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In the three weeks since anarchists helped shut down the largest fascist rally the US has seen in decades, the pendulum has swung back and forth between new public support for anti-fascist organizing and a dishonest, fearmongering reaction spearheaded by the extreme center that plays right into the hands of far-right elements in the police and FBI. Now, fascists are shifting towards a strategy of decentralized attacks while the Trump administration prepares a new racist offensive against nearly a million residents of the United States. It's more pressing than ever to learn from our victories in order to strategize for the next round. We spoke with a participant in the front lines of the clashes in Charlottesville about why an under-equipped anti-fascist contingent was able to defeat a more numerous body of fascists, how to halt the creep towards authoritarianism, and what courage means in these struggles.

In Charlottesville, on Friday night, August 11, if the torchlit march had not encountered any protesters around the monument or elsewhere—if it had been able to proceed without meeting any

opposition—what do you think the consequences would have been?

Well, it's easy to be doctrinaire when you're speculating. I mean, any time fascists do something provocative without opposition, it sets a new baseline for them. It's like, "Oh, marching with torches and chanting 'Blood and Soil' is a pretty low-key thing to do, let's always do that at our gatherings from now on. It's fun and easy!" But I think it strengthens their movement even more when they encounter opposition that they can easily defeat, which is what actually happened on Friday. If that had been the only event in Charlottesville, or if the rest of the weekend had gone the same way, it would have been a gift to their movement.

I try to imagine the perspective of a fresh young recruit. You know he's posturing and puffing himself up, but he's nervous too. He feels awkward putting on that white polo shirt, he feels nervous carrying a torch at first. But then he sees everyone around him doing the same thing, his voice is amplified by a hundred voices saying the same words as him, and that nervousness turns into elation. So right there, his body learns an important lesson: "When I feel scared, these are the people who make me safe. When I feel weak, these are the people who make me strong." This is like church, you know. That whole process happens even if not a single counterprotestor shows up. He already knows that most of the world is against him.

If there's tangible, physical opposition, the nervousness is going to be more intense, but so is that gut-level lesson learned from a victory. So when we confront these things, we should recognize that we're raising the stakes. I think groups like SPLC (Southern Poverty Law Center) fixate on that side of things when they try to discourage people from counterprotesting. I think their attitude is, we can't do anything about these young men's acculturation into hate groups, but we can deny them opportunities to really get hardened. Or maybe they think that acculturation happens in internet

that kind of mindset, it leaves some scars. I just can't think about this question in an abstract way.

Some people talk about courage like it's just a matter of inner righteousness or integrity or something. I disagree with that idea. You can be a person of great integrity, ready to go through the fire for your beliefs, but when it comes time to use the weapons at your disposal you're too hesitant to make a contribution. Our understanding of courage should capture that readiness to step forward and act without guarantees. That's why I say it's about victory.

This isn't about violence versus nonviolence. Some of the most courageous people I saw in Charlottesville were not throwing punches; they were dressing wounds, or praying, or standing solitary in front of a line of advancing riot cops. Those people were all using the weapons at their disposal.

I guess the risk is that courage alone can't guide you. I mean, courageous soldiers can fight imperialist wars, but that doesn't make them right. Honor and sacrifice can fuel a spiral of meaningless violence. Sometimes the things that make you hesitate when you shouldn't are also the things that make you reassess your direction when really you should.

If you want to back way up and look at it, courage is a warrior value, and anarchism is a peace movement. I mean that in the very simple sense that it's about people treating each other right without being forced to. That's peace. Obviously, there's fighting involved too. I'm just not convinced that the things that make us strong in the face of adversity are always the things that make us good to one another, or that being ready for war makes you ready for peace. Maybe that just comes back to making sure that your vision of victory is really worth dying for.

It's a defensive struggle. Defense only works if you're poised to counterattack, and our best counterattack will always be liberatory social movements.

What I do see is that our experiences of struggle deeply shape our imagination. That's true whether your experience is rioting, or community organizing, or fighting Nazis, or just daily survival in a world that wants to erase you. You start to imagine the whole revolution as just whatever struggle you're used to, but on a larger scale. And then maybe you're just limited by your learned instincts and the culture you build up around them.

