

Magic Actions

Tobi Haslett

2021

LEST WE FORGET. The fear, the weeks of waiting, the vivid force of the eyewitness testimony; the replaying of grisly footage and then the shock of the conviction: the whole drama of the Derek Chauvin trial—its obscenity and thin catharsis—would not have *taken place at all* were it not for last year’s riots. Police trials are rare. So is national uprising: looting, acts of vandalism, and the nightly carnival of torched police cars are what vaulted George Floyd’s death from single cruelty to American crisis, as the fires of Minneapolis swept through every major city. It feels both near and far now.

It’s been a year: long enough for the events to be flattened and foreshortened; long enough for the authorities to paint their account over the true one. Last month’s statements by Nancy Pelosi et al. exposed the hope that a guilty verdict for Chauvin will be enough to end this episode, sating the popular fury and killing the memory of the rebellion. We shall see. Even now, an official narrative has yet to emerge from the chaos of last spring. But it was stunning to watch the corporate media try to summon one and fail, confounded by the images they flashed in the public’s face. At the DNC last fall we saw how the uprising may be remembered: a sunny, noble blur of soaring rhetoric and “peaceful” crowds—a fabulous alternative to the rawness on the ground.

But certain facts remain; some things can’t be wished away. Too much was born and broken amid the smoke and screams. The least we can do is remember—to try, after the riots, after the speeches, after the backlash and elections, and after this latest (live-streamed) liturgy of American “criminal justice,” to recall what really happened, extracting and reconstructing the whole flabbergasting sequence. Last year something massive came hurtling into view and exploded against the surface of daily life in the US. Many are still struggling to grasp what that thing was: its shape and implications, its sudden scale and bitter limits. One thing we know for sure is that it opened with a riot, on the street in Minneapolis where Floyd had cried out “I can’t breathe.”

THOSE WERE ERIC GARNER’S LAST WORDS. To hear them repeated, six years later, by another black man slain on camera by police, lent the instant rage and hurt a humiliated futility. The dream of Black Lives Matter now seemed shredded by events. Michael Brown in Ferguson, Freddie Gray in Baltimore—the murders of these young black men launched explosive local uprisings, which were followed (but never matched) by demonstrations across the country. Those were marches, not rebellions; large and passionate, but a degree removed. For the first few days it seemed that Minneapolis would follow suit: a riot in a single city, to be met with the old routine:

lament the stubborn “tensions” that wrack this “complex” country—then try to pin the violence on notorious “outside agitators.” Videos had already surfaced of white militants smashing glass. There were other videos, of course—the ransacked Lake Street Target; brute assaults by the police; clouds of tear gas blotting out entire city blocks—that revealed the robust presence of black people in the street. But fantasy proved irresistible. Was this a plot by anarchists, or the radical right-wing fringe? Tim Walz, the Minnesota governor, announced that 80 percent of the rioters had arrived from out of town. No matter that this was a total falsehood, to be rescinded the following day. In high authoritarian style, the rumors rhymed felicitously with the song sung by the state.

But the destruction of the Third Precinct—this was striking, and truly new. The situation in Minneapolis burst beyond its early outline. On the evening of May 28, the third night of the rebellion, the police were forced to evacuate their own building, trounced on the very territory they had disciplined and patrolled, broadcasting to the nation their own fear and vulnerability. (Malcolm X, who dreamed of a black revolution that would lift lessons from the French one, would perhaps have smiled at this latter-day storming of the Bastille.) The retreat was caught on camera and streamed on social media: the infiltrated precinct feasted on by flames, vans pelted with projectiles as they sped out of the parking lot, the sound of shattering windshields mixed with the rebels’ howls and cheers.

The event felt like a fulcrum. The whole country seemed to tilt: sacked shopping malls in Los Angeles and pillaged luxury outlets in Atlanta, a siege on New York’s SoHo and flaming vehicles from coast to coast. Pictures of Philadelphia and Washington DC showed whole neighborhoods bristling with insurgency, crowds smashed the lordly windows in Chicago’s Loop, and rioters set fire to the Market House, where slaves were bought and sold, in Fayetteville, North Carolina, the town where Floyd was born. Not all of this, surely, could be the work of agents provocateurs. Something deeper and more disruptive had breached the surface of social life, conjuring exactly the dreaded image the conspiracy theorists refused to face. This was open black revolt: simultaneous but uncoordinated, a vivid fixture of American history sprung to life with startling speed. A thousand seven hundred US towns and cities—the number was absurd. Within a week 62,000 National Guardsmen were dispatched to support city forces as they lurched to regain control. But what emerged under the banner of blackness was soon blended with other elements, flinging multi-racial crowds against soldiers and police. In living memory, this breadth and volume was virtually unprecedented, apart from the national uprisings sparked by the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.—a name wheeled out, on cue, to bemoan the unruliness of the rebellion.

But “rebellion” and even “uprising” soon fell from widespread use: as spring slid into summer, the preferred term devolved to “protests,” a change that marked the last phase in this jagged political sequence. There was constant, fractious overlap between differing attitudes and tactics. At first, battles in big cities outweighed more ordered, placid actions, but these soon became the standard (although Seattle and Portland were gripped by an insurrectionist element for months). A controlled but keen exuberance ruled the last months of demonstrations, which were less likely to result in ravaged property or mass arrests. By fall, the marches of the Obama years had in many ways returned, but flushed with a new fury—a gift given them by the riots.

We need not fear that word. In fact it’s vital to insist, over the drone of an amnesiac discourse, that last year’s spate of protest was *propelled*, made fiercely possible, by massive clashes in the street—not tainted or delegitimized by them, nor assembled from thin air. Those threatened by that fact will work to wipe it from our minds. The first phase of BLM thus made the case—

unleashed the anguish—that was acted on last spring, in the flash of confrontation with the shock troops of the law.

Some were more prepared than others. At the start of the New York uprising, I saw a line of baton-swinging officers break through a makeshift barricade; a group of marchers fell back, and were chastised by a young black man who chose to stand his ground. “What are you doing?” he screamed at those retreating. “What did you even come here for?” A few nights later, under citywide curfew and after the trains had been shut down, a friend and I called a cab home in a bid to evade arrest. As we sped along the East River, the driver glanced in the rear-view mirror and asked if we’d come from the demonstrations. Yes, we told him carefully, we’d been going out every night. His eyes smiled above his facemask. “You have to find the biggest brick you can,” he said, “and then you make it count.”

