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On the Arrest of Six Young People for “Domestic Terrorism”



HOW THE RECENT WAVE OF REPRESSION AGAINST FOREST DEFENDERS REVEALS THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE FORCES OF ORDER HAVE UTTERLY FAILED TO GRASP THE ELEMENTARY FACTS OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY POLITICAL LIFE.

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events, outreach campaigns, etc. could all become a nightmare for them.

It is time for the protagonists of the current movement to grasp a basic yet definitive truth: in the current era, the frontline is not simply a location on a map, nor is it only a destination, a position, or a place. On-the-ground defense has been and will continue to be a significant task; but there are many ways to make a place inaccessible, or to make construction less feasible. The forest itself will continue to produce flashpoints and dramatic encounters in the coming months, but it must not be the only such place. On the other hand, we are not only fighting something in the abstract or spectral sphere of politics, something one gestures to vaguely, falsely weaving together everything regrettable in our society. Everything is implicated in the status quo; that doesn't mean that the vulnerabilities of the system are evenly distributed. Broadly speaking, wherever there is the possibility of generating social consensus, of arranging the proper forces and attitudes, there can and should be an intervention. The task is to identify the true stakes, to craft coherent and measurable plans, and to seize control not only of strength but of time, of intuition, and of all that is perceptible. In this regard, prescience and sensitivity are among our most important weapons.

Tension increases by spreading force over the broadest area. From now on, reality is the battlefield.

He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls, drop by drop, upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.

—Aeschylus

IT IS A WELL-KNOWN PRINCIPLE, observed by all major theoreticians of modern warfare, that in any long-term conflict the opposing forces will tend to mirror and mimic one another. Perhaps this is what the Atlanta Police Foundation (APF) had in mind as they unleashed a battalion of cops—paramilitary costumes and all—upon a handful of tree-sitters and young activists operating a protest camp in a public park. The events of December 13th rose out of a deep and growing well of incomprehension. Since we cannot afford to fall into this pit, a few clarifications are in order.

I

To halt the Blackhall land-swap grift, as well as the proposed Cop City murder playground, an ensemble of forces and groups have demonstrated considerable intelligence, flexibility, and tact. In the Spring of 2022, the Police Foundation announced their commitment to launch pre-construction for Cop City on May 1st of that year. Now, seven months later, not a single inch of silt fencing has been put up. Nothing has been done. Through relentless and dynamic actions undertaken in decentralized and uncoordinated ways, thousands of people across the city and even the country have brought the forest destruction project to a stalemate.

In the course of these events, it has become abundantly clear that adversaries of the movement do not understand the nature of contemporary struggles. Their recent wave of repression indicates that they believe they are fighting a movement from the 20th century, i.e., a two-tiered, leader-driven struggle organized around a “core” of dedicated militants and a “support base” who essentially follow their lead. Twenty years of protracted delusions of this nature led to costly and humiliating defeats for the US military in Afghanistan. And yet, recent events in the forest make clear that few on the other side are studying the negative impacts of dogma, biases, and strategic inertia in the realm of domestic policing or “counter network operations.”

The large-scale inter-agency raid on December 13th targeting both sides of the Weelaunee Forest suggests that the Police Foundation imagines that forest encampments form the core of the forces arranged against them. They believe they are fighting some kind of hybrid social movement/criminal enterprise coalition, and it is called “stop cop city” and “defend the forest.” They imagine this “coalition” to function like a classical organization that can be broken down into parts through intimidation and threats. They seem to actually believe that the various acts of nonviolent sabotage against machinery, the protests outside of the offices and gated communities of the developers, as well as the canvassing and public engagement efforts somehow all emerge from a single rag-tag group of dreamers living in the woods, all of whom exclusively hail from other parts of the country. Only in this way can

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The next phase could very well swallow everything. Thus far, forest defenders—or, put differently, the thousands of activists, dog walkers, punk rockers, parents, dancers, scientists, students, doctors, campers, schoolchildren, ecologists, tree-sitters, saboteurs, lawyers, documentarians, and neighbors who have thrown their weight behind the movement—have engaged in the most limited, peaceful, constrained forms of resistance imaginable given the stakes of the struggle and the surface area of the adversarial forces. By focusing directly on those responsible, by showing up at their residences, in their offices, and then in the forest itself, activists have kept their interventions limited only to the narrowest lane possible. Perhaps that period is now over.

