

# **No More Martyrs**

**On Death, Dying, and the Courage it Takes to Live**

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*While many of the ideas presented in the following piece have had some ethereal existence between my synapses for the better part of a decade or more, the motivation to attempt to focus them in written word began in January of this year (2023). That month saw the murder of no fewer than 70 people at the hands of US police with a few of those murders breaking through the noise into the public consciousness. Tyre Nichols was beaten to death by the Memphis Police Department. Tortugueta was shot to death by a myriad of police departments occupying the Weelaunee People's Park outside of Atlanta, Georgia. The circumstances of the deaths, and their subsequent pageantry, of these two young people quickly saw them elevated to the status of martyr, however taking significantly different forms of that status. The goal of this piece is to lay out a critical analysis of the process of that elevation, the status of martyr, and the relations that elevation/status engenders among radicals, anarchists specifically. This analysis is specifically articulated from a US context. While others may desire to extend certain critiques beyond the US where they feel them relevant, I am not personally attempting to do so.*

*I have struggled for a time with worries about the timing of this piece, not wanting to come across as leveling some personal critique of specific people while wounds are still very raw and grief remains heavy on the hearts of family and friends. I don't think the martyrdom of Tyre or Tortugueta is unique, but they are two important (and current) examples of a phenomenon I wish to critique writ large and so they are mentioned here. I wish I could wait for a moment of respite, when we are far enough removed from any particular instance of brutality and subsequent martyrdom for grief to be processed and healing found. But every single day brings about new brutality, new martyrs. There is no moment of respite to wait for. So, I say now plainly: No More Martyrs.*

## **The Appeal of a “Meaningful” Death**

There is an existential pit to the edge of which many radicals find themselves clinging by their fingernails, feet dangling downwards. It is a pit that widens and deepens as we are confronted by the possibility that everything we do might be for naught, that we may face impossible odds, that we may never live in the worlds of which we dream. It widens most rapidly when we are confronted by the reality that we, too, will die one day; no one gets out alive as they say. It can be terrifying, truly a stop-dead-in-your-tracks-choking-on-your-own-breath type of fear, to sit with these ideas. That fear can become so intense as to push us away from engaging with these ideas, instead leading us to search for something to cling to, something to give the cosmic joke of existence some purpose.

I don't believe it can be overstated how terrifying the notion of non-existence, and of meaninglessness, can be for many. I say this without judgment, as it is a fear I have felt to varying degrees throughout my life as well. However, that understandable fear is often exploited, used as a tool to reproduce the violence of the institutions surrounding us. Given most (though not all) view death as an inevitability of life, the notion of “dying for something” can become deeply appealing when staring into the possibility of an endless nothingness.

The image of the sacrificial protagonist has littered our media for ages. It is used to convince young people that there is meaning to be found dying “for their country,” bolstering military ranks with recruits searching for martyrdom as much as a way to pay for college. It's used to give an audience the catharsis of vicariously living through an action they will likely never encounter themselves, offering distraction from the mundane brutality of every-day life. It keeps the carrot

of an objective, achievable meaning dangling in front of our eyes, blinding us from opportunities to create our own meaning daily. Even in radical spaces the image of the sacrificial protagonist, of the martyr, holds near reverential weight.

This reverence is seen most explicitly when the police kill, especially when the police kill someone understood as having been a radical themselves. But in these instances, the fantasy of martyrdom is not in service of the dead, it is in service of the living. The grief that comes with the loss of a loved one, or even someone we simply know of and find commonality with, is as relentless as it is cruel. We are hit by wave after wave of as many emotions as there are languages. While we struggle through the sea of this grief, a lighthouse often cuts through the fog, but its light is more a siren song begging us to wreck against the unseen rocks than a sign of refuge.

In our flailing, we are often drawn to the idea that those killed by the police “died for something.” It is too painful to believe we lost someone to the sheer immensity of the meaningless brutality that is civil society, that this loss is simply the most recent iteration of a cycle of violence that has been ongoing since long before any of us were born. The dead become objects, props to be held up as symbols of resistance for the living to draw inspiration from. Their memory is flattened into a shape most useful for those grieving or those seeking to use this memory to advance their own positionalities.