“I AM NOT SAD,” Martin Luther King wrote, as cities exploded in the late 1960s, “that black Americans are rebelling; this was not only inevitable but eminently desirable.” He was killed on a motel balcony before he could see those words in print. They appear in “A Testament of Hope,” an essay often cited as proof of his socialist politics, which grew more rigid and explicit by the time he was taken out. (It happens that “desirable” and “historically inevitable” are key terms in Rosa Luxemburg’s account of the mass strike.) King had begun to direct the Civil Rights movement toward the struggle of black workers; in 1967, he described the National Liberation Front not as a menace, but a legitimate “revolutionary government seeking self-determination” in Vietnam. And he arrived at a rapprochement with what had come to be known as Black Power: his late alliance with Malcolm X posed a brazen challenge to the white power structure that, in the wake of both men’s convenient assassinations, pitted them against each other in a facile national myth. Malcolm, the black Muslim, was denounced as a vengeful thug; King is now for many a picture of eloquent docility. But he was hated by the kind of moderate who now invokes him to condemn the riots.

King’s nonviolent protest was the fruit of a rigorous spiritual discipline—as well as a tactic, deployed pragmatically, before a scrim of mounting chaos. This was a theory of “direct action.” Tension and confrontation were fundamental to the task. By applying unremitting pressure to every facet of civic life, he wished, as he wrote in “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” to foment “a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.” The backdrop to that negotiation was the black rage breaking out in cities across the country; armed resistance groups were forming in black enclaves in the north and west. Here was another “crisis-packed” possibility, so some of the state’s concessions to the Baptist reverend may have been clinched by the urban rebels. And by the late 1960s, as King’s vision swept beyond mere equality before the law, he came to see revolt as a simple fact of his political moment. Nothing to relish or openly cultivate—or bombastically decry. “The constructive achievement of the decade 1955 to 1965 deceived us,” he wrote. “Everyone underestimated the amount of violence and rage Negroes were suppressing and the vast amount of bigotry the white majority was disguising.”

This later King has been supplanted by a glimmering hologram of bland obedience, beamed in instantly to vilify anything violent or simply rude. (I saw many demonstrators chide others for their taunts and foul language.) Years of peaceful BLM rallies had met with years of elite inertia—but many last spring insisted that “bad” protesters (smashing property) would undo the work of the “good” ones (holding signs), some of whom were so flattered by this divisive strategy by the press that they went to flamboyant lengths to broadcast their own grinning, willing harmlessness. A pageant soon ensued (and thankfully subsided). Officers armed to the teeth marched besides

newly minted pacifists; National Guardsmen did the Macarena with the people they were licensed to kill. Nonviolence, once a tool, today glows with the power of fetish. And, unlike King, many marchers seemed to believe that good manners would be repaid with gentler policing.

They were vigorously disabused of this, as peaceful crowds were bashed, gassed, cuffed, maced, kettled for hours, and driven into by police vans—on May 30 alone, eight people were left partly blind from rubber bullets. On the first night of the New York rebellion I was nearly struck by an NYPD vehicle barreling down a crowded street; the driver came out and howled at us before bursting into tears. The next week I was arrested at the most orderly demonstration I saw all spring—not a single broken window. After less than an hour of marching through the South Bronx, we were choked on all sides by officers who kept us in place until the emergency curfew fell. Then came the attack: cordons of police pressed hard on either side of the trapped crowd and began to wallop anything that moved—many officers clambered onto parked cars to swing truncheons at our skulls. (My friend had worn his bicycle helmet, which within minutes was shattered in half.) The marchers were picked out from the crowd one by one as the police beat their way through the screaming kettle: two officers grabbed my arms and slammed me to the tarmac; a third knelt on my spine and bound my wrists in plastic cuffs. I stayed in that position, arms twisted behind my back, for eight of the seventeen hours I spent in police custody. But from the chaos of that night, one thing burns brightest in my memory: the hush that fell over the crowded cell as the gate swung open for a young white man. Like us, he was still in cuffs. But he'd been beaten worse than anyone else, his head cracked so hard that his red hair was plastered to his skull and his small face blackened with dried blood. With his arms pinned behind his back, he looked like a bird in an oil spill.

As more mayors imposed curfews, suspended food programs, and—in the sadistic instance of Eric Garcetti of Los Angeles—closed Covid-19 testing sites in revenge for the rebellion, the wheedling rhetoric of “nonviolence” implored marchers to submit to official diktat. “Anyone who is a peaceful protester, it’s time to go home,” Bill de Blasio said on live TV. I suspect that King would be sickened that his legacy was being travestied by the state that terrorized him—and rueful, if unsurprised, that revolt was still flaring in 2020.

But the riots worked. The beast groaned. Despite the many criticisms streaming through the media, the destruction of property struck many as a defensible answer to state violence: *Newsweek*—not known for its anarchist sympathies—reported that a full 54 percent of Americans saw the siege on the police precinct as “justified.” The riots were too large and widespread, and expressed too popular a discontent, to be explained away by belting out the familiar anthems of condemnation. One old lament—that looters were destroying their own neighborhoods—seemed especially flimsy this time, as post-Minneapolis, crowds waged war on the (well-insured) commercial districts of the nation’s downtowns.

In 2014, the failure to indict Darren Wilson for killing Michael Brown doubled the sense of helplessness fury; within days of Floyd’s death, Chauvin was charged with murder in the third degree, which as the riot roared along was promptly raised to second. Another third-degree charge was added just before the trial’s start at the end of March. But the punishment of particular officers was no longer the thrust of this social movement. (To some demonstrators, it’s anathema.) “People are still out protesting,” Andrew Cuomo moaned three weeks into the uprising. “You don’t need to protest. You won. You won. You accomplished your goal. Society says, you’re right. Police need systemic reform.” This statement—a lovely mixture of condescension and real fear—

sped deftly past the fact that for many, “reform” is not the point. They’re fighting for abolition: an end to the police.

