

The Lessons of Charlottesville, a Year Later

How the Terrain Has Changed

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A year after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville that left one dead and countless injured, we can see how fascists, police, centrists, and others have learned from experience and adjusted their strategies. Have those of us who oppose the rise of fascism done the same? Read on for our analysis.

Fascists and the Far Right

Some fascist organizations disintegrated after the debacle in Charlottesville, and many still haven't recovered. Patriot Prayer was in disarray; Richard Spencer scaled back his efforts to speak on university campuses; the Traditionalist Workers' Party collapsed. A few months after "Unite the Right," some anti-fascists felt confident enough to declare a provisional victory. However, a year later, fascists are reorganizing and trying new things.

Discouraged from pre-announced mass actions like Unite the Right, the explicitly Nazi organization Patriot Front has demonstrated a new pattern of surprise attacks via their appearances at the Houston Anarchist Book Fair and the San Antonio Occupy ICE camp. Thus far, these appear to be chiefly aimed at producing video footage with which to make advertisements for fascism, but the model could be used for much more destructive means.

Meanwhile, Joey Gibson of Patriot Prayer has figured out that if fascists can just hold off on publicly murdering people and deny having ties to overt white supremacists—however dishonestly—they can resume slowly building momentum while letting the police do most of their dirty work. He's working with a volatile sector of the population—Proud Boys in Pinochet shirts—but he seems to be making his approach succeed where other fascist organizers have failed. We will surely see more groups like his attempting to rebrand fascist politics under the umbrella of patriotism, Christianity (or atheism), and other anodyne façades.

In response to the Patriot Front strategy, we need to improve our security precautions at public events—while being careful not to create additional obstacles to expanding our movements. Our greatest security will come from others caring about us and joining in our struggles, not from technical measures.

In response to the Patriot Prayer strategy, we have to refine our rhetoric and research in order to convey to the general public the threat that fascists pose even when they conceal their agenda behind a smokescreen. The growth of the European far right has shown how much more dangerous suit-and-tie fascists are than old-fashioned Nazi skinheads. Unite the Right turned out badly for fascists because they had not yet succeeded in teaching their rank and file to act "respectable," but we shouldn't count on fighting swastika-waving goons forever. One of the chief strategies by which fascists aim to recruit for their movements is to spread fear about an imagined "Antifa" that targets conservatives indiscriminately. We have to make it impossible for them to confuse the issue.

The Police

The wave of fascist and anti-fascist mobilizations that accompanied Trump's rise to power caught many police agencies off guard. Police watched from the sidelines as Nazis battled anti-fascists in Sacramento in 2016; they lost control completely when demonstrators shut down Milo

Yiannopoulos in Berkeley on February 1, 2017. They took a hands-off approach to the series of clashes that followed in Berkeley and elsewhere.

During the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, the police largely stood back and let the confrontations play out. They only interceded to declare an unlawful assembly and clear the park when anti-fascists forced their hand, after the city and state authorities had announced a State of Emergency. This is consistent with a pattern that goes back at least a century. When white supremacists have the upper hand, police tend to give them free rein; when anti-fascists gain the advantage, police step in aggressively.

After Unite the Right, Charlottesville police faced a great deal of criticism for their hands-off handling of the demonstration. The response of police departments around the United States has been to shift to a more aggressive strategy involving massive multi-agency mobilizations and preemptive crackdowns. Police are doubling down on protecting and defending fascists under the guise of “preventing another Charlottesville” while employing overwhelming force against anti-fascist protestors.

Participants in a small anti-fascist rally in Newnan, Georgia reported this in April. On June 30 and again on August 4, police in Portland worked closely with the fascists, deploying potentially lethal weaponry at random against everyone on the other side of their lines. (Afterwards, the Portland police claimed they would “temporarily suspend” use of one of the many potentially lethal weapons they had employed, while using the opportunity to bait demonstrators into providing further intelligence on themselves.) It is a matter of public record that police identify more with the fascists they are defending than with those who protest against them.

The decision to announce a weekend-long, statewide State of Emergency in Virginia several days ahead of a rally in Charlottesville at which no fascist or far-right presence is even anticipated is consistent with this pattern. Police are using the violence fascists have perpetrated as an excuse to clamp down on those the fascists attacked, effectively fulfilling the fascist program.

In the wake of Black Lives Matter and similar movements, police have widely lost credibility. We’ve come a long way since the Occupy movement when liberal protesters across the US argued that police were “part of the 99%”! Now, like the Trump regime, police recognize they are unpopular, yet appear to have concluded that they have enough institutional power and support from their base to get away with almost anything. They don’t seem to be concerned about losing legitimacy in the public eye. Perhaps they are correct that, in a polarized society, they need not concern themselves with how *everyone* feels about them. But this callous attitude may create vulnerabilities for them down the line.

The way that police have taken advantage of post-Charlottesville criticism to escalate their violence in support of fascist organizing is a reminder that when we critique the institutions of the state, we have to produce a discourse that delegitimizes them completely, a discourse that cannot be appropriated for other ends. We should use this opportunity to draw connections between policing and the fascist agenda before their latest escalation becomes normalized as well.