This process of objectification, this elevation to the status of martyr, serves to reproduce the fantasy of a meaningful death. If we can posthumously ascribe meaning to the dead, then we too can look forward to such meaning being assigned to our own life in the event of our inevitable demise. We can take solace in the fact that we may be remembered, that our memory may be used as inspiration for the struggle to continue.

At its most insidious, this elevation offers cover for broad inaction. If we convince ourselves that meaning can be found in martyrdom, and the dead have been elevated to such a status, then is it really all that necessary to act against the martyr producing machines? If we destroy the mechanisms that produce martyrs, then we inevitably lose access to the meaning derived in martyrdom. Are we willing to suffer such a loss?

## How We Orient

So, our struggles largely become oriented around the dead. Slogans about “justice” for the deceased cover cardboard signs and graffitied walls, come out of megaphones and the chests of angry crowds. The dead are objects, tools, often cudgels, to be used and discarded. Sometimes they are used to inflict beautiful strikes against the police or prisons or even civil society writ large, though these actions rarely generalize. Unfortunately, they are equally as often used as an appeal for civility, for peace. Either way, when the orientation of struggle is framed around the dead, as their memory begins to fade so too do the actions in their name. For all the verbiage of “never forgive, never forget,” a lot of forgetting takes place with haste.

But there are other ways to orient struggle, and such orientations can happen naturally outside of the more ritualized radical practices, without the need for explicit articulation. Struggle can be oriented as fighting for the living, and not just a nebulous concept of “the living” but *us*, for *me*. We can fight for ourselves. It is not a coincidence that when riots break out, and especially when those riots become prolonged to the point of resembling an attitude of social war or insurrection, that it is primarily the young and racialized who go the hardest and fight with the most

abandon. Those most marginalized by the existent world often implicitly understand that all that is expected of them is to suffer, that their suffering is both inherent to, and necessary for, the existence of civil society to continue. The desire to not suffer, personally, therefore necessitates the desire to end the existent order writ large.

Those who recognize their suffering as inherent to the existent world can take on such a positionality, though, the path to that position, and what one does with it will likely differ depending on the proximities to power (whiteness and capital especially) an individual inhabits. Unfortunately, too many radicals conceptualize themselves as the arbiters and organizers of a revolution that is meant to serve some nebulous “other.” This other is often called “the masses,” or “the proletariat,” or “the people” but it is almost always understood as something outside of the radical themselves. These radicals fail to speak for themselves as individuals in their attempts to speak for a collective they will never actually represent. In this failure, these radicals also fail to act for themselves, fail to recognize moments in which cracks have appeared in the pavement and in which new relations may be cultivated. Often, these radicals fail to act at all.

It becomes too easy to fall into the trap of believing it possible, or useful, to play gardener of the “revolution” or some grand insurrection. Many are yet to be disabused of the notion that if only they organize in some perfect way, they will be able to materialize riots at will. That if only they speak the perfect words the crowds will swell and take the action necessary to bring about a new world. These words do not exist, there is no use attempting to plan the insurrection, or even a single riot. As I see it, the most useful thing the radical interested in insurrection can do with their time is to find ways of building a general antagonistic position towards the existent world, both as an individual and in concert with others they share affinity with. Through the building of a generalized antagonism, space is created that may allow for the next insurrectionary moment to be prolonged, to be pushed further than the moments prior, for an even deeper rift to be opened. But that building requires acting now. It requires more than day dreams. It requires courage.

## **The Courage Necessary to Live**

In the simplest terms, it takes incredible courage to choose to really live. It takes courage to break from the illusion of choice presented by the world of capital and the worlds of prisons, police, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, etc. which uphold it. It takes courage to identify what it would be to actually choose some new path, each deviation an inherent strike against the existent world. Most of all, it takes courage to make these choices with the intention of living with them.