“ENOUGH,” Mariame Kaba, an abolitionist organizer, wrote in mid-June. “We can’t reform the police. The only way to diminish police violence is to reduce contact between the public and the police.” That this opinion was printed in the *New York Times* announced its debut in the dominant discourse. Here, in the paper of record, was an argument for stripping departments of funding with a view to their full elimination—the chief demand of the rebellion, as the latest round of “police reform” has been a costly, shambling farce. Obama’s Task Force on 21st-Century Policing, which concluded in 2015, offered recommendations on training, equipment and department culture, often with the effect of increasing law enforcement spending; indeed, many of these proposals had been adopted in Minneapolis. The blasted carcass of the Third Precinct hinted that the issue runs somewhat deeper. The abolition of police and prisons has always been the ideological engine of BLM, an inheritance of the Black Panthers’ Ten Point Program: “We want freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county, and city in prisons and jails,” reads number 8. This tradition was kept alive by grassroots groups and championed in the academy and public sphere by the scholar-organizers Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore.

But even they must have been astonished when, on the thirteenth day of the rebellion, the Minneapolis City Council made an unexpected announcement: it had voted to disband the city’s police. The day before the vote, mayor Jacob Frey had been booed out of a rally for refusing to back the measure: chants of “Go home, Jacob!” thrummed the air as he picked his way through the livid crowd. (His embarrassment was, of course, compounded by the fact that the council’s vote was veto-proof.) The proposal was for a full-scale dismantling of the Minneapolis police force, to be followed by—something else. But the change may never take place. The effort has already hit a legal roadblock, as the department is protected—and given chilling autonomy—by a city charter from 1920. Faced with the enormity of the consequences, council members walked back their earlier pronouncements and reduced the 2021 police budget by a meager 4.5 percent. From the start, some abolitionists feared that this attempt could even lead to an insidious sharpening of social control (as when the police in Camden, New Jersey were disbanded in 2013) or the city being taken over by the Minnesota State Patrol. Now it’s clear that a transformation on the municipal scale will take the continuing mobilization of the people in the street—as well as a deepening of the conversation about what the police do, and are. Scrapping departments isn’t enough; neither is closing prisons. Incarceration and policing have become the state’s annihilating reflex when confronted with murder and sexual violence, but also homelessness and addiction—the social disintegration that marks those lives consumed by poverty.

Prisons mop up poor people, not bad people. (Last year’s decarceration program—a measure adopted in many, but not enough, jurisdictions as a means to curb the spread of Covid—has yet to be statistically linked to rearrests.) Vital to abolitionist thought is, as a first step, a redistributive mission. The extraordinary amount of money spent on punishment in the US should instead go to preventive and rehabilitation programs—a “nonreformist reform”—but more crucial is an assault, on every level, on the political consensus that’s ripped the welfare state to ribbons. This will raise the “social wage” and drive fewer to the desperation simply classified as crime.

But behind even the most sparkling policy initiatives lies the knowledge that a world without police and prisons can only follow from ruthless criticism and transformation of every piece of the social whole. This is a revolutionary project. “Abolition,” Gilmore has said, “requires that we change one thing, which is everything.” It’s this position, which treats the struggles of

race and class as historically and strategically linked, that's sparked and revived debates within and beyond the Left. The Panthers were armed socialists; Davis was a 1960s militant who's been the Communist Party Vice Presidential candidate, twice. And in *Golden Gulag*, Gilmore's geographical study of the boom in California prisons—her argument is driven in large part by the Marxian conception of “surplus”—she titles her Ten Theses on abolition after Lenin's famous pamphlet: “What Is to Be Done?” Somehow *this* is the movement making strides in the United States of America. To the scattered victories of abolitionists towards the tail end of last year—the weakening of police unions, severance of several law enforcement contracts with universities and public schools, the (token) shrinking of police budgets in a handful of major cities—we might add an ideological one: black radicalism has hacked a path back to the mainstream political scene.

Naturally, the calls to defund police departments have appalled some self-styled sympathizers of the protests; high-ranking Democrats now claim the slogan harmed them in local elections. And common-sense pundits have leapt into the fracas, citing problems that only a vast, armed, proudly ungovernable, extravagantly subsidized municipal fighting force can solve. It appears not to matter that by nearly every measure US police forces are far from competent (the clearance rate of murder cases across the country is abysmal). In fact, one in thirteen of all murders are committed by police; of those committed by strangers, the proportion is one third. And there's no evident curiosity about the social roots of “crime.” Skeptics are of course right to point out the high incidence of murder and assault, but scant effort is made to prevent them, or even explain why these violations are so common in the US.

No economy in the “developed world” is as unequal as this one. And no state in human history has thrust so many behind bars. (This is true per capita and as well as in raw numbers, as the US accounts for a quarter of the global prison population.) These are linked phenomena: where the state claims to root out roiling chaos and depravity, abolitionists see whole stripes of the population deemed irrelevant to capital—the melancholy underside of a glittering accumulation. That accumulation has twisted nimbly into new and savage forms. In the public mind, the great victims of the neoliberal order are white workers stripped of factory jobs, and castaways from the middle class. But they are not alone.

Those who were already subject to high levels of joblessness and homelessness, who rely on the support of eviscerated public services, and whose rent is currently multiplying in an open bid to banish them, have also been impaled on the rapacity of this new world. They're seen as scrapped, depleted people, darkly troublesome in their superfluity, doomed to rattle through the metropolis until they're hunted by the state. Many of them are black. In reactionary folklore, they all are: “law and order” policies, tools for disposing of these “surplus” people, were first sold to voters as a way to ward off black rebellion. (Included in that category was the now-hallowed Civil Rights Movement.) Now the “informal economy” beckons to those shipwrecked by the real one; cages and police bullets claim the poor and unemployed. Only a steroidal ideology can beat back the glaring fact that the surge in jails, bail, police, prisons—that is, “mass incarceration”—is an expression of this system at its most crashing and advanced. This a moralism without ethics, an “austerity” of waste: the catastrophic maintenance of a specious urban peace.

