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They're Going to Sell You the Lie of Provocateurs

Or: on Broken Glass

Margaret Killjoy

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The first thing you need to remember is that 54% of Americans believed that burning down a Minneapolis police station was justified in the wake of George Floyd's murder. This was higher of the approval rating of either major political candidate.

That's something you need to remember this week, because people in power are going to be urging you to remain calm and they are going to urge you to distrust anyone mad enough to break a window, anyone mad enough to throw hands or throw rocks.

Yet you, reading this, you're mad. You're mad enough to throw hands or throw rocks. I know you are, because you're human, and a woman was just murdered by agents of the state in broad daylight. The only thing that keeps you calm and orderly is a belief that throwing hands or rocks isn't what should be done, whether strategically, morally, or for your own safety.

I am not here to tell you to act otherwise. I will never, ever, try to convince people to take actions that they don't want to take, nor to take actions that I myself am not willing to take.

I am here to tell you that the only way we're going to get through this is if we support each other, and that means supporting the people who are taking more dramatic and dangerous action.

Because they are likely not provocateurs, nor are they doing the work of the state. They are your neighbors. They are school teachers, doctors, line cooks, sex workers, middle management, baristas. They're not all white and they're not all men, and they're throwing bricks because they are mad and because they know that, to quote Frederick Douglass, power concedes nothing without a demand.

Whether they're right, tactically, is besides the point.

I can tell you that I have been in hundreds or thousands of demonstrations, across two and a half decades, in about as many countries as I have fingers. I've seen all kinds of wild shit. I've been teargassed and I've escaped mass arrests and I've been caught by mass arrests. I'm not a rock thrower, not personally, but people I care about have spent real prison time for rioting.

And the one thing I've never, ever seen is the classic agent provocateur. I've never seen an undercover cop be the one to escalate the crowd.

I've seen undercover cops, to be sure. Some of them are obvious, though the signs aren't what you think they are. If it's your first rowdy demonstration, you're not going to pick the right people.

One time, years ago, in Amsterdam, I was in a spirited demonstration that was organized in solidarity with a migrant who had died in police custody. I saw a broad-shouldered man right in the middle of the crowd with a cleancut haircut and an earpiece attached to a wire. I ran up to my friend to tell her.

"I think that guy is a cop," I said.

I suspect that at least some of the major cases against “antifa” from 2025 will turn out to have been built in similar ways.

The FBI are predators who look for impressionable young radicals and implicate them in terror plots. It is evil. The best way to stay safe is to be alert for people who are trying to convince you to take radical action.

This might seem like a subtle distinction, but I think it’s an important one: what provocateurs do, historically, is try to convince other people to escalate their tactics (and in particular towards felony charges involving fire or explosives and usually outside of protest situations). What they don’t do is escalate things directly.

Social movements are at their strongest when the rowdier elements and the more peaceful elements act in solidarity with one another. When massive crowds march around holding signs, it doesn’t change much. When a few isolated people break windows, it doesn’t change much. But when the massive crowds refuse to let the radical actors be picked off and isolated, suddenly you have a social movement with real power.

So please, please, don’t let the state split the movement into “good protester” and “bad protester.” Even *if* there were agent provocateurs in the crowd, their goal in picking fights with the cops would be to convince us to do that splitting.

Remember at all times who your real enemies are. Keep your ire focused at them. Deescalate all conflict that isn’t with the enemy.

And we’ll get through this. And if we’re lucky and brave and act in solidarity with one another, well, we’ve got a world to win.

“That’s my boyfriend,” she told me. “He’s got an earpiece in because he’s listening to the police scanner, so that we don’t fall into a trap.”

He just happened to be 6’3” and broad-shouldered. I wound up friends with him later. I sure never admitted I’d thought he was a cop.

A movie came out at the end of last year, *One Battle After Another*, that is, for the most part, unrelentingly radical. Our protagonists are a washed-up leftist bombmaker and his daughter, on the run from cops. The real heroes of the story are the people who hide people from ICE. It’s a good movie. I’m not going to spoil it.

