

AMONG FRIENDS

REFLECTIONS AFTER THE
GEORGE FLOYD UPRISING

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THE FOLLOWING TEXTS were written in 2021, intended as position papers to be discussed and debated among comrades. We're publishing them because we believe they contain insights which could be useful for those struggling to orient themselves in the aftermath of the 2020 revolts.

The viewpoints expressed in these texts—presented in no specific order—do not converge into a neat, single narrative. While they share some basic assumptions about strategy, a closer reading also reveals considerable divergences. In fact, they show that partisans of the uprising have a wide ranging set of ideas that are often in conflict with each other, even if they're occasionally synergetic.

For example, Kiersten's and Adrian's texts are in tension with each other, with Kiersten criticizing what she calls "the nihilism of technique," or what can also be referred to as the theory of the "meme," an analytical framework which Adrian has more fully theorized elsewhere.¹ According to the memetic argument, "leading gestures" (or leading techniques of struggle) are said to predominate over "leading identities." Adrian's text in this series ("Limits") is a good example of how this argument is applied as a mode of analysis. In another text, "Funeral, Riot, Wedding," the author further elaborates on the theory of memetic action,

developing an approach that doesn't necessarily try to position the technique of struggle over its social content, but is instead somewhere in between, at once technical and social.

In another divergence, Shemon critiques the way in which much of the North American ultra-left has imported its revolutionary theory from Europe, and is unwilling to fully digest the theories and strategies that were imminent to the George Floyd Uprising, specifically as these dynamics related to the Black Radical Tradition.

These are only a few of the tensions which reflect the historic fragmentation of the far left, as well as the fact that the anti-police riot has yet to produce a common language (or analysis) when it comes to understanding itself. At the same time, despite these tensions, this series also demonstrates that alliances among different tendencies are not only possible, but necessary for the development of a revolutionary movement.

For the time being, the anti-police riots have come to an end. But the legacy of the George Floyd Uprising lives on. Many questions and contradictions continue to linger under the surface. Even though full blown rebellions are no longer taking place in this country, crews of proletarians continue to attack capitalist social relations in various, hidden ways, from sporadic looting caravans, to sideshows, to bike life, to rowdy block parties, to jailbreaks and small prison riots. It's unclear when the struggle will explode on a mass scale once again, but our wager is not only that it will, sooner or later, but that there's a good chance it'll be bigger than anything we've experienced. What remains to be seen, however, is whether a significant number of those who fought in the uprising will gather themselves into revolutionary formations that can carry the lessons learned in 2020 to the next phase of mass revolt.

- SM28 Coordinating Committee

REMARKS ON THE 2020 REVOLT

RL

I.

Most important takeaway of the past year: there are 100,000s of people all across the country who participated in the anti-police revolt. There are also millions of people who will cheer on and act in tandem with those 100,000s. We must be in dialogue with both groups of people.

II.

We have a wide reach in contrast to our size. It is still not enough. In the old days, our ability to connect with the abovementioned groups would be through the party or the unions. Some have posited that we can do this through real life gathering places and memes.

III.

What we are up against a year from now is the Democrats and their ilk telling people that the 2022 midterm elections are the most important elections of our lives, sucking up whatever insurgent energy there is at the time. Ammunition for this will likely be the result of a Supreme Court decision on whether *Roe v. Wade* is constitutional. I'm unsure if this can be avoided and find it an unworkable terrain, however, there are lessons from 2016 and 2020.

In 2016 we focused on anti-police demonstrations that summer and the NODAPL/Standing Rock movement. In 2020 anti-police riots were ongoing across the country, right up to the November election. We can't control when movement or uprising occur, but we can deploy ourselves when they arrive.

Since the Oscar Grant Riots in 2009, we have seen disdain for the police grow to the point that over twenty million people took to the streets last year. In between the larger upheavals of 2014, 2016, and 2020, we saw smaller anti-police riots. When neither of these two options are possible, we should continue to isolate and weaken our enemy. Defend the Atlanta Forest, No Cop Academy in Chicago, and weekly black bloc marches in Portland are current examples of this.

LIMITS

Adrian Wohlleben

The insurrection came, finally.

Mobilizations in some 1700 cities, with rioting in nearly every major metropolis in the country. Entire commercial blocks flattened by fire, police driven back from city centers, a President cowering in a bunker. Upwards of 2 billion dollars in damage by the end of the first week—303 police vehicles destroyed or vandalized in NYC alone. 14,000 arrests. Hundreds, if not thousands of antagonists currently in jail and/or facing charges. Over a dozen partisans killed.

