blown and a little bit of anger was released over the twelve days of rioting. It is hard to connect with people because of how spread out and alienated the city is, but I think its important to keep showing signals of disorder, having visible attacks and signs of resistance. Also the Left is finally starting to get a foothold and organize these large days of action. These are totally recuperative, but at the same time there are still large groups of people who refuse to be controlled by these politicians and activists, and so it makes sense to engage in them. Whether simply to disrupt or push them in different directions. I also think it makes sense to act in conjunction but outside of these events. We are at a very crucial moment, where everything is being noticed, and that gives us a situation where, as anarchists, we might be able to introduce new analysis, new tactics and hopefully spread things into new terrains, both literally and figuratively. As for what anarchists elsewhere can be doing... while I think solidarity at-tacks are always impressive and wouldn't discourage them, I think that on a broader sense only anarchists see them. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, it gives us warmth and strength to see others attacking, but I think it makes sense for rebels to think about how things might spread and how they can act in ways that inspire rebellion in their own places. If not also acting in ways that could impact or deter the efforts of police in Ferguson. So I'm not entirely sure how this can look, but I know people are creative.

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