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Charlottesville and Beyond

Jack Gerson

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Four months ago, my article “The Black Bloc, Free Speech, and the Extreme Right Threat” appeared in the June Utopian. That was before Charlottesville.

White supremacists, fascists, and other alt-right bigots descended on Charlottesville on August 12 determined to inflict harm: armed to the teeth and wearing body armor, they marched with torches, chanted vile racist and anti-Semitic slogans, encircled counter-protesters, fired live ammunition into the crowds (as cops stood by), and threatened the lives of anti-racist clergy, culminating in a white supremacist driving his car directly at and through scores of marching counter-protesters, killing Heather Heyer and seriously injuring many others.

Charlottesville evoked a wave of outrage against the white supremacists and against Donald Trump, who claimed that anti-racist protesters were equally to blame, condemned “the alt-left,” and said that Confederate statues are an important part of “our” heritage. Thus, one week later, 30,000 marchers confronted a far-right rally in Boston, outnumbering the bigots by a thousand to one.

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The following weekend, a mobilization of thousands in San Francisco led by the longshore workers of ILWU Local 10 forced the alt-right “Patriot Prayer” group to cancel its planned rally. The next day, an even larger mobilization in Berkeley forced right-wingers to flee under police protection. At least briefly, popular attention focused on this country’s racism, past and present.

Ever since, much of the alt-right (and the “alt-light”) have tried to crawl out from under the wreckage of Charlottesville by presenting themselves as peaceful, reasonable folks. In the words of Antoine Freeman, a member of the Oath Keepers armed militia (quoted when he showed up with other right wingers at UC Berkeley on September 24):

“Just supporting free speech, just making sure people were peaceful, that people are out here respecting each other and making sure things don’t get too heated. No bad optics. No Charlottesville stuff. Can’t have that anymore. Just a civil discourse.”

The right-wingers, on the defensive, have tried to regain public sympathy by provoking their opponents:

- Provoking them into initiating physical attacks (as Joey Gibson and his “Patriot Prayer” group has tried repeatedly: for example, San Francisco on August 26, Berkeley on August 27, Berkeley on September 24 and 26);
- Provoking them into acts that the alt-right could claim are attempts to deny them free speech (as Milo Yiannopoulos tried with his abortive “Free Speech Week” stunt).

Mainstream media and politicians from both capitalist parties have helped the bigots to recover by exaggerating – and at times fabricating – violent actions by antifa and other leftists. Perhaps the grossest example was an August 27 incident in Berkeley, when

a right-winger was knocked down and beaten. This incident, captured on video, was virtually all that was reported in the national press. The video promoted by the media was edited to eliminate the section that clearly showed the “victim” directing pepper spray at the crowd just before he was knocked down. That nearly 10,000 had rallied peacefully for hours that day went unreported. Also unmentioned: the right-winger who was beaten was wearing a tee shirt showing Chilean dictator Pinochet throwing an opponent out of an airplane.

This largely manufactured incident was seized upon by Democratic Party politicians and others eager to differentiate themselves from the far left and from Trump by condemning violence. Nancy Pelosi said that antifa should be “arrested and prosecuted.” Left-liberal Berkeley Mayor Jesse Arreguín called for classifying antifa as “a street gang.” The Berkeley cops demanded authorization to use pepper spray for crowd control against “violent” protesters (i.e., antifa). We may be on the verge of a witch-hunt, with antifa the immediate target.

Why is the anti-racist left being cast as the most violent? Because when push comes to shove, the establishment generally prefers the extreme right to the extreme left, because the left wants to expropriate and eliminate the corporate elite, while the right only wants to run the show to protect the property and interests of the elite.

Who are the main perpetrators of violence in the world? The U.S. state and ruling class. Who are the main perpetrators of violence in this country? The cops, followed by rightwing militias and white supremacist hate groups. The extreme right has been responsible for scores of political murders over the past decade – the murders in Portland and Charlottesville are just the most recent. Antifa has killed no one. There is no moral equivalence between antifa and the fascists and white supremacists. ***Let’s be clear. Despite tactical differences with antifa (discussed in the June Utopian Bulletin), we unequivocally defend all anti-fascists from state repression – including antifa, the current target.***

Let's also be clear on the issue of violence vs. non-violence: We are not pacifists. We are revolutionaries. We base ourselves on the need for a revolutionary transformation of this society from bottom to top to create a libertarian socialist society, one that breaks the power of the capitalists, dismantles their state, and maximizes democratic local participation and control. This will require confronting the repressive state apparatus, as well as fascists and other goons. In the end, we will need to drive them off the streets or be driven off the streets ourselves. One can simply not hope to accomplish a revolutionary transformation while holding to a principle of non-violence.