That may be a problem for the generation that's been radicalized in the Trump era. There's the potential for a kind of creeping authoritarianism on the left, the revolutionary left I mean. You know, that whole mythology of the militant… it can obscure the necessity of struggle against—not the state of today, but the state of tomorrow.

But you know, we have a choice about that. We don't have to be determined by our experiences, even if we're shaped by them. We can have a more expansive vision of struggle. We can choose what we're struggling for.

Clearly, it takes a lot of courage to physically confront armed fascists. What does courage mean for antifascists? What kind of courage should we be trying to cultivate? What are the risks of focusing on courage as a value?

Courage is being willing to die for the sake of victory. That's a straightforward definition. And that is exactly what happened in Charlottesville. One of us died, and we had a victory. That might sound inspiring to some people, but to me it's fucking nauseating, it makes me want to cry. I mean, I didn't know Heather, I don't know if she was preparing herself for the possibility of death. She's not around to tell us if she wants to be a hero. I do know that some of us entered that weekend consciously accepting that we might die, or that our comrades and loved ones might die. When you take on

forums, not torch marches. I don't know. I think anarchists sometimes understand this process better than sociologists, because we've been through something similar, in subcultural spaces or street marches or whatever.

Also we're not static. Even when we take a loss that strengthens the movement we're fighting against, it can strengthen us too. Friday night seriously shook people, but it probably made us more determined and smarter on Saturday. I almost want to say wiser. We knew exactly what kind of victory we needed to deny them, and we knew we would have to do it without the advantage of physical superiority. If no one had showed up to oppose them on Friday, maybe we would have made worse mistakes the next day, against a sharper adversary. There's no way to know.

Why were anti-fascists not as prepared to respond on Friday night? Can you say anything about the motivations of those who still chose to confront the torchlit march?

The details of that march were announced much later, that's the main thing. Also I think some kinds of counter-protestors are always going to stay away from a nighttime event like that, because it's more likely to be crazy. Some people were prepared, but it was just different situations.

I do think Friday highlighted one weakness we have right now, which is that we don't share much common culture around assessing our group capacity in the heat of the moment. I've seen this at other events too. Some of us are used to quietly running the numbers when we're in a crowd, asking ourselves, you know, what are the odds we can successfully unarrest people if there are issues with the police? Or what are the odds we can physically prevent this group of white supremacists from reaching their destination? That kind of thing. And adjusting the approach accordingly. Other people, maybe people who aren't drawing on the same kinds of street experience or think of their goals differently, seem to approach those questions morally rather than situationally.

Like, we must not let them reach their destination, therefore we shall not let them reach their destination.

I'm not saying there's one single correct way to look at it, but if we're not having those conversations constructively outside of these crisis moments, it's not good. Those conversations are part of building a strong movement culture.

On Saturday, it appeared that counter-demonstrators were outmatched by fascists in terms of muscle mass, equipment, numbers, and terrain. It was a terrifying situation. Yet anti-fascists did unexpectedly well in the confrontations. What do you attribute this to?

You mean we did unexpectedly well, right? I think antifascists had a deeper understanding of diversity of tactics. The presence of counterprotestors with a personal commitment to nonviolence was important, I think, and so were the diverse approaches of those who did use physical force, I mean as far as acting more offensively or defensively.

Unite the Right was all about image. They wanted three things: look like victims of antifa/"SJW" aggression, look like friends of the police, and look like they were winning the physical battle in the streets. I think all those wires got crossed in Charlottesville because of the diversity of their opposition.

Side note, we made a conscious decision not to do Saturday in black bloc. I think that helped in the specific circumstances.

So diversity of tactics, yeah. A lot of these alt-right people are scared of confrontation, even though they fantasize about power. You could tell that made it hard for them to psychologically switch gears; by the time they figured out how to deal with one kind of counterprotestor, the situation had changed and they had to go back to square one. They had to think too hard. They didn't know if they were going to get punched or prayed at. And the whole time they're getting pelted with paint balloons, and they just look silly.