That peace is paid for, dearly, in the daily lives of the black poor. For decades every slice of the political class has told a little fable about why this is: absent fathers, the “culture of poverty,” a lack of “opportunity,” the startling attitudes trumpeted by certain genres of popular music. The right wields these clichés as the weapons they in fact are, while the Democratic center opts to mawkishly rephrase them. Perhaps the blare of sentimentalism can drown out the churn of

the machine. Take Mayor Frey’s indulgent bawling as he knelt beside Floyd’s casket, and the vaudevillian spectacle of Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi striding into the Capitol last June, joined by a clutch of their party colleagues to introduce the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020. Each wore an Ashanti kente cloth—a sign of “solidarity” in the florid realm of culture—and proceeded to perform a ritual dreamed up by “peaceful protesters” last spring: the Democrats knelt in silence for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, exactly the length of time Chauvin’s knee dug into Floyd’s neck. Their gesture echoes Colin Kaepernick, but given the details of Floyd’s passing amounts to a pantomime of his murder.

The Act itself, a second version of which passed in the House in early March, was an echo of the Obama-era reforms. It was also scraped of any acknowledgement of the conditions that made it “necessary”—namely that, measured against whites, black people are vastly poorer and more imperiled. They are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed, twice as likely to go hungry. They’re more than twice as likely to be killed by the police, more than three times as likely to be incarcerated, and last year were twice as likely to lose their lives to Covid-19. This is not a coincidence. It follows from the slashing idiosyncrasies of their history as a people, their specific wincing intimacy with the abstractions of “state” and “property.” Black people were property: any abolitionist will remind you that the many US police departments grew from slave patrols meant to enforce this, raking the land for runaways and throttling black revolts. From forced labor to endemic joblessness, from hated ballasts of the economy to hated exiles from its present form: this road was paved with bloodshed and contempt enshrined as law. Lynching, segregation, the Great Migration, restrictive covenants, discrimination at work, exclusion from unions, and throughout all this the drumbeat of state violence in the street—the varieties of degradation are enough to make you fling a brick.

It is hard to find new words for this. Radical passion has been gutted, blunted, deflected, suppressed—and frozen into rhetoric, peddled as commodity. In the face of establishment cynicism and the promise of “representation,” it can be hard to voice real outrage, and the ache of collective grief. “Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us,” Richard Wright wrote in 1940, “but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem.” Indeed, some of the most celebrated black literature of the last century centers on state terror and the rebuke to it, books planted throughout the culture as flags for blackness itself. Every James Baldwin novel but the last hangs on a false conviction or a scene of police abuse. The climax of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is a riot that streaks through Harlem after officers kill a street vendor: the protagonist can’t help but marvel at the chaos that envelops him, the “bursting, tearing movement of people around me, dark figures in a blue glow.” Some of the best poems of Gwendolyn Brooks’s explicitly militant period—“Boy Breaking Glass,” the three-part “Riot” sequence—are angular, late-modernist renderings of an era of black revolt, an era hymned in Amiri Baraka’s tribute to the Newark rebellion of 1967. Baraka was beaten and arrested, then thrown into solitary confinement, but his riot poem, “Black People!,” rings with euphoria: “Smash the windows daytime, anytime, together, let’s smash the window drag the shit from in there. No money down. No time to pay. Just take what you want. The magic dance in the street.”

MARTYRS DRIVE THIS MOVEMENT: they are its origin and blazing emblems. But some of the most infamous police murders extend from more quotidian debasements. Everyone knows that “broken windows” theory—that cracking down on minor infractions will deter more serious

crimes—has drilled an armed state presence deeper into the lives of the urban poor. Eric Garner was harassed repeatedly before his death in 2014; police even took his exhausted fury at this as pretext to throw him to the ground. “I told you the last time,” he begs in the video recording as officers close in, “please leave me alone!” Seven years earlier he’d been stopped on the street and told to flatten himself against a police car. According to the federal lawsuit that he later filed against the NYPD, an officer pulled down Garner’s pants, groped his genitals, dug his fingers into his rectum and jeered that he was a paroled felon who should never have been given a job with the city’s parks. The officer “violated my civil rights” for “his personal pleasure,” read the suit, which Garner wrote out—by hand—while jailed on Rikers Island.

In Ferguson, Darren Wilson was cleared of all federal civil rights violations after an investigation led by Eric Holder, the head of Obama’s justice department. The findings did, however, expose that the city had been fending off fiscal apocalypse by ticketing black people at outrageous rates. One section, titled “Ferguson Law Enforcement Efforts Are Focused on Generating Revenue,” revealed that “issuing three or four charges in one stop is not uncommon in Ferguson. Officers sometimes write six, eight, or, in at least one instance, fourteen citations for a single encounter. Indeed, officers told us that some compete to see who can issue the largest number of citations during a single stop.”

Police plundered the black population because at bottom they knew they could. They knew that in the eyes of authority, the black poor are threatening monstrosities, but also violable and devalued, available to be pulped. You can stalk them, prod them, punish them; feel free to take whatever you want from them. Those who didn’t pay their fines on time in Ferguson were slapped with warrants for their arrest. So when after years of fleecing and abuse, the police slaughtered a teenage boy and left the corpse splayed in the street, the people did what they could: they ripped the city to pieces. Within months the local government declared that all prior warrants for tickets would be annulled. Those people are still impoverished and overwhelmingly endangered; they didn’t topple the racial hierarchy or reverse their dispossession. But the events last spring would be unthinkable without the example of Ferguson’s poor: under the spotlight of the national media and the fire of the National Guard, they broke open a new phase of struggle when they forced the state to flinch. “Smash the window at night,” wrote Baraka, “(these are magic actions.)”

Within this rage and mourning, there are layers, contradictions. Breonna Taylor was killed by Louisville, Kentucky police who bashed down her door in the night and started shooting. They were looking for her ex-boyfriend while scouring the area for undesirables, in advance of a “high dollar” real estate project planned for that section of the city. Taylor’s murder took place two months before Floyd’s. But his was the one that stirred popular passion, lending further credence to the black feminist claim that, although almost every media-friendly voice in this movement has belonged to a woman (Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi founded the Black Lives Matter Network in 2013), victims such as Rekia Boyd and Sandra Bland are tacitly deemed less significant communal losses, and thus less worthy of mass grief. The same measure applies to black trans victims such as Tony McDade, who was gunned down last May by Tallahassee police. Though recognition is spreading fast that black trans people face great volumes of targeted violence, the riots were not for him.