Nothing prevents the entire metropolitan space from becoming a zone of creative subversion.

In the coming months, university lectures could be disrupted by restless youngsters demanding to know “Why are activists being charged with terrorism? What will we do with our degrees when the planet is flooded or burned?”

As for the contractors behind the project, aside from their clerical and logistical operations, they frequently engage in a variety of public outreach events, jobs fairs, symposiums, celebrations and fund-raising events. The time might be approaching when all of these efforts become a theater for the creative actions of free-spirited people.

Every wall, billboard, and bathroom stall may soon be adorned with slogans and stickers, posters and declarations of support.

Other tactics typical of contemporary movements could erupt at any moment and in any part of the country given the breadth of the economic forces backing Cop City: university walk-outs or occupations spilling over from the long-haul UC strike, interstate blockades, confrontations in shopping districts, dramatic episodes at City Hall or County Commissioners offices.

The subversive rhythm could begin to overwhelm the commercial, logistical, and public activity of the forest destroyers. The Police Foundation thinks that their broad base of corporate and bureaucratic support is what gives them strength. Press conferences, suit-and-tie

given away to a millionaire developer hardly seems like the way to capture that always-elusive public approval.

Media operatives and police goons continuously refer to “forest defenders” in the narrowest and most arbitrary sense—referring only to some campers or some people living in tree houses. There are even well-meaning activists and movement supporters who occasionally commit the same slip-of-the-tongue. However, there is no reason to think the repressive forces actually believe in their own little language games, or the ridiculous tropes they conjure in order to prop them up. If they really believed that the movement emanates from the forest occupation, then why are they knocking on doors across the country? Why are they following Atlanta residents around in unmarked vehicles, pulling people over who film their operations in the forest, and snatching protesters off the sidewalks?

The reality is simpler and sadder than it may at first appear. The present operation has nothing to do with safety, and still less to do with “counter-terrorism” in the conventional sense. The truth is that a few agents in the GBI are hoping to make a nice career for themselves, and successful work in “counter-terrorism” may be the fastest way to do that. This is how thousands of “consultants” and “experts” managed to pilfer billions of dollars from the War on Terror Industrial Complex following the 9/11 attacks. Whoever these pencil pushers are, they are working with state prosecutors and the Governor’s office to catastrophize the situation just enough to get on CNN, but not enough that the Feds will step in and take over the investigation. In this context, netting convictions is irrelevant, as they will certainly never be realized in a court of law. If they happen to intimidate a strong movement into hibernation in the process, all the better for them.

Everything about this scenario amounts to moves and counter-moves, feints and tactics in a spiral of creative competition that the Police Foundation is not in the least bit capable of winning.

Let us plant our feet on the ground and consider next steps. We will not reference any of the statements or pseudo-plans of our adversaries—we lead the race, and they are trailing behind in every lap.

we explain the absurd Domestic Terrorism charges levied against six people for sitting in trees or walking through the park. Either they do not understand how politics has worked for the past two decades, or they have decided that it is worth it in the short term to play dumb.

It must be frustrating to know—in the way that many once “knew” that the world ended at the straits of Gibraltar, or the Sun revolved around the Earth—that a well-funded inter-agency operation is being outmaneuvered by a group of volunteers who eat from propane stoves. To be the Goliath in this scenario must be endlessly irritating—if only it was a correct appraisal of the situation. Within this delusion, it is the hope of the authorities that by cutting off the “logistical support” of the movement—as they imagine it—they clear the path for their ridiculous little plans.

Certainly this is what they have told their contractors and donors behind the curtain: “Don’t worry. They are out of the forest now. We are a bit behind schedule, but we can start with a clean slate in the New Year.”