But there’s one scene where an angry crowd is driving back a line of riot police. Then a cop puts on a mask, wades into the crowd, and half-heartedly throws a molotov cocktail back towards the police so that the cops have an excuse to break up the crowd with violence.

The film wants you to believe that the only people who would throw molotovs are cops. Are provocateurs.

The state wants to turn you into a conspiracy theorist. Yes, you, you progressives, who laugh at the conspiracy theories of the right wing. They want you to believe that anyone who fights back against the police is secretly an agent of the police. It’s nonsense.

Someone I knew, years ago, was convicted for throwing a molotov cocktail. She was probably all of 20 years old, and she was a guitarist and zinester who lived in a squat. Ironically, she hadn’t even thrown the damn thing, it had been in her possession when they arrested her. But she was convicted of throwing it anyway.

You are willing to believe that only provocateurs throw rocks, because you think you don’t know anyone who has done or would do such a thing. I can tell you that this is simply untrue.

I'm also not going to tell you to throw molotovs. Frankly, in the US, you probably shouldn't. The cost-benefit analysis just doesn't work out in your favor.

There absolutely are undercover police embedded into crowds of protesters. Some of them are there to observe people and film people to build cases against people later, and they are likely to stay undercover the entire time. Some are there to point people out for immediate arrest, to help the riot police who are outside the demonstration pick off the people who are helping the protest happen.

Sometimes the cops are there to pick off the window-breakers and the rock throwers, but the police like to target people who have specific roles, no matter how peaceful those roles. Legal observers and street medics are routinely targeted for arrest—so much so that a number of street medics have started running unmarked so as to avoid being targeted for arrest.

The police do not need an excuse to brutalize crowds. While they are more likely to attack a spirited crowd than a docile one, this is not absolute. And time after time, the police start the violence. If you read between the lines in newspaper accounts, it's right there to see: "the violence erupted when protests began to throw tear gas canisters back at the lines of riot police." (For more on how violence is defined, including the source of that quote, CrimethInc has an evergreen essay on the topic.)

The police see their job at demonstrations to control, contain, and/or disperse the crowd. They use violence if it is necessary to accomplish this. If the crowd won't move how the cops want it to move, they will attack people. The violence of the crowd is somewhat unrelated to this.

The local police are not, however, particularly interested in larger questions of grand strategy. They're not playing 4D chess.

They're there to beat us up and keep us in line. They don't need to infiltrate the crowd to get someone to shove one of them in order to start pushing us around. They'll just push us around.

Now, there are some government assholes trying to play 4D chess to ruin people's lives and disrupt social movements. There are infiltrators. For years in the late 60s and early 70s, the FBI ran a program called COINTELPRO. This isn't conspiracy theory stuff, this is long-established and documented. They infiltrated social movements with the goal of disrupting them as thoroughly as possible.

In particular, they liked to foster infighting. They would craft rivalries between various branches of the Black Panther Party. They would attend meetings and try to argue about minutiae so that nothing would get done. They would whisper poison into people's ears. It was, unfortunately, incredibly effective.

It was revealed to the public by a group of activists who broke into an FBI office and found proof. While the COINTELPRO program was formally shut down, there's simply no reason to believe the FBI has stopped using these tactics.

In the wake of 9/11, one thing the government seemed to delight in doing was go to mosques and convince young Islamic men to plot some kind of terrorism in order to arrest them. This tactic is, for reasons slightly above my head, legally distinct from entrapment.

They did it to anarchists too. Eric McDavid spent years in prison for a bomb plot he was pressured into by an informant. The Cleveland 4 were four young activists who were tricked into a bomb plot by, you guessed it, a federal agent. Two men were arrested for making molotov cocktails in advance of the 2008 RNC, which they'd been encouraged to do by the anarchist-turned-informant named Brandon Darby (the subject of the classic essay "why misogynists make great informants").