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What Counts as Violence?

Why the Right Can Shoot Us Now

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A long-time anti-fascist was shot Friday night during a protest of alt-right racist and troll Milo Yiannopoulos, in the middle of a crowded square. The shooter, who later turned himself in, claiming self-defense, was released by UW police early Saturday morning. Somehow, this is barely newsworthy. Meanwhile, local news outlets condemn the violent protesters for throwing “potentially lethal” balloons filled with paint. This is our new reality.

It is somehow unremarkable and understandable for a protester to be shot, while it is beyond the pale for anyone to block the entrance to a fascist rally.

This should be extremely concerning to all people of good conscience.

Let us imagine, for a moment, that the tables had been turned: imagine that a Milo supporter had been shot, in self-defense or otherwise. The alt-right and the mainstream media would be in an uproar. The anti-fascist would still be

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in custody, charged with murder. Why do we know this? Because anti-fascists and anarchists are regularly assaulted by the police and held under outrageous bail conditions. Hundreds who protested the inauguration in Washington, DC, were in jail for over twenty-four hours before getting bailed out; some now face up to ten years imprisonment on felony riot charges. Women are regularly incarcerated for self-defense against abusive men. People of color are regularly held for weeks on end, without bail, for skipping bus fares and other minor offenses. But somehow, a man who shot into a crowd, on a campus that bans firearms, is deemed responsible and safe enough to release without charges or bail. When we are arrested, our names and faces are advertised in the media, along with denigrating comments and descriptions. We are all aware of this double standard; one only has to look at the difference between the hands-off response to the armed militia occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, and the violent attacks on water protectors at Standing Rock in North Dakota.

This is not to complain, or to ask the police for protection. We are not calling for prosecution; the courts will never serve us, and the police will never protect us. They only protect the wealthy, the privileged, and their own ranks. It is common practice for police to protect neo-Nazi rallies; and yet, when the fascists pull guns or knives on us, as in the UW shooting, as in Minneapolis, as in Sacramento, they rarely face serious consequences. We cannot rely on the police, and we do not care to. They are a violent and racist force, descended from slave patrols and anti-union thugs. Their job is to enforce white supremacy, the property of the wealthy, and the patriarchal order of society. We do not want their help. We are not surprised, because the police have always worked with the fascists, in every country where fascism has taken hold.

More alarming than the behavior of the police is the degree to which right-wing gun violence has become normalized and acceptable.

Conservatives cry self-defense and gun rights, while the media accepts their narrative, seeking instead to criminalize victims like Trayvon Martin. Liberals decry gun culture, but have also become accustomed to it; it is no longer surprising, it becomes part of the background of normal life. Meanwhile, popular narratives cast anti-fascist actions and protests as exceptional, extreme, and violent. This is part of an ongoing culture war over language and truth; the extreme right seeks to cloak their violent, racist rhetoric in pleas for free speech, while refusing to take responsibility for the violence that follows. We saw this with Trump's support for attacking protesters during his campaign, and we see it now. Every time a right-wing attack goes under-reported and unpunished, it grants legitimacy to right-wing violence and encourages others to do the same. The spike in hate crimes following Trump's election demonstrates this clearly. As racist, misogynist, and transphobic violence becomes mainstream, it spreads and gains legitimacy. This is how fascism works; this is how it spreads. In 1932, five Nazi stormtroopers beat a young communist to death in front of his mother; Hitler applauded their actions, and subsequently released them after taking power. Their "national passion" excused their crimes.

This cannot be the new normal. We cannot cede ground on this front, or on any other front. Media organizations that refuse to call Trump on his lies, that present Milo Yiannopoulos supporters as scared victims, or that give voice to Milo's absurd statement after the shooting that "if we stop, we let the protestors win," are complicit in granting legitimacy to fascist political violence.

This country is barreling down the tracks towards a very dark, very violent future. Protests and rallies are important,

but self-congratulatory photos and safety pins are not enough to stem the tide. Those of us who recall the anti-war protests in 2003, then the largest global protests in recorded history, should remember that our numbers were not enough.

We must make our struggles more real than symbolic, to stop the fascists from organizing and to ensure everyone hears, over and over, that this is not normal, and this is not okay.

We live in exceptional times; we must ensure these exceptions do not become normalized. But of course, simply turning the train and returning to the pre-Trump “normal” is not enough. This country has always been racist; it is founded on genocide, slavery, and colonialism. Our task, as Walter Benjamin described it during another period of anti-fascist struggle, is to create a real state of emergency, to throw all of our assumed truths and behaviors into question. If we do, “our position in the struggle against Fascism will thereby improve.” To do so, to truly combat fascism requires real anti-fascist struggle, and requires supporting those who are wounded on the front lines.

America was never great; let’s make America not exist again, and replace it instead with a human community that is truly free—free of white supremacy, free of capitalist exploitation, and free of patriarchal violence.