II

Unfortunately for our enemies, this is not how the movement functions. We know this, as does anyone who has attended a rave in the forest, or who has even a cursory familiarity with debates around the struggle; everyone can see it besides the cops and their media allies in the local press. Even now that the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) has been called in to oversee operations, they continue to approach what is occurring as a dynamic of “cases” and “crimes”; an accumulation, perhaps, of bad actors, linked together in a “criminal network” (in Governor Kemp’s words), itself subject to legal operations and surveillance. Having so thoroughly misunderstood their opponent, their strategy will unquestionably fail.

The APF has given up making statements directly to the press, in part because they are out of their league when it comes to drafting well-timed and thought-provoking articles or interviews. In order to make up for this unusual vow of silence, and to maintain some minimal semblance of proceduralism, they have deputized a single woman,

Alison Clark, as their spokesperson. Every new article and hit-piece on the movement seems to rediscover Clark. When statements come forth from “local residents,” or from the fake community groups she pretends to be a part of, you can be sure that it is her and her unnamed cop husband. But Clark is not completely alone. The first person to utter the term “eco-terrorist” in reference to this movement was a woman named Sharon Williams, who dropped the phrase at a “Community Stakeholder Advisory Committee” meeting last summer. Officially, the Committee is supposed to review site plans and give feedback to the APF about the Cop City development; in reality, it is a political front to lend legitimacy to the depraved plans of the forest destroyers, a fact which became abundantly clear several months ago when the group purged its single dissenting member.

For six months, Sharon Williams, Alison Clark, Governor Brian Kemp, and Councilperson Michael Bond have colluded to reframe the movement as a “domestic terrorism” issue. This powerful misperception seems to be steering the entire repressive operation, which now orients itself around the meeting schedule of the fraudulent Advisory Committee. The most recent raid, along with a prior raid conducted last summer, took place one day before this group was scheduled to meet. In spite of having no formal authority, this Committee has become a strange fixation for the Police Foundation, no doubt because it is the only place they receive praise and validation...until now.

In the flurry of fake news spreading across the country following the December 13th raids, many articles dutifully repeat fictions hand-crafted by the Advisory Committee: “protesters are stealing cars,” “forest defenders are storing gasoline,” “they are shooting ballbearings at contractors,” “they are making bombs, attacking paramedics,” and, finally, “protesters tried to burn a man alive!” Since the facts do not support the perspectives of either the Police Foundation or Ryan Mil-sap (or their lapdogs), these forest destroyers have decided that lying outright might better serve their purposes. They hope that by dragging everything into a fog of confusion and accusations, they can reduce the situation to the question of force, arms, clashes, violence—in other words, their preferred theater of operations. Happily, these lies, echoed by the Georgia Bureau of Investigations, are already being drowned out

by the torrent of real journalism on the movement, in local and national outlets, and will soon disappear from memory altogether.

III

That this affair is not a judicial case should be obvious by now. What is taking place is a question of power relations, the balance of pressure and influence that competing forces can bring against one another. In this way, the events of December 13th, the media spin, and the Domestic Terrorism charges are best understood as maneuvers within an ongoing, unrestricted conflict. Already, Atlanta Police are claiming this struggle has “come to a head,” suggesting that the latest episode is the conclusion of a long and difficult fight. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it is simply another episode in a protracted struggle they have entirely failed to grasp, a struggle that pits wild and free humanity against the “best practices” and “institutional memory” of a bureaucratic system incapable of changing or adapting itself to the complex dynamics of 21st century politics.

“Defend the Atlanta Forest” was recently declared a Domestic Violent Extremist group by Homeland Security. Aside from the non-existence of such a group, this designation reveals that even higher level institutions still do not grasp the elementary facts of 21st century political life. Political action as it has developed in the current movement, and in all contemporary movements, does not develop primarily from collective deliberation, chains of command, or membership organizations. On the contrary, real action spreads memetically through signals, signs, and images; by narratives and events, public codes, shared references, and decentralized processes.

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What have our enemies managed to do? They have struck a lightning rod. Nothing more. Raiding a public encampment located in the middle of a park...how sophisticated! Is this supposed to reassure the bureaucrats and speculators footing the bill of these projects? Crushing makeshift kitchens and festival grounds in a public park slated to be