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Police Squeeze

L.A. Kauffman

May 2000

I've been walking around in a white-hot rage for many days now, ever since the New York Police Department collared 19 people from the Black Bloc on May Day.

Apparently, it's now against the law to be an anarchist in New York City - or rather, to look like one, or fraternize with people who do.

The day's main event was a march calling for an unconditional amnesty for undocumented immigrants, organized by the Coalition for the Human Rights of Immigrants and other groups. Upwards of 5000 people attended, mainly folks from Mexico, but also from Colombia, China, and a dozen other places.

It was a family-oriented crowd, with as many baby strollers as protest placards. There was also a strong showing of support by U.S. citizens, including anti-sweatshop organizers, religious progressives, and puppet-wielding anti-capitalists from the Direct Action Network and other groups.

All around Union Square, the starting point for the march, the police amassed, literally by the thousands. Rows upon rows of cops in riot gear stood in military formation everywhere you looked. Some were carrying the suddenly ubiquitous canisters

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of pepper spray and tear gas; most had big bundles of plastic handcuffs hanging from their belts, as a none-too-subtle threat.

This obscenely excessive show of force was intimidating enough to someone born in the United States (one lifetime radical visiting from the West Coast told me it was the most militarized demo he had ever seen); imagine the effect on undocumented immigrants who attended the May Day march.

I found myself thinking about the appalling irony of it all. Thousands of people had come to this legally permitted march to show their desire to become U.S. citizens, to live under the protections of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. And all around them were the trappings of a police state, in which dissent is dealt with through force.

Suddenly, while we were all milling about and waiting for things to begin, dozens of cops rushed the crowd and hauled off 19 people whom they believed to be anarchists.

There was no provocation, and the authorities couldn't simply arrest people for wearing black (they would incarcerate most of Manhattan that way). So they went all the way back to 1845 to find a legal pretext for sweeping anarchists off the streets: a law, originally used to squelch the Ku Klux Klan, that forbids the wearing of masks in public.

Mind you, only some of the 19 were even wearing bandannas over their faces. The rest were charged with loitering, on the grounds - I'm not making this up - that they were standing in the proximity of people wearing bandannas over their faces.

Preposterous? Of course. But the NYPD doesn't care. They can keep you for 30 hours or more in a filthy, crowded, airless underground cell before you even get to see a judge or lawyer. They win, even if your case is thrown out at arraignment.

This incident is part of a larger, disturbing pattern, which has received very little public attention. In just the three last months, there's been a sharp increase in the use of police power to stifle speech and curb First Amendment rights.

For ultimately, what do we have to hide? We see gross economic injustice in a world on the brink of environmental catastrophe, and we intend to expose and challenge the responsible parties. We want fundamental change - a revolution, if you will - and we know that those in power will use every means at their disposal, from ridicule to police repression, to stop us.

One D.C.-based organizer of the April 16 protests against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund had police show up at his door to threaten him on a night when he and others were going posterizing, which is legal in Washington, D.C.

Just the other day, I had to go to court with five other people, having been caught putting up posters in Greenwich Village that advertised A16 and other events (this in a city whose streetscapes are increasingly cluttered with huge corporate ads, many of them erected in violation of local zoning laws). Our case was dismissed, but our time had quite effectively been wasted.

Many people - even some progressives - lauded the Washington, D.C. police department for its supposed restraint at the IMF/World Bank actions. True, the crowds of protesters weren't indiscriminately gassed. The authorities were more shrewd in their abuse.

In the days leading up to the D.C. protests, the police repeatedly deprived us of our right to assemble, in ways that clearly hindered our ability to express our views.

First, the police raided the Convergence Center on Saturday morning, a day before the actions, evicting everyone on some flimsy fire-code pretext and not allowing us back until the protesting was well over. That meant no central point for information, no meeting spaces, nowhere to create protest props or distribute zines and broadsheets.

Then, when people regrouped in a nearby park, motorcycle cops descended on a legal training and threatened everyone with arrest if they didn't disperse. All day long, vans filled with police in riot gear menacingly circled the park, squad cars and motorcycles crisscrossed it, and helicopters hovered overhead. If you can't meet, you can't organize - and the police were doing all they could to stop us from gathering.

Finally, on the eve of A16, the police surrounded 679 people who were heading home from a protest (against the prison-industrial complex, no less). All were whisked away to jail in

what even high-ranking officials admitted was preventive detention - that is, designed to keep them from the actions on the following day.

Organizers were resilient enough to deal with most of these disruptions - finding a nearby church to meet in, and a union hall for building puppets, and so on - but it amounted to a huge diversion of activist energies.

It was also unnerving, and intended to be. Late on Saturday night, a group of 15 or so organizers held a tactical meeting at an Ethiopian restaurant for the Rebel Alliance (a cluster of affinity groups from New York, Seattle, Florida, and numerous other places).

We'd all heard already about the 679 arrests, and as midnight came and went, more disturbing news kept filtering in: One of our meeting spots for the morning was swarming with cops; the National Guard had commandeered a school building halfway between there and the other main place where people were to meet.

By the time we wrapped up, we were all convinced we were walking into a big and possibly bloody trap. We figured we wouldn't be able to assemble at all, but would be clobbered before we got there. It was too late to change the locations: We'd told many hundreds of people where to meet, and there was no way to contact them all beforehand.

I'm a bit ashamed to admit I was utterly terrified, my stomach in spasms; but so, too, were many organizers far more experienced than I. Of course, in the morning, the meeting spots turned out to be totally unguarded, and we assembled without event.

The episode was instructive, for it underscored how much of police power is psychological. That's why the D.C. police have bragged about their surveillance of activists, and why NYPD detectives went out of their way at the May Day march to tell certain activists that they had seen them down in D.C. It's why law enforcement officials from other cities and agencies - in-

cluding the federal Drug Enforcement Agency, for christ's sake - openly accompanied New York's police brass on May Day.

They all want us to know that they're watching us: monitoring our mailing lists, attending our meetings, even infiltrating our groups. Indeed, in utter violation of the law, they ostentatiously videotape every march and gathering they can.

And the message the NYPD sent by arresting the 19 anarchists was that you can't escape this surveillance: Leave your face uncovered, and they'll tape you; cover it, and they'll arrest you.

This escalation of police strategies toward our movements is new enough that there have been few discussions of how to handle it. For myself, I've decided to acknowledge that it frightens me, and work like hell not to let it make me paranoid.

I think it's important not to be blasé, not to adopt the pose of toughened political heavies who don't bat an eye at the sight of riot gear. ("Hey, this is nothing - you should have seen what they did in Seattle . . .")

It's all bad: every single use of force to stifle speech, whether through intimidation or incarceration. Past police operations - whether against the Black Panthers, the Vietnam antiwar movement, or the World Trade Organization protests - shouldn't be the yardstick by which we measure abuse.

It's also crucial that we not give in to the temptation of paranoia. The minute we start obsessing about who in our ranks might be a cop, or whose telephone might be tapped, we begin closing ourselves to newcomers and poisoning our movements with suspicion.

Secrecy is the hallmark of undemocratic institutions: the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank, to name a few. Our strength is in openness. (Sure, there are small affinity group actions that must be kept hush-hush, ranging from banner hangs to sabotaging genetically modified crops, but that's a different story.)