If there was ever any question, America is not immune to the global wave of insurrections that have been unfolding relentlessly since 2018, even if its distinctive history throws up unique challenges.

The revolt hit upon four main limits: ballistic, political, strategic, and territorial.

The material victory of the police prevented the wave of anti-police arson from continuing. A social movement apparatus was generally successful in its efforts to pivot and reframe a demolitionist wave of revolt into an abolitionist dialectic of policy.

The combative force of the revolt forked into two types of riot, reflecting the oldest apparatus in the West: the split between

the polis and the oikos. On the one hand, political riots clung magnetically to the empty halls of power, while storefront riots arrived like lightning to devastate the avenues of the wealthy, but without any possibility of enduring. Their articulation-in-separation has something to do with the problem of “coordination”² but cannot be adequately reduced to or summarized by it, for it is inscribed just as much in the material terrain, in police strategy, and even our very conception of revolutionary power as such, of what ‘victory’ looks and feels like in our day and age.

The movement’s placemaking impulse (autonomous zones) and its counter-logistical intelligence (car looting) were unable to interact in any meaningful way. Subordinated in large part to the political riot, the locations of so-called “autonomous zones” were dictated by an entirely non-autonomous symbology of power—city halls, police stations, etc.³ While the impulse to attack city centers is perfectly understandable, if one wishes to avoid political LARP’ing (the fiction of a “political” existence apart from everyday life) then the terrain to be seized upon, constructed and defended is the one within the reach of our everyday lives and rhythms. If this terrain appears inauspicious for such purposes, then perhaps it’s time to move elsewhere.

Of these four limits, some could conceivably be overcome, others not so easily.

The material clashes with police were not foregone conclusions. With even a bit more coordination on the ground, with less drinking and shopping and more material preparation, offensive capacities could have been concentrated much more forcefully and impactfully. Simple things—all perfectly legal to own—that could have been casually stockpiled were grossly under-provisioned; cars didn’t share intel effectively...the list goes on.

Last summer showed us how far we were willing to go—sometimes too far. At the same time, we saw who stood next to us when it came time to fight, and who didn’t pick up the phone. The conversations on this level should be had, while avoiding shame or moralism. A recomposition of the U.S. based antagonist milieu is inevitable,

which will be further complicated by the various personal fallouts underway or still to come. While I will not pretend that it doesn't matter to me whether friends went out or stayed home, we need to be sensitive and smart about how we refashion our idea of who we are and what our role in our young century should be. On the one hand, we must retain a functional and strategic heterogeneity in our circles. On the other hand, no useless leniency... While our ideas and slogans might be on everyone's digital timelines, when it comes to the other tendencies of the 'hard left' we previously believed it was our duty to compose with, the fact is that, in our determination, in our willingness to push things to the limit, we stand frighteningly alone (in some cases, the only whites in the whole crowd...).

We need a more serious conversation about the liberal left and social-movementist counterinsurgency. They exist to break our frames; we need a set of procedures and methods for breaking theirs.⁴ An inventory must be made of methods to explode their frameworks, counteract their operations in the streets, and induce defections and treason within their ranks, while simultaneously warding off a right-wing hegemonic capture.⁵

Atlanta's Defend the Forest campaign represents a promising combination of placemaking and infrastructural combat: on the one hand, a territorial eco-struggle; on the other, a way of extending the anti-police movement into a struggle at the level of infrastructure. We should theorize this opportunity openly, discuss best case scenarios, parallels with other struggles globally, and how this both alters and continues the energy of last summer.

THE NIHILISM OF TECHNIQUE

Kiersten Solt

I.

I would like to be done with reflection. The movement we knew as the George Floyd rebellion is concluded. It is not over, because the rebellion changed the world by increasing the visible conflict that constitutes the quotidian, but concluded insofar as the rebellion is over and the world has begun to take a new shape. So far as we spend time reflecting on the past without insights of the present, our view will be limited. To have done with reflection, then.

II.

What is the largest takeaway of the movement of the last year, after the rebellion and the pandemic? The point is, I think, that the grand social striations, race and the police, the economy, and the systems of control (spectacle, job, rent, bills, property) which administer our lives to us have not ceased to function for a single moment. And yet, simultaneously, our party in the form I call the real movement, now knows itself, because it has expressed itself undeniably for five years in a row, particularly last year. The real movement exists and knows itself to exist. And in calling it the “real movement,” I admit that it seems not to matter, to those of us who use the term, that our party has a recognizable name. Real or imaginary, our movement exists.

III.