Then you had macho types who reacted to that paralysis by just going ham, charging in swinging by themselves. That was

Charlottesville, and I'm sure that's what his centrist opposition will do when they try to replace him.

There's two ways to respond as an anti-authoritarian. You can double down on the irreconcilable social conflicts, and say it's our job to bring them out into the open and fight consciously from the side of the exploited, you know, refuse an oppressive social peace. Or you can dispute the state's claim that it can resolve people's conflicts better than we can resolve them on our own. Who does it serve when we perceive our conflicts as irreconcilable, and why do we have to listen to those voices?

Right now, people like Bannon are pushing a vision of a society threatened by deep, irreconcilable conflicts, but they're not the conflicts a leftist would talk about. They're citizen vs. alien, West vs. Islam, and so on. We can push for a different way of seeing the structural divisions in our society, and put our bodies on the line for those beliefs, but if that's all we do we're giving a lot of ground to authoritarians who want to be the neutral party. I'm talking about mom-n-pop authoritarians, not just the deep state. So I think we have to bring the idealist side of anarchism with us too, don't just challenge the analysis of our society's real conflicts, but challenge the state's claim to protect us from each other. Challenge the belief that we have always needed protection from each other, and always will.

In Europe, one of the anarchist critiques of antifascism has been that it obscures the necessity of struggle against the state, capitalism, and other forms of domination. Do you see this as a risk in the US? Why or why not?

What do you mean "obscures the necessity of struggle"? Like we imagine that as soon as the last Nazi is killed, capitalism and the state will come crumbling down of their own accord, and trans women won't have to worry about getting randomly murdered for their gender? I don't see that risk. If you just mean that antifascism can tie down anarchists and keep them from prioritizing the work they really believe in, well of course it can.

Final Solution. We should also remember, again, that clashes like the ones we've been seeing can harden these kids. So the ones who don't drop out because of fear or shame are becoming a more dangerous kind of cadre. The respectability strategy is basically over, but the same individuals can now go about consolidating their gains.

Can anti-fascists take credit for the ouster of Stephen Bannon? Will his return to Breitbart and the grassroots far right embolden fascists and give them more momentum? Beyond the obvious strategy of "no platform for fascists," what role should anti-fascist activity play in our struggle against the state, the chief implementer of totalitarian measures?

That's a lot of questions! Bannon? I don't really care who takes credit for his career change, but I don't really see it emboldening the far right. You know, the Democrats want to tell it like Charlottesville got Bannon kicked out, because that shifts the focus back to the Oval Office and out of the streets. It might have. I don't know. I'm glad he's out, but it's not my focus. I'm not sure he cares whether he's directing his movement from inside the institutions or from outside.

What I anticipate is that he'll try to create a home for all the young people who don't want to go to Nazi rallies anymore, he'll push this "alt-left" nonsense, basically he'll try to do a better version of Richard Spencer's strategy. That means no Nazis, no Klansmen, just nice Midwestern church people who wouldn't mind seeing the police gun us down. I'm not sure the momentum is with him now, but we'll see.

Okay, about the state… We're still in the midst of an authoritarian backlash in the broader culture, alongside the white backlash. Trump draws on it, but so do his opponents. If you're trying to get a popular mandate for authoritarian governance, you present yourself as the only force able to contain irreconcilable, violent conflicts within society. That's what Trump was doing when he talked about the "many sides" of violence in

scary, because these were big dudes who understood violence, but it didn't really serve their larger goals, and they lost fights because we would surround them and beat them back. It didn't help those guys that their official rally was up a hill behind barricades.

Finally, there were the guys in full-on riot gear, plexiglass shields and clubs and face-shields, stuff like that. They had a hard time early in the day, marching into the park, because they couldn't figure out what kind of confrontation they were in; they wanted to beat us up but they wanted it to look like our fault, and they came out worse on both counts. Later, they regrouped, and it seemed like they were ready to crack some skulls in a more paramilitary style–charge out of the park in formation and just trample whoever was in their way. I think that would have happened more if the rally had gone on longer, because they were starting to give up on the whole image thing. We should have had more tools to obscure their vision and keep them at a distance. But the cops dispersed the rally before it went there. I think we can take some credit for that.

