

When Repression Rains, It Pours

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Something has lit a fire in my gut lately, and it's not the tangy gazpacho chilling in my fridge. It's not the body bags piling up in Iraq, or the precipitous decline of our planet's wild systems, or any of the other train wrecks concocted by elites in the Global North. For the last three weeks, I've been spitting barbs because so many people I know have been getting targeted, terrorized and thrown in jail by the police.

The number of folks in my field of vision who've been rounded up since mid-June is startling, and I feel compelled to write about them here. Though they might appear in the news as a series of disparate, isolated incidents, I think my friends' stories indicate a broader pattern of police repression that's all too common—particularly against activists of color.

NYC

Following the April 26th acquittal of four cops who killed Sean Bell and wounded two others in a hail of 50 bullets, NYC saw a surge of social movement calling for police accountability and community power. Rallies, marches, and a near-riot popped off around the city, while Al Sharpton's "slowdown" blockades on May 8th captured national media attention. Since that time, actions specific to the Bell case have largely subsided, and much of the public energy and outrage has dissipated (or, at least, been brought to a simmer.)

At the same time, a few sustained projects have taken root in the wake of the NYPD's most brazen murder yet of an unarmed person of color. Among these is a series of citywide copwatch trainings being promoted by the People's Justice Coalition and Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, coupled with a growing interest in community alternatives to policing generally.

Caught in this climate is Rebel Diaz. A conscious hip hop crew comprised of three MCs—Chilean brothers RodStarz and G1, and Afro-Boricua rapper Lah Tere—Rebel Diaz is well known in both activist circles and hip hop scenes in NYC. In the crowd I run with, they're public figures you can count on to be outspoken about imperialism, racism, gentrification and police brutality. So it's not surprising that they were singled out for special treatment by New York's Finest.

On June 18th, Rodstarz and G1 stopped to observe several police officers harassing a street vendor in the Hunts Point area of the Bronx. Knowing a sense of public accountability can deter police abuses, the two MCs asked for the badge numbers of the cops in question. But this time the strategy backfired: the police snapped, dragged the two men to the ground, beat them up a little, and hauled them off to the 41st precinct. They were later charged with "obstruction of justice" and "resisting arrest."

Within hours of RodStarz and G1's arrest, a citywide call went out for folks to demonstrate at the building where the brothers were being held, and to barrage the precinct with calls in protest. (In Michigan at the time, I was hit with a stream of text messages about the situation.) The emergency actions drew a big response, and both brothers were released the following morning; their court cases are pending.

If the story ended there, I'd take it as a sign that cops are touchy about public confrontations following the Bell trial, but that prompt action on our part can keep their abuses in check. Unfortunately, there's more to tell. A week after the brothers' arrest, in the early hours of June 25th, unidentified police officers burst into G1's apartment in Harlem with guns drawn. According to G1's official statement

The uniformed police officers did not knock, nor announce themselves, nor verbally identify themselves before or during their entry into my apartment.

They pointed their guns at us the whole time as they verbally barraged [my roommate DW, my friend] MM and I with questions as to who we were and what we were doing there.

As I lay on the ground with my hands up, I replied loudly and clearly that I lived there, and that everyone in the house was supposed to be there.

They replied incredulously, repeatedly yelling their questions as to who we were, with threats as to what would happen to us if I was found to be lying.

After various other taunts and threats, including accusing us of harboring a fugitive criminal suspect, they departed just as quickly as they had arrived, down a side stairway adjacent to my apartment.

They did not stay to search me or my roommates, or the apartment for any signs of the supposed fugitive they were looking for.

G1 did get the badge numbers of two officers involved in the raid—by running into the middle of the street and flagging down a police vehicle that was peeling away from the scene. But even with that information, the incursion remains a mystery: “Both the 25th and 23rd NYPD precinct, which patrol my block, have denied that the officers involved are from their command.”

Two weeks ago, this news filled me with a sense of dread. I asked myself: where did the officers who raided G1’s apartment come from? Is this a police scare tactic, considering the high profile of the Rebel Diaz crew? Are police officers in New York veering into the realm of paramilitary-style violence against activists of color?