Meanwhile the black elite has rarely been so resented by the “community” it claims to champion. Class, a topic scrubbed from much of US political discourse, has swirled into peculiar shapes within black life since the 1960s. Desegregation did little more than lift the legal barrier to the

labor market, which meant a ripple—not a revolution—in American arrangements of race and wealth. This new league of professionals has remained so faithful to the Democrats that Biden couldn't help but boast of his seigniorial entitlement to the black vote: "If you have a problem figuring out whether you're for me or for Trump, then you ain't black!"

The statement neatly captures the chuckling smugness of his party. Four days later, Floyd was killed. "Black liberal, your time is up," ran the headline in Al-Jazeera, as the riot crashed through Minneapolis. Black mayors of big cities—Keisha Bottoms in Atlanta, Muriel Bowser in Washington DC and (infamously) Chicago's Lori Lightfoot—were among the most strident voices raised against the rebellion. Writing in the *New York Times*, Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor offered a biting summary of the past few decades of black Democrats: "Black elected officials have become adept at mobilizing the tropes of black identity without any of its political content." A movement that first tilted gently against party leadership and sought some form of redistribution has since bowed to corporate influence and the edicts of the DNC. All this has been justified by the desire for "black faces in high places." The Congressional Black Caucus and a cluster of black mayors joined the party in embracing finance and austerity, as well as "law and order" policies meant to douse the mounting flames.

It's worth lingering, here, to note that the chief beneficiaries of Civil Rights were those black people poised to scale the heights of class and meritocracy. (The rest were left to languish as a sociological "problem.") But the path has been a swerving one, lined with prickling little ironies. Many of these people heaved themselves into white-collar employment just as the middle class began its crumble into neoliberal instability and launched their long march through the universities as degrees plummeted in value. A large chunk of this layer grew up within familial earshot of urban poverty, and thus carries the vivid memory of what proletarian life actually looks like: many of them know the pain of visiting family behind bars. So their middle-income existence is pressed up against the so-called underclass—a link to be minimized or insisted on, grateful for or raged against, brandished as cultural birthright or folded shrewdly into sensibility. But never fully severed. They still know the sting of condescension or outright hatred. And though abolition is still a new notion, their children are largely raised with blunt distrust of the police. With little wealth to inherit, these families possess far less property than their white counterparts, and even that prosperity seems to vanish with mortifying frequency. "White boys who grew up rich are more likely to remain that way," pronounced a study published in the *Times* in 2018. "Black boys raised at the top are more likely to become poor than stay wealthy in their own adult households."

For huge swathes of black America, Obama was a triumph and realized dream; for the middle class, he was a mirror. The fierce, conflicting aspects of their harrowing evolution were prettily reproduced in his image and political style. His centrist managerialism was cast as a triumph of Civil Rights; the old injunction to be "respectable" was softened by his much-touted love of rap. His speeches seemed to stream down from a place of unpretentious elevation, so he could lash out at poor black people and expect gratitude for his frankness. Drone strikes, deportations and fealty to the banks were balanced by the moral prestige of the historical black struggle.

Ferguson ripped a hole in the middle of Obama's second term. He lapsed into ambivalence: though sometimes sonorous about the forces arrayed against young black men, he lambasted the Baltimore uprising as a terror wrought by "thugs." Those sympathetic to Obama saw him as having to placate irreconcilable constituencies—a position he also held as the recession disproportionately affected black families. The period between 2008 and 2016 saw black homeownership

decrease at calamitous rates: negative home equity shot up in the black community when the housing bubble burst and continued to skyrocket for years after it began to decline among whites, all observed from an astral distance by the first black commander-in-chief. So he was—at best—irrelevant to the fates of those who loved him most. No trill of rhetoric or stirring gesture could stop the tank of financial capital, or shield the fragile fortunes of the new black middle class.

It's that part of the black world—*their* anger, *their* comfort, *their* belated conscription to the harried scramble for the American good life, *their* uncertain place beneath the fluorescent lights of the corporate office—that's become a point of panicked fixation in the aftermath of the riots. It was hard not to laugh at the official response to the rebellion, as every brand and elite institution rolled out the same manic public statement, declaring their love for their black employees and allegiance to BLM. But, perhaps inevitably, that daffy piety became the rule. One outcome of the uprising is the expansion of a zealous antiracist discourse that remains silent about the street battles that gave it marvelous topicality.

This is not a new phenomenon. The past six years had seen the passions of Ferguson displaced by efforts to give white professionals moral lessons and a smattering of black people prestigious posts. Black professionals, after all, are the crown jewels of the liberal reformist mission: their presence on the campus or conference call performs a shining symbolic task. This is the only sliver of black America to feel the full effects of integration—so the shivering, conflicted existence of this minority within a minority stands as talismanic promise that the wound of history might be healed. In Obama's first public statement after the events in Minneapolis—months before he intervened to break a strike by professional basketball players—he began by quoting an email sent to him by an "African American businessman."

Any sign of this group's ingratitude provokes perplexity and dismay. One of the most sensationalized early episodes from the riots concerned two lawyers in their early thirties who faced decades in prison for their alleged actions in New York. One is Pakistani-American and the other is black: raised working-class in Brooklyn, he was plucked by a non-profit organization and spirited away to a bucolic boarding school, followed by Princeton, law school, then a budding career as a corporate attorney, only to see this fantastic future evaporate when—for reasons breathlessly speculated on in the national media—he drove his friend around the demonstrations as she pitched Molotov cocktails at police vehicles. This may or may not point to something rustling through the spring, when quite a few young black people placed within this rickety middle class chose to cross the mystic threshold between "respectability" and dignity: they went out to meet the riots.