For the past several years, two “strategic” relations to the movements have preoccupied us. What we agree upon practically is the centrality of emergent conflicts, social and antisocial movements. Across the board, what we share is the first strategic orientation: the intervention in irruptions and potential contradictions to push them toward their insurrectionary horizons. To introduce and develop new dimensions, new tactics, new techniques: this has been our task. Our party is built on a shared set of techniques. Frontliner culture, shared affections, a shared seeing of irruptive situations. More narrowly, and second: to live in such a way as to be affectable by the ongoing contradictions.

From this point emerges the final question, an old and simple one. To be caught up in the real movement means to be caught up in historical winds. The question: Are we to dissolve into the real movement, or not? We must ask this question because the answer is already provided for us by what we have done for the past ten years (in some cases more). To dissolve would mean to stop gathering along the lines we have. Are we to dissolve, or to develop a new means of pressing on?

The current theory of the “meme” is an attempt to escape from this set of options. It does so, however, by sublating the real practical question, which is a question of what is to be done. In so doing, the theory of the meme produces a condition I call the nihilism of technique. The vocation of our party has, after all, not only been that of intervention in tactics: it has been to give meaning to the world.

FUNERAL, RIOT, WEDDING

Anonymous

The biggest takeaway of last summer: that we shall insist on enjoying the sweet fruit of victory while we are still alive.

The George Floyd Rebellion reflected a continuity with the global wave of revolts that preceded and followed from it, not only in terms of chronology, but in its character. It created a new standard for intensity, one that was delocalized yet focused. Even as “internal” communications faltered during the pandemic, new interfaces presented themselves. That tactics were imported, iterated upon and advanced, was neither a feat of engineering nor an accident, but a process which connects these: the experiment. The experimentation with different forms of movement (occupations vs. hypermobile demos) or different targets (precincts vs. Gucci) is still subject to the plain phenomenological fact that most experiments fail. And yet, if the angel of history can give life to our fallen comrades, she can, with the same knife, give meaning to failed experiments, to the extent that we do not let them circumscribe our present.

To do the same thing over and over and expect different results has value insofar as insanity has its value—but this is not experimentation. If the process of experimentation can be expressed as a meme, then the meme cannot be reduced to hollow repetition,

which dooms it to become a sort of law. We are not interested in legislating some precedent through repetition, we want resounding justice. The problem is that we rely solely upon intensity to insert difference into this repetition. This works because the function of intensity is precisely that it crosses the intermezzo between the cartographical and the topological. We are no longer “in a place” or “in a situation”—we are the situation. Yet, if this process only occurs as a function of intensity, we find ourselves trying to maintain non-equilibrium conditions against all odds.

Two points in regard to this problem:

We authorize ourselves, not as a choice but an inevitability. We have thus already committed to act, not as matter subject to external forces, but as matter that becomes active precisely when we do not find ourselves in equilibrium. This is our present condition, even with the absence of intensity. Do we still find ourselves, in the present, arriving on time for history, or are we simply late for work? Let us not rush towards a life we won't be living.

We are not special, we are singular. Intense situations produce singularities out of fragmentation—outside of intensity we rely upon a strategy, a shared language, an ethic to fulfill this function. Often, this instead produces the opposite—an interiority that seeks to forge alliances based on friendship. Without generalized intensity, we fall back on thinking we and our friends are somehow special.

How can we continue to insert difference into our daily lives, without the intensity of a rebellion? How can we come to share a language without relying on intensity to give our words and gestures meaning? What does the breakdown of our internal consensus make possible?

Last summer our communications were significantly interrupted and yet there was a sudden translation of our secret language into the collective psyche—a fragmentation of internal consensus into a greater singularity. So this year, rather than a recomposition of a new interiority, I would like us to wed ourselves deeply to the world—and so this is a proposal.

This wedding entails:

Something old: this meeting is a result of a strategic intervention undertaken a long time ago. The constant emergencies in the Trump era followed by a pandemic and then a rebellion have thoroughly spun our axes, but we should not forget that the ideas and visions we had 5 years ago were always meant to be a gift to our future selves. What did we plan on doing that we may have forgotten?

Something new: what are we not seeing? What changed the most within you? What's unprecedented about our situation and how can we exploit it?

Something borrowed: at what point did we feel closest to our enemies? What ways of thinking/being are compelling and why? Where are our edges and what can be borrowed from right outside?

Something mu: what is the feeling of the unsaid in the room? How can this be understood and played with beyond words? What is black right now?

THE BLACK REVOLUTION

Shemon

I.

We must decide if we are revolutionaries in Europe or revolutionaries in the USA. While we can be European revolutionaries as a subculture, mass politics will take form with a specifically American content. This doesn't mean we become nationalists about our ideas or strategies but that we are careful in our translation of both into American shores. What is the American road to revolution? If we cannot answer this question to the particular realities of this country we don't have a map at all.