To put this in perspective, let's start with our long-term strategic goal – the revolutionary transformation of society. This requires building a revolutionary movement, one that will have enough popular support to go over to the offensive. The current struggle against the white supremacists can be instrumental in building such a movement. At this point, most of the population is in the middle: they reject overt fascists but don't yet see the need for mass mobilizations to confront them, much less the need to physically run them off the streets. Indeed, they are still unclear, for the most part, about who the alt-right is; about whether anti-racist counter-protesters are afraid to hear what the alt-right has to say and are trying to suppress freedom of speech. To build the movement, we need to get more people directly involved: go to union halls, immigrants' rights groups, churches in black and Latino areas, etc., and aim to turn out tens of thousands. And we need to carry out educational work: we need to explain to people what fascism is; we need to reveal what groups like "Patriot Prayer" and the "Oath Keepers" are all about. Finally, the movement must not be intimidated: therefore, it is important to physically confront the fascists when it helps explain who the fascists are and what they believe.

We want to avoid situations in which the bigots can portray themselves as victims. Victimhood builds sympathy for them,

interests of the powerful and privileged and is antithetical to the needs of the vast majority of the people, and for moving from there towards a revolutionary movement. We ought to be building the foundations for such a movement, rather than fostering illusions in the Democrat Party and the state. These questions will be addressed in forthcoming issues of the Utopian Bulletin.

wing while limiting itself to calling for defending and expanding the state sector.

What does the anti-fascist/anti-racist movement put forward today to try to reach the disenfranchised in the Rust Belt, or the poor in rural and semi-rural areas? Aside from the hollow appeal to rely on the state for help, the movement bases itself on “multi-culturalism” – aka identity politics. But Bannon and his friends base themselves on their own form of identity politics: they call for protecting “real American citizens” (widely understood to mean “white male Americans”), while the movement’s multi-cultural advocates base themselves on favoring everyone *but* white males. We will never build the kind of movement that we need unless we reject both the appeal to the state and the trap of identity politics.

Earlier, we suggested that at this time we should at times be challenging rightwing figures to debate rather than just trying to shut them down. But if we debate, we had better have something to put forward other than identity politics and drastically expanding the imperial state. If we were to put forward that line against, say, Bannon, we would leave with our tails between our legs. As we observed earlier, tens of millions in this country face a dark future: unemployed or underemployed; burdened by debt; unable to afford their own homes, let alone buy new ones; barely able to pay their rent; strung out on opioids. Many live in drug-ridden, high crime areas. The cops, for sure, act like occupying armies – but what is our alternative for those who live in fear of walking home from the bus, or going to the corner store?

We think that there is an alternative. Look at the support that the NFL players who kneel for the national anthem have received across a broad sector of society. Trump’s dog whistles to the white supremacists do not resonate with the bulk of the population. The basis for deepening this response into a broad movement against racism, fascism, and all forms of intolerance surely exists. This can provide the foundation for the next stage: fusing this sentiment with the deep and prevalent understanding that the state serves the

which does not help the antifascist cause. So, for now, as much as possible violent confrontations between the anti-racist movement and the fascists should be defensive: defending ourselves and our movement (as well as minorities, women, Jews, Muslims, LGBT people, et. al.) We want to demonstrate who the bigots are and what they represent.

While we unconditionally defend antifa against state repression and see antifa as allies in the struggle against fascism and racism, we believe that many in antifa have pursued tactics that let the alt-right claim to be victims. In addition, we think that antifa has paid too little attention to the importance of building a mass movement with broad popular support – either out of indifference to building such a movement or because they see the majority of people as passive observers who will side with the left or the right depending on which side wins the physical confrontations. This substitutionist view is elitist and undemocratic: it shuts the vast majority out, leaving all decisions in the hands of an elite, self-selected leadership. Too frequently (although with some exceptions) black bloc or antifa have marched into demonstrations organized by others and, by launching missiles or otherwise immediately going on the offensive, de facto overturned whatever decisions had been democratically reached.