"WE SHOULD NOT JUST SCREAM," Mike Davis said in May. "We need to start breaking things, quite frankly." But this interview on the podcast *Time to Say Goodbye* appeared a full week before Floyd's death; his comments didn't refer to police murder, but the economic and social catastrophe triggered by the spread of Covid-19. No reckoning with the eruption in late May can elide the role played by the virus. It should come as little surprise that last year the most unequal developed nation racked up just under 20 percent of global deaths from Covid-19. The crisis has brought chaos to the incarcerated population—which, as a result of crowding and neglect, reached an infection rate over five times the national average—and detainees at Rikers Island were forced to dig mass graves for Covid casualties in New York City. Deaths across the country are highest among the non-white poor: black and Latino communities were hit especially hard, and several Native American reservations soon became capitals of infection.

The spectacle of governmental fecklessness—right-wing legislators dismissing the likeliness of an outbreak, only to quickly reverse their policies as infections soared—reflected an element of popular will. This is the land of the free. The most furious market imperatives throb deep within the soul. It will be hard to forget that the Lieutenant Governor of Texas insisted with pride that many vulnerable senior citizens, confronted with the prospect that a lockdown might wreck the economy for their grandchildren, would rather die. It was easy to scoff or screech at this, but beneath the boom of right-wing rhetoric, you could make out the faint, metallic whirring of liberal technocratic complicity: the Trump Administration’s relief plan, drafted in collaboration with Democratic Senate leader Chuck Schumer, passed with near unanimous bipartisan support.

It was a stop-gap. And after decades of neoliberal consensus, perhaps the most one could expect. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES), followed by dribbles of supplemental legislation, was a forced experiment in social democracy. A single check for \$1,200 was supposed to tide people over for months; relief to workers suddenly stripped of income was routed through unemployment insurance and ran out while the virus continued to soar. (A second relief bill proved impossible to pass before the November election.) The historian Robert Brenner has characterized the bill as plutocratic plunder. High earners whose work was uninterrupted by lockdown measures made out quite well, which explains the uptick in national savings and the relative health of the financial markets.

The bill was a corporate bailout of historic proportions, allowing for a galling amount of Federal Reserve money—10 percent of annual GDP—to be handed to the heads of the largest companies, with scandalously little oversight. And what about the entrepreneurs—those mascots of national ideology and great victims of the rebellion? In December, the *Times* reported that of the \$523 billion disbursed through the Payroll Protection Program, over a quarter was awarded to the top 1 percent of applicants—among them corporate law firms and a steakhouse chain owned by CNN founder Ted Turner. As pundits howled last spring at the sickening spectacle of looted storefronts, the vast majority of small businesses were floundering not from riots, but from lack of federal support. (Hundreds of businesses received checks for \$99 or less.) Across the economic field, a brief period of relief gave way to a still-unfurling disaster: record numbers are facing eviction, record numbers cannot feed themselves, at least eight million people have fallen into poverty. For months before Floyd’s death, the horrors were compounded, and combustible.

Black struggle struck the match. The future of that struggle now lies coiled in an enigma: why, at a point of overlapping crises and hypnotic social freefall, did the killing of a single black man unleash the largest wave of demonstrations this country has ever seen, as well as a multi-racial revenge on private property and the state? Something more than liberal sympathy was at work here—something more potent and less vaporous, at once rooted in the American past and reflective of recent developments. Slogans notwithstanding, institutions historically justified by the hatred of black people have turned a greedy eye toward other groups. In the US, Native Americans see the highest proportion of people killed by police. Punitive immigration policies have caused prisons and detention centers to swell with Latin American detainees. (The Los Angeles riots of 1992 are remembered as a black uprising, but the majority of those arrested, as well as those charged with arson, were Latinx.) Although black people are still incarcerated at by far the highest rates, abolitionists have long claimed that the state would happily lock up higher numbers of poor whites, as has been proven with brutal flair across the country.

But the fight against police and prisons remains bound up with *black* liberation because one people feels the harshest shocks of economic earthquake and has served as a kind of vanguard in

its subjection to state cruelty. A practice of militancy issued from this historical experience. Clattering with internal disputes and handed down for generations, the real black movement isn't the nursery rhyme recited brightly in the public sphere, but a protracted battle against domination at its most naked and unconstrained—King, on the day he was killed, was to give a sermon called “Why America May Go to Hell.” So it's possible that the death of Floyd reverberated so painfully because under the delirious conditions induced by the pandemic, whole sections of the middle class seemed to walk through the political looking glass. In an instant they were poorer and even more insecure, their noses bluntly rubbed in their disposability to capital. Left without a livelihood by callous fiat in a moment of crisis, they were treated to that peculiar *mélange* of state control and state neglect—the punitive abandonment that paints the lives of the black poor.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE? (The fraught, irrepressible question comes twisting to the surface.) The paths pursued by Occupy Wall Street and BLM—the twin children of the financial crash—may trace the silhouette of the present challenge. Occupy shot up spontaneously as a brisk political motley—anarchists jostled beside progressives who wanted only to rein in the financial sector. The most lasting legacy of the encampments (which were, of course, stormed and at last destroyed by municipal police forces) was the rhetoric of “the 99 percent”—populist, universalist, and by the end of the decade emblazoned across both primary campaigns of the social democrat Bernie Sanders. (The anarchism had been forgotten.) With him “democratic socialism” entered the mainstream political lexicon.

Last spring, when the black movement came flashing back to life, it was less legitimate, less “nonviolent”, and looked nothing like the socialists seeking glory at the ballot box. And the riots burst mere months after Sanders bowed out of the primary, so the two strands of struggle fell into an enlightening juxtaposition. From Occupy to Bernie; from BLM to the Floyd rebellion. One rocketed up the ranks of state, while the other fought its power far more fiercely this time around; one pinned its hopes on universal programs to be beamed down from the Oval Office, while the other floods streets under the sign of a single group. One takes up distribution, the other force, repression: two functions, in the end, of selfsame state machine. But under the particular conditions bequeathed by US history, the first was coded “white,” the second—starkly—black.