Many harbor daydreams of taking some drastic action to strike against the brutality of this world. These dreams can be so vivid that we smell the smoke and feel the adrenaline coursing through our veins, each brick becoming an extension of our hand as we wind up to throw. But rarely do these daydreams continue to the day after we strike out. Rarely do we daydream of the morning after the riot, when the consequences of the previous night begin to take concrete forms, when we must actually take that first step into the unknown. The martyrdom fantasy lives within these daydreams, envisioning an action that eschews all consequence beyond a death that is as much a goal as a consequence. Given that within this fantasy death is precisely what grants the existential relief of a prescribed meaning, death isn't much of a consequence at all.

I desire more than fantasy. While a daydream may offer some relief from the acute pain I experience living in the world as it is, it is nothing compared to the actualization of the undoing

of that world, nothing compared with choosing to actually live. Therefore, I don't want to avoid discussion of consequence as I don't want an orientation in which we prioritize avoiding consequence above taking action. Instead, I want to offer a possible framework for how those who find themselves swept up in the fervor of an insurrectional current might engage with consequence. As I see it, fear of consequence will always be an obstacle to be overcome in pursuit of desired action. It is reasonable to fear repression in the form of acute police violence, the violence of courtrooms and prisons, and the economic fallout of not knowing how you'll survive if you lose your job. It will always be frightening to deviate from the ways of living that we have grown accustomed to, to experiment when the risks of experimentation are so incredibly high. There is always some hidden calculus, a weighing of a fear of consequence and a desire to no longer suffer in the ways imposed upon you.

For me, the goal is to find ways to reduce the fear of consequence by limiting the consequences of experimentation themselves while, at the same time, increasing the capacity of individuals to articulate their desires. The former can come from the generalization of antagonism towards the existent. The latter comes from the normalization of speaking explicitly to our desires as individuals and encouraging, and helping others to do the same. In limiting consequence and increasing the capacity to articulate desire we simultaneously offer the possibility of pushing further, taking ever bolder action when insurrectionary space is opened, as well as helping ourselves (and each other) to make use of that opened space, already primed to experiment.

When I speak of "increasing the capacity of individuals to articulate their desires" I am gesturing towards projects that encourage an individual's creation of meaning and critical understanding of the world. This is more an orientation of a project than a project in and of itself. For example, I believe tabling zines, reading groups, workshops, etc. can all be projects that encourage an individual to develop a critical understanding of the world and begin making their own meaning, but they can all just as easily build a dogmatic and incurious way of relating to the world.

When I speak of "the generalization of antagonism towards the existent" I am speaking of taking actions that, by nature of being taken, open space for their own reproduction. This can come from the clandestine demonstration of what actions on what targets are achievable, but it can also come from small acts of public solidarity with those with whom we share a locale. When a cop harasses someone, for any reason, we can be there to tell them to fuck off, to call them a pig, to intervene further if the situation calls for it and to embolden others to do the same. If we see someone struggling to pay for their groceries we can shoplift (if we weren't doing so already) and share our spoils. We can organize broader court support networks and pool resources to minimize (as much as we can) the toll of catching charges. The important point in all of this is that none of these actions be interpreted as exceptional. In order for generalization to be a possibility, we first must consider such acts a part of daily life, bordering on cultural instinct, and speak to them as such.

In the end, my reason for leveling criticism at the act of elevating the dead to the status of martyr is my desire for a world in which we attack the mechanisms that create martyrs in the first place with more ferocity than what I see at present. I do not believe that there exists an objective meaning to be found, and certainly not to be found in death. I want us to fight for the living, to fight for ourselves. I want us to believe that difficult things are possible, that we can desire more than the specific circumstances of our death. I want more than a tear-filled eulogy

at a candlelight vigil, with my face on a poster that will be replaced by the next face on the next poster in a day at most. I want to live, here, now.

It's reasonable to fear the possible consequences of acting. It's reasonable to fear the unknown that comes with experimentation. But if we truly desire the end of the existent, this fear cannot be justification for inaction. We cannot allow our preference for the suffering we know to prevent our choosing to live and embracing and wrestling with the consequences of that choosing.

We can choose to be brave.

We can choose to live.

We can be more than martyrs.

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