This sounds weird, but I think anarchists might have better discipline than Nazis, at least in this kind of situation. Fascists had the advantage when things were really scripted, and a lot of them would have had the advantage in a one-on-one fight, but they were just clumsy when it came to navigating a complex situation. I guess I mean self-discipline. But it has this real communal aspect to it, because we actually care about each other and pay attention to each other, like not just our cliques and affinity groups, but also strangers. You can't fake that. You can't squeeze that out of an authoritarian ideology.

Some have reported that it was very important that there were guns on the anti-fascist side of the conflict, to discourage fascists from escalating past a certain degree of force. Others have expressed concern about whether guns can be a useful tool in struggles for liberation. Coming away from Charlottesville, what is your impression?

I don't know if guns were an important deterrent as the day wore on. Maybe they were early on before things really started, when we were just milling around several blocks away. Realistically, if a Nazi had started shooting later in the rally no one would have had a clear shot before he emptied his clip, and once that gunfire started the crossfire would be hellish. So I guess it depends what kind of threat you think was deterred. Probably the deterrent effect was a factor in the open areas where more one-on-one fights happened—you might not pull a knife in the open if you think there's a chance you're being covered. But on that topic, the possibility of getting stabbed makes you pretty careful too. We were all thinking about Sacramento.

I can see an argument that the possibility of handguns mixed in the crowd would discourage the guys with shields and clubs from rushing in too aggressively. Maybe it put more pressure on them to stay in very tight formation, which limits how aggressive you can get with a club. I'm just speculating here, I still think the concern with image was a bigger factor for them. Anyway, that's different from the militia style, open carry rifles.

I guess I did see a neo-Confederate man in the front lines reach for his pistol and then change his mind when we yelled that he had a gun. He settled for an extendable baton instead. So that's an example where knowing that you can be identified and targeted will convince you to keep your own weapon holstered. That deterred him from brandishing a gun, though. He really did have a self-defense mentality, even if it was a racist, delusional one, and he was going to pull his gun to "deter" the mob he was facing. It would have been very different if his primary goal was to kill people.

As soon as you start talking deterrence, you're talking about an arms race. I think that's a danger whether it's guns, knives, or plexiglass shields. You lose the social character of the struggle and you lose the diversity of tactics. I don't mind being around assault rifles, but I do mind the paramilitary mentality. We're susceptible to that mentality when fear clouds our thinking.

If you get into an arms race with a bunch of scared people who have little or no experience of gun violence—I'm talking about antifascists as well as the alt fascists, we're scared too—you're creating an extremely volatile situation. All it takes is one jumpy person pulling a trigger.

Probably the only thing you can do is think very concretely about what you're trying to deter. Reflect. It has to be based in experience, yours or a mentor's or something, and it has to be real about the big picture. Otherwise, you've just got a very risky security blanket.

Do you have any thoughts about what approaches we should expect fascists to take in the wake of Charlottesville?

It's a dangerous time. They've already lost the battle to look like victims, so some of them will be happy to look like successful aggressors. That could certainly mean they go in the direction of clandestine attacks, but it could also mean they show up at these things looking like Roman legionnaires and they rush us first, hard. Our best defense is numbers, which maybe we have now. Obviously, there are tactical questions for us too.

On the other hand, some of them may try to move back toward a mass movement, and away from the fringe. They might stick to being the "pro-white bloc" at Trump rallies.

What do the events in Charlottesville mean for the strategy of Richard Spencer, who seeks to popularize a new "respectable" white supremacy?

He lost. His strategy lost. The president tried running interference for him, but it didn't work. I mean, these suit-and-tie Nazis can't change their character overnight, so they'll keep trying the same rhetoric, but it's going to be a dwindling audience.

On the other hand, that rhetoric does enable young alt-right recruits to remain in denial about what they're signing up for. For the most part, they think they're the Freikorps, but not the