Yet the fights are fused, and need each other. They form two spokes on a single wheel: the sociopolitical cataclysm of rising un- and underemployment. It's no coincidence that the first time the black movement has laid claim to cities since Black Power was amid the post-crash “jobless recovery”—nor that the riots came hurtling back as millions were stripped of work last spring. The racist, decades-long program of mass incarceration accompanied austerity and stagnant wages, as the incomes of the vulnerable fell even further into perilous uncertainty. And even the smallest steps on the path to abolition will rely on Gilmore's call to raise the social wage: a call being answered, almost exclusively, by a newborn socialist left. Over two thirds of American voters support this left's main proposal, Medicare for All—as private health care is a rarefied employee benefit in a time of widening informality. Nothing in recent memory has fulfilled the socialist hope of politicizing state and city budgets with the swiftness of the spring rebellion. And we'll never know if Biden's recent stimulus bill, which constitutes a historic leftward lurch in fiscal policy, could have been passed without the battles in the street. If this really does foretell a break with neoliberal governance—a somewhat shocking claim repeated in certain quadrants of the left—any honest account of this change will have to feature not just the efforts of progressive legislators, but the rebirth of the black struggle.

But both camps are internally divided and brim with distrust of the other. BLM's most officious, nonprofit element still risks becoming an ornament to philanthropy and public relations; the technical "leaderlessness" of the movement has rendered it malleable by the liberal center. Sanders was savaged loudly, and only sometimes in good faith, for his supposed indifference to US racism—laughable hypocrisy from the Democratic establishment, which he was nevertheless terrible at rebutting. This did not, however, stop him from joining Joe Biden in coming out *against* defunding police. It's impossible to say what comes next, either for the black movement against state terror or the state-facing redistributive effort, but short of a defeat of capital in a single, stunning stroke, any left that hopes to assemble its flailing forces must find a way to join the two clearest fronts of conflict: on one hand build class power by wresting benefits from the state, on the other slay the beast that eats the dark and poor. Real unity will have to be established by new kinds of action and organization. (It bears repeating that the New Deal, a social democratic reform and nostalgic model for a slew of progressive policymakers—itsself riven by racial exclusions—came into being after years of police beating and tear-gassing "disruptive" throngs of the unemployed.) Policy-minded leftists, liberated from their dreams of capturing the executive branch, have now been forced to reckon with the humbling blaze of urban uprising. Socialists must learn from the riots. Legible, polished politics and the smashing fist of black rebellion—they may be linked by the dialectic, which in the famous allegory chains the master to his slave.

"A revolution is not just constant fighting," James Boggs wrote in 1968. Of all of the black radicals whose legacies are now being scoured for lessons, his is among the brightest and most appropriate to this new phase. Born in Alabama in 1919, he spent nearly thirty years working in the Chrysler plant in Detroit, during which he agitated on behalf of black workers and came to see their predicament—their degradation and exclusion, their tenuous, subordinate place in a midcentury union movement slouching toward obsolescence—as the prelude to a wider crisis. Decades before neoliberalism, he knew that postwar growth and high employment would evaporate, and that the working class was changing shape. He knew that the bitterest battles, those with the power to make the most ambitious assault on the order of things, would be waged by those locked out of politics as well as their means of subsistence: this new avant-garde would be molded from the black poor and unemployed.

They were not the majority. But they were the most disruptive and inventive force in the US, vested with the historic capacity to call every facet of social existence into question. Boggs's '60s were spent cultivating organizations that would not only fortify black labor, but forge a bond between shop-floor struggle and a fast-inflating sphere of conflict. As the Civil Rights Movement thickened into the militancy of Black Power, he knew that riots—the destruction of property and mass clashes with police—would be a routine feature of a society riven by racial hatred and which refused to feed its poor. The task was not to disavow the smashing clarity in the street, but to build forms of collectivity that could outlast the days of rage. There was power in a riot, in its rippling, adaptable passions—power that might even express itself, at some point, by winning seats on city councils (as long as the movement knew not to deify this strategic foothold in the state). Although he split with his mentor C.L.R. James, Boggs held to James's belief that despite the fixation on "equal rights," the vigorous challenge posed by the black movement proved that it was *power*, not the democratic ideal, which was being fought for and forfeited every second in the real world. "Rights are what you make and what you take," he wrote in *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*, published in 1963—the high noon of Civil Rights.

The book was bracing. Boggs foresaw an America stripped of manufacturing jobs, its cities bristling with surplus people—disproportionately, black people. They were left without stable employment or even the distant hope of it, banished from abundance and desperate to get by: “Being workless, they are also stateless.” No organization dared to speak for them. They’d have to organize themselves. From this restless, black-led mass would flow new forms of political practice. He called his fourth chapter “The Outsiders”:

The present workforce is itself a product of the old society and struggling to survive within it. This means that we must look to the outsiders for the most radical—that is, the deepest—thinking as to the changes that are needed. What ideas will they have? They have not yet expressed them clearly, but their target is very clear. It is not any particular company or any particular persons but the government itself. Just how they will approach or penetrate this target I do not know, nor do I know what will happen when they have done what they must do. But I know that the army of outsiders which is growing by leaps and bounds in this country is more of a threat to the present “American way of life” than any foreign power.

LAST YEAR AN ARMY OF OUTSIDERS, their ranks swollen by the ravages of a freak disease, launched the most widespread spontaneous uprising in the history of the United States. Behind these rigid objective conditions, a few splintered and subjective ones. Something has changed in America; something is still pulsing beneath the carapace of party politics. The rebellion didn’t just release a jet of fury, but lodged the riot, without apology, in the very rhythm of political life.

Explosion became routine. Summer and fall were studded by local clashes prompted by other murders by police. In June Atlanta rose up again after the killing of Rayshard Brooks: demonstrators obstructed a five-lane highway and burned a Wendy’s to the ground. The shooting of Jacob Blake in August set off a citywide revolt in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and yielded the most riveting images of summer: the packed parking lot of a used car dealership transformed into a shining sea of flames. In response to the murder of Walter Wallace earlier that month, Philadelphians shattered windows just days before the election. But perhaps the most stunning juxtaposition arrived in late September. Less than a week after the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg sent Democrats into fits of panic, it was announced that the police officers who shot Breonna Taylor would face no charges. While columnists hymned Ginsburg’s devotion to gender equality before the law, the people of Louisville inflicted their own feminism on the city: they burst back into the street to avenge their fallen sister.