There’s still only sketchy information available at this point, but alongside other recent cases of police abuse, a formula seems to be emerging. The sequence of events goes like this: first a high-profile case of police brutality evokes public outrage and disgust; then, a few modest grassroots projects emerge to curtail police violence; finally, the cops execute targeted crackdowns on activists who’re bringing them scrutiny. By late June I had a feeling that the events in NYC contained an inner logic. My hunch was confirmed when I heard about a recent house raid in Philadelphia.

Philly

In the city of brotherly love, the same formula was repeated almost verbatim. First there was a case of police brutality: on May 5th, 12 to 14 Philadelphia cops were caught on camera by a Fox News helicopter as they dragged three shooting suspects from a vehicle and took turns kicking and beating them en masse. Much like the Bell case, footage of a rampaging mob of Philly police also prompted a broad public response. In fact, just a day after protesting the acquittal of Sean Bell’s killers, Al Sharpton announced his intention to travel to Philadelphia to address the situation. But beyond public speakers and movement figureheads, action was also a-brewin’ at the grassroots.

Some movement crystallized in the Francisville area of Philly, where a multiracial collective house started circulating petitions to address growing police harassment. Like many soon-to-be gentrifying neighborhoods, Francisville has endured aggressive policing as cops patrol on

behalf of wealthy landlords and residents from encroaching developments. The house's petition confronted the climate of fear and intimidation by calling on Philadelphia's Mayor and Police Commissioner to attend community meetings on police brutality, surveillance cameras, and "stop and frisk" policies.

The response was fast and flagrant: on June 13th, the Francisville house was raided by plainclothes police officers. As in New York, the cops entered without a warrant, and in this case the housemates were detained for 12 hours without charge. The pretext used by police to enter the house still isn't clear (officers on the scene called the housemates a "hate group," alleging they found "literature about killing cops" and "propaganda against the government" on the premises) but it is known that the Department of Homeland Security, the Housing Authority and the Department of Licensing all conducted tours of the property within hours.

When the residents eventually returned home, they found their building closed by the city for code violations, and it became clear later that the property had been thoroughly searched. Daniel Moffat, a resident of the Francisville house, found that

My computer was gone. I was informed that the Department of State had taken my computer for evidence. I couldn't find my phone list that was posted on the wall. I couldn't find a notepad with a bunch of my notes in it. I couldn't find this little book with a lot of phone numbers in it.

News of the raid in Philly reached me just a few days after the arrests of RodStarz and G1, and it shook me up. Not only was it troubling that a measly *petition* could draw the ire of the power structure, but two of my friends had stayed in the Francisville house just weeks before it was raided, and thus narrowly escaped being detained themselves.

Right now the folks in Philadelphia have regained access to their house, but continue to fight a legal battle over the building's alleged code violations. Investigation also continues into why the house was targeted by local and federal agencies in the first place, and much like in New York, many questions remain. I'm troubled by events in Philly and the implications they could have for us in NYC—but at the same time, I'm preoccupied with yet another case of repression that recently exploded on the west coast.

LA

After the Rodney King beating and the 1992 riots, the LAPD may be most famous for its crack-down on the Los Angeles May Day rally in 2007. As a huge, peaceful rally of community organizations and migrant groups came to a close in MacArthur Park that spring, the LAPD waded into the crowd, firing rubber bullets at families and elders and clubbing those who didn't disperse fast enough. Police helicopters hovering above the scene declared the rally closed, while below a phalanx of cops in riot gear chased people into the surrounding blocks.

Outcry over police brutality at the May Day rally received sympathetic coverage on national news networks, mostly because members of the corporate media were shoved, clubbed and beaten along with rally-goers as police swept through the park. At the same time, the LAPD's actions further solidified the work of Copwatch LA, an organization that documented the police attack on the rally and had been active for several months beforehand.