The Trump Administration

After “Unite the Right,” Donald Trump provoked outrage by arguing that there were “fine people on both sides” and later, when pressed, assigning blame to both sides as well. Nonetheless,

we can ascribe the departures of Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka from his administration in part to the ensuing backlash.

Today, Donald Trump continues to appeal to racists via dog whistles—for example, gratuitously attacking well-known athletes of color such as LeBron James. He is counting on gerrymandering, the unconditional loyalty of his base, and the monopolization of force in the hands of US government institutions to maintain his hold on power regardless of how unpopular he becomes with everyone else.

So far, this strategy has basically worked. A version of the Muslim Ban is now in effect; Trump continues to stack the courts with highly conservative judges who will hold those positions for decades to come, intensifying the racism of the carceral justice industry and making legal challenges like the J20 court case even more difficult. It's also worth noting that many white supremacists are radicalized in prison. It's possible to understand the current revival of fascist street violence as a side effect of the expanding prison-industrial complex. This is yet another example of how state and extra-state authoritarianism reinforce each other.

As the state becomes the chief force implementing the fascist agenda, we have to stay focused on countering the ways it is targeting people, even as fascists attempt to draw us into private turf wars. The more effective we are at mobilizing broad resistance to its operations, the more allies we will have when it comes to facing down fascists. For example, in supporting prisoner revolts such as the upcoming nationwide prison strike, we can make it more likely that prisoners will organize along class lines rather than racial lines.

The Centrists

It's a mistake to understand the struggle between fascists and their opponents according to a binary framework. Those who like to see themselves as political “centrists” in fact comprise a third pole in these struggles.

The centrists are not at all enthusiastic about anti-fascists being powerful enough to deny fascists a platform. Two weeks after fascists gathered in Charlottesville, anti-fascists shut down a fascist rally in Berkeley, California. In response, Berkeley's mayor, a liberal Democrat, called on the police to classify anti-fascists as a gang and mobilize against them accordingly.

More recently, centrist Democrats used the elections of August 7 as an opportunity to launch social media attacks on the Green Party and third party voting in general; they hope to use the specter of Trump to discipline those to their left into supporting “moderate” candidates. As they attempt to channel all disapproval of Trump into support for the party establishment, corporate media outlets, and the FBI, we will surely see them make moves to discredit direct action and radical politics.

This gives us a new perspective on Facebook's decision to delete the Facebook page that the Shut It Down DC Coalition was using to promote their protest against the “Unite the Right 2” rally in Washington, DC. Facebook claimed that the page in question appeared to be connected with Russian bot activity, associating anti-fascist organizing with the number one bugaboo of centrist Democrats. Perhaps this is entirely coincidental.

Immediately afterwards, Google, Facebook and Apple banned Alex Jones and his conspiracy-theory-peddling media company, Infowars. Infowars has long provided a venue for confused conservatives to find their way into far-right and fascist activity; we can hardly lament their

misfortunes. But if the banning was a partisan centrist maneuver against “extremes,” we’ll be next on the chopping block.

And Us?

And us? What lessons did we learn from Charlottesville? How should our strategies shift in view of how others have changed theirs?

Forging Broader Ties

In the wake of the violent clashes in downtown Charlottesville, many anti-fascists concluded that it was essential to organize as broadly as possible.

But how do we set about doing this? For two weeks after the Unite the Right rally, the corporate media appeared sympathetic to the anti-fascist cause. This changed as soon as anti-fascists achieved victories in Boston, Durham, and Berkeley and conservative editors regained control of the discourse. We can’t count on corporate media to tell our story for us. We have to do our best to shape the narratives they produce since that is the terrain on which the police justify their attacks. However, the more we legitimize corporate media outlets as a credible source of information, the more powerful they will be when they turn against us.

We have to build a social base directly by organizing with others who are affected by the same problems. Anti-fascists in the Bay Area, Portland, and elsewhere have repeatedly accomplished this, turning out massive numbers of people who are willing to organize with respect for a diversity of tactics. This is essential: so long as you don’t give up your autonomy, gaining the ability to act together with large numbers of people is a more important victory than shutting down any particular fascist event. We should evaluate our anti-fascist organizing according to how well it equips us to engage in all the other struggles that confront us.

The most important aspect of collective self-defense—whether in Chiapas, Rojava, or Virginia—is being firmly tied into a social base of support. All the firearms and concussion grenades in the world will not suffice to protect people who have lost the respect of their communities.

The struggle that is taking place here is not (just) a military clash between armed groups; it is a clash of values within an entire society. We have to spread our tactics, our values, and our unruliness far beyond the immediate sectors of the population that we are currently able to organize with. Even when we are forced to engage in open confrontation, we have to remember that what we are doing must serve as a form of education and outreach. Fascists have gained the most momentum when they’ve understood their actions, including attacks on undocumented people, anti-fascists, and other adversaries, as a means of winning recruits. We have to fight in a way that makes our opposition to all forms of authoritarianism comprehensible and appealing to everyone who could join us.