Soon there will be more riots. The murders of Daunte Wright, Ma’Khia Bryant, Adam Toledo, and Anthony Alvarez over the past two months are proof of the ongoing horror; the bursts of action in the street mark the arrival of another spring. Again—we shall see. But it’s not pat or naïve or triumphalist to say that people were changed by the rebellion: they did things they’d never done before, things that no one knew were possible. In late May, a Fox News helicopter broadcast footage from Philadelphia that proved the insolence of these new insurgents: as the camera swept up to pan the length of a city street, rioters pushed an empty squad car until it crashed into another. Officers looked on, powerless; within minutes, a whole row of vehicles had been fastidiously destroyed. These weren’t “outside agitators,” but dauntless outsiders, and there was something marvelous in their comportment, their light, balletic elegance as they slashed tires and popped car hoods to light fires on the engines. They moved with the evident, placid

confidence that in that moment, they were winning. The camera zoomed in on one young vandal as he reached his arm through a smashed rear windshield. In an echo of those Antillean slaves who devised the J’Ouvert carnival to mock their masters, he retrieved a blue police cap and placed it rakishly on his head.

I’d seen the footage in May; I cried hard a few months later while watching it again. In an instant it brought back the floating feeling, the roaring weightlessness, of spring. I remembered the elation cut with fear, the shards of unreality and lakes of psychic calm—times when the knowledge rippled invisibly through the sprinting, shouting crowd that the young people of the city had outpaced the armed police. I remembered the first day of the uprising, the sense of being released from the grip of quarantine into the city’s three-dimensionality. Here were buildings and swarms of people, thickly present in the stabbing sun.

“What elasticity, what historical initiative, what a capacity for sacrifice in these Parisians!” Marx gasped in a letter when news reached him that the members of the Paris Commune had repelled the imperial army and abolished the police; he said they were “storming heaven.” And a version of that thought—a degraded, baffled paraphrase—flashed to mind as I saw the masked children of New York slam their skateboards against police vans and throw themselves at lines of officers packing guns and shields and nightsticks; chanting the name of a dead man while sprinting with hundreds down an avenue, I’d never felt an ecstasy more complicated or a freedom less false. On plate glass window in Soho, someone graffitied, simply, “GEORGE!” So many of the faces I saw streaking through spring and summer—lit by burning cars and reflected in broken windows, doing victory laps around sneaker stores and bloodied by batons—belonged to adolescents. Armed only with their psychotic courage, they were running, dancing, singing, smashing, burning, screaming, storming heaven: all rapturous varieties of Baraka’s “magic actions.” I listened to 19-year-olds talk nonstop throughout the night we spent in jail, as they howled insults at the officers and swapped stories of humiliation by police. It struck me that they were too young to have seen the initial phase of BLM. Though well-acquainted with power and violence, they were tasting “politics” for the first time. Whatever the fate of the movement, I suspect that much of their future thinking will be measured against the feelings that filled the nights of 2020: the vastness and immediacy, the blur and brutal clarity.

Last year the whole world was watching, to quote the ’60s slogan. Along with expressions of international solidarity—the marches in foreign capitals, the Molotov cocktails hurled at US embassies in Athens and Mexico City, the mural of George Floyd’s face covering a massive wall in Idlib—2020 saw rebellions abroad that cleaved to local circumstance. Riots broke out in France against Macron’s ban on sharing footage of the police, and for a moment a link was forged between the *gilets jaunes* blockades and the migrant rioters of 2005 who burned the banlieues after the deaths of two teenagers in Clichy-sous-Bois. But the deepest resonance came in October. Nigeria—whose economy is over 50 percent informal—saw the sudden resurgence of the movement to abolish its Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). (It has since been scrapped and virtually reconstituted under another name.) The unit was ruthless, lawless, feckless; under the auspices of public safety, officers beat, surveilled, harassed, and fleeced anyone who fell outside the charmed circle of the elite, such that many victims came from the tottering but vocal middle class. One trigger for the demonstrations was a video of a SARS officer shooting a motorist and driving off in the dead man’s Lexus.

The eruption was unreal. Looting on an enormous scale, massive clashes in the street with soldiers and police, official buildings set on fire, and in Benin, capital of Edo State, demonstrators

laid siege to a correctional facility and sprang prisoners from their cells. The next day, the police massacred twelve unarmed demonstrators at Lekki Tollgate; a total of thirty-eight civilians were killed by officers that night. #EndSARS can't be reduced to a postscript of BLM—it bloomed from the particular chaos of the Nigerian economy and kleptocracy—and the revolt last year in many ways surpassed the Floyd rebellion. But the similarity is striking. For much of the 20th century, revolutionaries argued bitterly over whether the black movement in America could be compared to African struggles for independence. But now that the “informal proletariat” is the fastest-growing class on the face of the planet, the fights that flank the black Atlantic have never seemed so interlaced. A global wave of outsiders is crashing on the shores of states. As one wise vandal spray-painted on a wall in Minneapolis: “Welcome back to the world.”

The phrase hangs like a banner above the ruptures of 2020—a year that began three months into a civil rebellion in Iraq, which, like its Western torturer, saw the largest uprising in national history. Last spring I was reminded of the demonstration where I first saw windows smashed: I was 20, at the 2012 march against NATO in Chicago, just after the “end” of the Second Gulf War. Among the gathered thousands—scraps of a flouted pacifist left—was a group the others hated for its frank aggression toward the police. Today they're known as antifa; back then the term was “black bloc.” At the end of the march, a group of them grappled with armored riot cops, shattering the glass of a fast-food franchise before being cuffed and dragged away. But my clearest memory is of their chant, which I found myself joining in. It rang with then-recent outrages—the murder of Oscar Grant, new incursions into Palestine, and crackdown in Syntagma Square: *Oakland, Gaza, Greece! Fuck the police!* None of us had ever heard of Ferguson, Missouri.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Tobi Haslett
Magic Actions
2021

<https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/magic-actions/> retrieved on 7/19/21

For a zine version w images / fun layout go to
<https://dl.orangedox.com/magicactions-bw>

usa.anarchistlibraries.net