To my knowledge, Copwatch LA is the most active group of its kind in the United States. After gaining big public attention from a police brutality case early in its existence (a video they publicized of officers beating a man while suffocating him made the front page of Yahoo News), the group has built a large network of volunteers to document police activity around the city. Their website even features live feeds of copwatch photos from cellphones around LA, which is an impressive techy feat for a non-funded, grassroots group. Yet the early successes of the Copwatch LA have also put a powerful spotlight on the group's organizers—particularly a young man named Joaquin Cienfuegos.

Joaquin is a Latino anarchist from South Central LA, who came to New York this summer to meet folks struggling on the East coast, and share an almost-finished documentary on the 2007 attacks. He crashed in my apartment in June after a raucous evening in lower Manhattan, and we emailed a little afterward. Just a few days ago, I received word that he had been arrested and was being held on \$40,000 bail.

Fearing a repeat of NYC and Philly, I emailed for more info, and found the situation even higher-stakes. On June 27th, police officers pulled over Joaquin and a friend on their way home from a fundraiser for Copwatch LA and an Anarchist People of Color regional gathering. The anonymous friend put out a public statement a few days ago:

Joaquin said “they’re pulling us over” as we were turning down my block (La Mirada Avenue). I told Joaquin not to stop until we got in front of my house, because if they were going to kill us or beat our asses, it was going to happen on my block and in front of my house where people could see.

The police approached the car, and found Joaquin didn't have his license on him (it had been stolen a few weeks earlier.) This was reason enough to cuff Joaquin immediately, at which point

I also told them Joaquin needed to get my wheelchair out of his trunk so I can get out of his car. The pig came to the driver's side of the car and popped the trunk, went to the back and put the wheelchair together. At that point the pig saw a machete in the trunk and asked Joaquin “what was he doing with a machete?” Joaquin said that “he does gardening work from time to time and it shouldn't be ‘illegal’ to have a machete in his trunk.”

As I exited the car. they told me I could go home. So I crossed the street and observed them from in front of my home. From afar, I hear the pig ask Joaquin, “What's in this case?”

In the case was a gun owned by Joaquin, which resulted in a felony charge of “possession of a concealed firearm.”

I can't comment on the prevalence of guns in Los Angeles activist circles, never having worked on the streets of South Central. But I do know that the LAPD has proven itself at least as dangerous with loaded firearms as activists on the left, and at the same time, I know that the LAPD has a habit of throwing arms charges at activists they see as a threat.

In fact, the same thing happened recently to members of the Black Riders Liberation Party, a political formation made up of former gang members and black youth from around Los Angeles modeled on the Black Panther Party. Last fall, most of the Riders' leadership was rounded up

in a statewide sweep, charged with “conspiracy to purchase a concealed weapon,” and held on \$500,000 bail. Joaquin had been working closely with members of the BRLP to document their legal struggle, and Riders were in attendance at the fundraiser the night of Joaquin’s arrest. These connections, one imagines, would’ve been enough for the police to put Joaquin in their sights.

Today

As of this post, Joaquin has just been released from jail, where he was held on lockdown for most of his time inside. He now faces a lengthy legal battle, along with a fundraising effort to cover the loans needed to bail him out. And after the house raid in Philly, the attack on G1 in NYC, and this new arrest in Los Angeles, I’m struck by the brazenness of police attacks on activists of color in the U.S.

Three times in the last six weeks, the same formula came into play: after an incident of police brutality evoked public outcry and was met with a modest grassroots response, the power structure went to extreme lengths to target and eliminate activists working against cop impunity. This pattern suggests activists working for accountability and community power can expect repressive responses from local authorities, often without regard to public oversight or legal constraints and with the backing of federal agencies. Yikes.

At the same time, these acts of repression remind us of the scope of our struggles, and of the hurdles any movement that wishes to fundamentally transform our world must inevitably face. It’s a frightening prospect, sure, but it’s also an arena that can shape our tactics and strategies beyond theory and booklearnin’. To face these challenges, I’ve heard, you need to have a fire in your gut.

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