Our relationship to those who will *never* join us is more complicated. History has shown a thousand times over that liberal politicians will turn to us in an emergency—for example, to create a political crisis they can offer to solve—but will disavow and abandon us the instant it

becomes politically expedient. At the same time, as society polarizes, grassroots support from leftists is unlikely to discourage police from hospitalizing or even killing us. If we build powerful enough movements, perhaps we will gain enough leverage on liberal centrists that they will be forced to stand up for us without thus securing the means to pacify us. But that goal is a long way off.

Finally, we have to address the root causes of suffering. If we do that, people will join our efforts for their own reasons.

Doxxing

In the wake of the clashes in Charlottesville, both sides have stepped up their efforts to identify their adversaries. This is an asymmetrical conflict. Fascists who are doxxed have more to fear from society at large: Joey Gibson and countless others have lost their jobs as a result of anti-fascists publicizing their politics. Even the US military has kicked out fascists, if only after tremendous public pressure. In addition, fascists have been disowned by their parents, kicked out of school, and faced other forms of social exclusion. In some parts of the US, doxxing has reduced the fascist movement to those who are extremely privileged or disenfranchised. We should continue to use this strategy, building and circulating databases of everyone involved in far-right activity.

Those who are doxxed by fascists and the far right face a different set of risks. The police have charged people with felonies on the basis of research and speculation originating on far-right and fascist online forums. In addition, anti-fascists have also received threats at their workplaces and homes. The stress of being identified as a target for fascist violence can be considerable. In addition, if the government were to make another qualitative shift to the right, the police could utilize lists of targets supplied by fascists. In the meantime, doxxing discourages high-risk activity on the part of those whose identities are known to fascists and police officers.

This is perhaps the chief structural function of far right doxxing: to take advantage of the asymmetrical way that the police target anti-fascists in order to tie their hands in conflicts. Republican politicians who understand this introduced the “Unmasking Antifa” law.

In this context, it’s especially important for anti-fascists to engage in pre-emptive harm reduction. See below for a collection of guides to minimizing the threat posed by doxxing.

Masking

One of the solutions to the threat of doxxing is to conceal one’s identity. There are pros and cons to this: the more effectively anti-fascists mask up, the greater the risk that they will appear alienating to those who are not familiar with the dangers of engaging in anti-fascist struggle, and the more aggressively police will target them.

One solution to this problem is to normalize masking as a regular part of political activity so it is not only associated with illegal or confrontational activity. In the year since Charlottesville, it has become increasingly common for a wide range of demonstrators to utilize masks and protective gear. In Portland on August 4, the number of people who marched in or behind the black bloc was inspiring. At least in certain hotbeds of resistance, it should be possible to legitimize wearing masks, especially in view of the threat of doxxing.

This is not always possible. As we wrote in our analysis of the struggles of 2017:

“In Charlottesville, anti-fascists largely opted to forego masks and black clothing, despite the risks of participating in confrontations while permitting fascists and police to identify them. Due to far-right and corporate media efforts to stigmatize ‘antifa’ as violent and alien, participants feared that concealing their identities would only help to legitimize the fascists. This concern underscores the extent to which anarchists were operating from a position of weakness in Charlottesville.”

Over the year since, the fact that activists did not conceal their identities in Charlottesville has caused no end of grief to those on the receiving end of fascist doxxing. But it may have been the right choice, all the same.

In situations where it is not possible or strategic to show up in black bloc gear, demonstrators can utilize a wide array of other items to the same effect: hats, umbrellas, sunglasses, reversible jackets, wigs, scarves, and the like. On a full day of actions, it’s best to bring a wide assortment of these and continue changing them throughout the course of events. Likewise, in any potential altercation, those who have their hands free should look around for cameras and other perimeter threats and attend to them.

Staying Flexible, Staying Rooted

Those who fight monsters should take care not to become monsters themselves, Friedrich Nietzsche warns us, and this is especially true when it comes to opposing fascists. Our conditions for victory are different from theirs. They want to exclude; we want to include. They want to dominate; we want to coexist. They want to attack, to exterminate; we want to protect, to nourish, to create. We have to be careful not to militarize ourselves, not to get stuck in routines and rituals, not to lose our optimism about humanity or our ability to love.

When our efforts to prevent fascists from organizing hit an impasse—for example, in Portland, where the full might of the police state has been utilized to defend Patriot Prayer marches—we have to identify other ways to achieve our objectives. When all the resources of the state are engaged in protecting a single fascist demonstration, anti-fascists could pick another target via which to express their values and shift the focus of attention. We have to stay flexible and continue to experiment with new tactics and ideas.

Likewise, the tragedy in Charlottesville and all the other fascist violence before and since has showed that we have to take trauma and healing seriously. Making care a fundamental part of our organizing, we can incorporate collective grieving and healing into the rest of our activities in order to be good to ourselves, strengthen bonds, and dream together about the future.

The greatest harm that fascists could do to us would be to reshape our conception of human nature in their own image, so that we think of their pettiness and hatred in place of the tremendous potential of humanity. We should understand the relationships we forge in the process of fighting fascism as a model for the alternative that we are proposing—and treat each other accordingly. If we can create nourishing, egalitarian, and inspiring communities despite all the forces ranged against us, this will show that we have a better way.

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