Finally, we think that antifa suffers from an illusion it shares with more moderate, liberal opponents of Trump: the belief that fascism is imminent, if not already here. Under this view, there’s no time to do the long-term work of building a mass movement: the final conflict is happening now. We think that this is wrong. In fact, Trump and the Congressional Republicans have to date failed to pass any legislation of note – not on health care, not on tax reform, virtually nothing. The courts have overruled several of Trump’s proposed travel bans. Trump’s base has narrowed down to hardcore supporters – and now these are splitting, as prominent Christian fundamentalists are denouncing him and even his close buddies among NFL team owners have had to distance themselves

from him. Most important, there is no significant sector in the ruling elite of the country that favors putting the fascists into power. While we take the alt-right and the extreme right militias seriously, we need to recognize that they are still a marginal phenomenon who, when they try to surface their white supremacist views, are roundly denounced and rejected – the aftermath of Charlottesville testifies to that.

Thus, we don't think that fascism is on the short-term agenda. Moreover, it's a mistake to label everyone on the right "fascist." For example: Ben Shapiro has odious views on abortion, immigrants, and other issues – but Shapiro is not a fascist. The attempt to prevent him from speaking at UC Berkeley on September 14 does not play well beyond the already initiated: it just makes leftists appear to be intolerant of anyone who disagrees with them. Ben Shapiro – like Milo Yiannopoulos and Joey Gibson – is not really interested in free speech, other than claiming that his has been denied. Therefore, don't go for the bait. Make the bigots defend what they have to say: challenge them to debate. Force them to state and defend their hateful views, rather than letting them hide behind "free speech."

On the other hand, we think that more attention ought to be paid to the white nationalist/protectionist tendency fronted by Steve Bannon and bankrolled by the billionaire Mercer family. They base themselves on the failure of the neoliberal globalist program and appeal especially to whites in the Rust Belt and in rural and semi-rural areas. Tens of millions of these people have been locked out of society and face the future with little hope: unemployed or underemployed, unable to afford their own homes and barely able to make rent in shared apartments. And, in the future, the Bannons and Mercers may turn their anti-Wall Street propaganda to appeal to the millions of ex-students in urban areas burdened by crushing student debt that makes them indentured servants to the banks. Bannon and the Mercers are appealing on a classic right-wing populist basis: demagogically claiming hostility to the banks,

the unions, and the state. (Bannon likes to cite Lenin's "The State and Revolution" as the textbook for his plan to "smash the state").

This tendency is playing the long game: Bannon calls Joey Gibson, Richard Spencer, and other alt-right luminaries "clowns." The Bannon/Mercer strategy is to split the Republican Party and either take it over or reduce it to rubble and create their own vehicle. They just succeeded in Alabama, where the candidate that they backed, the ultra-racist Roy Moore, won the Republican nomination for Senate over incumbent Luther Strange, who had the backing of Mitch McConnell and Donald Trump. Bannon and the Mercers hope to follow this up with several more campaigns against established Congressional Republicans in Tennessee, Mississippi, Arizona, and Nevada, among other places.

What's the left doing? What does it counterpose to Bannon's anti-state rhetoric? In the main, it defends the state, calls for the state to expand its role (to do "good things" for the people, such as single-payer health care), and looks to "the unions" (i.e., the union bureaucrats) for support (five years ago, such support helped kill Occupy). This popular front approach, calling for the state to save us, is doomed from the outset. It essentially calls for reviving the Keynesian welfare state that crashed and burned around 1970. Indeed, statism has failed in all its forms: liberalism, fascism, Stalinism, reformism (the welfare state), and neoliberalism (globalization). It's past time to recognize this. Thus, for example, we should recognize that the state that "progressives" want to run health care and regulate Wall Street is the same state that routinely murders civilians at home and abroad, and that aids Wall Street in savaging Detroit, Flint, and Puerto Rico (to cite just a few).

The Democrats want to disassociate themselves from "violence" – they want to criticize Trump for that – and so, as we have seen, they have called for state repression against antifa. The Democrats actually are for the most part OK with the current opposition to the alt-right – so long as it focuses on opposing Trump and the right