

Indicting anarchism, inventing ‘terror’

From 1898 to Cop City: State propaganda has long mischaracterized and scapegoated anarchism to maintain a violent status quo

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“Law is on trial. Anarchy is on trial ... Gentlemen of the jury, convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and you save our institutions, our society.” – Julius S. Grinnell, prosecuting attorney of the Haymarket Martyrs

“Peaceful protesters should be protected—but arsonists and anarchists should be prosecuted—and local law enforcement can do that.” – Joe Biden

News of the indictment of 61 people in the fight against the construction of the militarized police training facility in Atlanta dubbed “Cop City” has left many in shock. Seeing dozens charged under the state’s racketeering, or RICO statute, was confusing enough since authorities are targeting a decentralized movement using a law meant for highly organized crime. However, what left many people even more perplexed was how the 109-page indictment included descriptions of anarchism. It states early on that “violent anarchists attempt to frame the government as violent oppressionists, thereby justifying the anarchists’ own violence.” Words like these echo some of the worst days of political repression in the history of anarchist movements worldwide and should concern anti-fascist organizers today.

What we’re witnessing is a resurgence of the worst fascistic impulses, and it’s happening under a Democrat president in a Democrat-controlled city with overwhelming Black representation. While conservative school boards are banning books and the right is suppressing history and education, we must educate about what led up to this point. What’s happening in Atlanta dates back well over a century to the original “war on terror,” which was a global war against anarchism. These events defined national and international policing apparatuses.

In September 1898, Italian anarchist Luigi Lucheni assassinated Elisabeth, Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary. Some anarchists, like Lucheni, used the “propaganda of the deed,” or targeted violence such as assassination, to catalyze a revolutionary uprising. By the end of that year, politicians, members of the ruling class, and authorities worldwide were concerned enough about anarchism to call for an international conference. It led to convening in Rome dubbed the “International Conference for the Defense of Society against the Anarchists.” Richard Bach Jensen notes in his book “The Battle against Anarchist Terrorism” that the agreements reached at this

nearly month-long conference played a “key role in the quarter-century-long international campaign against anarchism.” Jensen points out that “facilitation of inter-European police cooperation was the most important result” of the anti-anarchist conference and traces its influence on developing international policing agencies like Interpol. This was followed by the development of another infamous policing agency that credits anarchism for its creation.

After self-professed anarchist Leon Czolgosz killed U.S. President William McKinley, incoming President Theodore Roosevelt launched a domestic campaign against anarchism and tapped Charles Bonaparte (the grandnephew of Napoleon) to develop the policing organization that would ultimately become the FBI. Roosevelt stated explicitly to Congress that the state needed to “war with relentless efficiency not only against anarchists, but against all active and passive sympathizers with anarchists,” whom he labeled a “body of criminals who object to all governments, good and bad alike.”

The war against anarchists would later shape much of the First Red Scare and be marked by anti-immigrant legislation, such as the 1903 Anarchist Exclusion Act. The 1919–20 Palmer Raids conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice led to the arrest and deportation of thousands of labor organizers; Italian, Eastern European, and Jewish immigrants; and prominent anarchists like Emma Goldman. Herein lies the era that illustrates the origins of the policy, policing, and strategic persecution used against anti-fascist organizers and radicals today.

The FBI website itself states, “anarchists, in a sense, were the first modern-day terrorists.” This helps us understand how anarchism (and “anarchy” as a term) became erroneously synonymous with terror, chaos, and disorganization. The tactic has been employed in notorious moments like the trial of the Haymarket Martyrs following the 1886 Chicago Haymarket bombing and the trial of Italian immigrant anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. High-profile cases like these captured national and even international attention and were used to create an anarchist bogeyman that still lingers. This historical context clarifies what’s being levied against “Stop Cop City” protesters.

Tragedy, exploitation, and societal problems are all ripe opportunities to create a scapegoat. Those shouldering the blame have often been “anarchists” by association, choice, or indictment. That is to say, like “terrorist,” it doesn’t always matter if one is ideologically an anarchist or not because the authorities weaponized the term to aid prosecution. Therefore, using a RICO statute in Atlanta mirrors an antiquated police tactic that’s just as seasoned as it is devious.

Misunderstanding anarchism is a central part of stigmatizing it in the courtroom, social movements, and historical renderings. Anarchism is easily one of the left’s most mischaracterized and obscured sections. Instead of seeing it as an umbrella term for socialists, communists, and radicals who ideologically oppose state-building and state reform, critics have maligned it as immature adventurism, terror, and individualistic nihilism. While those elements certainly exist within some anarchist factions, overemphasizing them has been a propagandistic project to many across the entire political spectrum, and the general public has fallen victim to it too. It’s arguable that popular misinformation in this regard is part of what makes it easy to manipulate from a legal standpoint. Anarchism’s breadth, decentralization, and autonomy, even as a politic, render it vulnerable to distortion. The prosecution pursuing Stop Cop City and Defend the Atlanta Forest activists are already using this to their advantage in an all-too-familiar way.

The state of Georgia’s use of the RICO statute against the defendants has also provided some punitive flexibility, which isn’t new. During the height of what became known as the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) cheating scandal, Fulton County then-Assistant District Attorney Fani Willis

targeted educators using RICO. Accusing educators of correcting students' answers on standardized testing didn't amount to the conspiracy it was portrayed as, but it was still used nonetheless. The DA tapped RICO expert John Floyd, who argued that, "the educators had joined in a conspiracy and used the school system as a criminal enterprise." In the teachers' case, 35 were charged with RICO because of their affiliation with APS. The educator's salaries were used as evidence of material gain. Guilt by association allows RICO to turn anyone and anything into a criminal syndicate.

Now, the most basic acts of protest, movement-building, and solidarity are being criminalized. This isn't new because criminalizing protest has been expanded exponentially in the face of growing movements against environmental destruction and state violence. In recent years, almost all 50 state governments and the U.S. Congress "have considered the implementation of 246 anti-protest bills, 39 of which have been enacted in 20 states." The stakes are extremely high because if what the prosecution is trying to accomplish works, the state will use it beyond Georgia too.

"The spread of anarchist ideas is conducted through word of mouth, internet, and written form," the indictment said. It goes on to say some of those being charged work to promote "the false idea that the group is non-violent." Roosevelt said something similar in his first address to Congress: "No man or body of men preaching anarchistic doctrines should be allowed at large any more than if preaching the murder of some specified private individual. Anarchistic speeches, writings, and meetings are essentially seditious and treasonable."

People have been fighting to stop the construction of a militarized police facility threatening one of Atlanta's "four lungs." Anarchist or otherwise, they have put their lives on the line. One of whom, Manuel "Tortuguita" Terán, was murdered by the police in an act of wanton police terror. This is the terror we're most familiar with. This is the terror that has killed thousands of people in recent years. Among the many victims we both know and don't know are people that were often maligned after their extrajudicial killings. And what's certain is no anarchist group in the history of this country has ever lived up to the relentless killing with impunity that the police and state exercise daily. Old propaganda tells us anarchism is a major threat while the state grants legitimacy to its forces that kill relentlessly based on race. This is what we should be collectively putting on trial, not the people resisting such an arrangement.

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