II.

What we have witnessed is the long movement from Oscar Grant to George Floyd. We can see a learning curve of slogans, politics and tactics. Can we cohere the party of George Floyd or will capitalism absorb this party? In other words, is it safe to assume that there are thousands of young people who agree with us?

III.

The lack of Black comrades in our ranks bit us in the ass during the uprising. We need to be honest about this. With more Black comrades, a more effective strategy to the Black counterinsurgency could have been mounted.

IV.

Black struggle produces theory. Everyone wants to forget the uprising without accounting for the theory that it produced. The centrality of theory to the Black Radical Tradition is seen in this genealogy: W.E.B. Du Bois, Harry Haywood, Claudia Jones, C.L.R. James, James Boggs, Muhammad Ahmad, etc. By forgetting this, by not accounting for the new theories produced by the uprising, we are reducing the Black struggle to rage and cute actions, leaving Europeans once again to be the producers of reason and theory.

V.

Race is the grammar of revolution in the United States. Only through race can class and gender be understood. Race is the master paradigm of U.S. politics, and Black liberation is king.

VI.

This will be the African century by 2050, via demographics. Africans will be exported once again throughout the world for their labor power as the rest of the world goes into a demographics crisis. The Black revolution will be global once again, but in a new political terrain.

VII.

The two main movements which emerged after the uprising were Palestine Solidarity and Stop Asian Hate protests. I focus on their anti-Blackness but not from the Afropessimist tradition. The energy of the Black movement creates the conditions for new movements to develop, but then they all seem to contain powerful strains of anti-Blackness. It's not about what they say, cuz everyone in the movement now says they are against anti-Blackness and the police. It's about what they do, and what they do (as movements in the United States) is act like legible citizens who know how to participate in the democratic process with power—that is anti-Black. They have disavowed the unique methods of struggle that took place in the uprising—burning the 3rd precinct, mass looting, destroying cop cars—for legible practices of peaceful protests. Period.

We do not seem to have an answer to this contradiction. And of course the tension is that Asians and Arabs did in fact participate in the George Floyd uprising, and some did some wild shit, but it is worth noting that they did this in the context of Black liberation. But when those “identities” get rearticulated as separate movements—Stop Asian Hate or Palestine Solidarity—it turns into something different. In other words, the language of Black Lives Matter becomes about social mobility and incorporation into the American empire.

RESULTS & PROSPECTS: REFLECTIONS ON AN ENDLESS SUMMER

Anonymous

*"There are no more riots, but the silence of the streets is sinister,
for it foreshadows a revolution."*

-Blanqui, 1834.⁶

LESSONS

I.

The summer of 2020 confirmed many of our hypotheses while ushering us onto a new plateau.

It may be years until we see another wave of struggle with such magnitude. In the meantime, we can expect to see a rising tide of militancy as disruptive tactics become common sense and the crisis we are living through deepens. As we catch our breath, we will need to learn how to navigate this new terrain. This will mean sharpening our intuitions and forming new hypotheses. We will have to distill the lessons of this last wave and we will have to survive this lull in a way that prepares us for future struggles. This text is a contribution to that effort.

II.

A key limit of this cycle of struggle has been the coordination problem. Struggles are not able to overcome the separations of the society in which they emerge.⁷

The uprising was not able to hold together the diverse, multiracial composition of its early days. It quickly began to decompose along the lines of its constituent elements. Black proletarians, political militants, and the mass social movement all took to the streets separately, and were unable to find some basis to coordinate their activity.

III.

It is not clear what the leap from riot to insurrection would entail.

Revolutionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries were able to articulate clearly what measures the social revolution would have to take. A half decade before the Commune, Blanqui was able to produce a manual for armed insurrection in Paris: what would need to be captured, what would need to be blocked, what technical preparation was necessary.⁸ Today no one can say with much confidence what taking power might entail. The battles in revolutionary Barcelona were mostly fought over the telephone exchange. What infrastructure today would need to be captured in the course of an insurrection?

IV.

Behind the apparent spontaneity of the riots were layers of invisible organization.⁹

If Romano Alquati found an invisible party in the auto factories of 1960s Italy, today this sort of informal organization tends to arise out of subcultural spaces. The degree to which comrades are in touch with, involved with, adjacent to, or able to compose such networks determines the extent of their influence in the streets. There are thus, again, real stakes to the counterculture, although those stakes don't lie in the cultural production itself.

V.

The 2014-2015's Black Lives Matter protests couldn't manage to sustain themselves due, in part, to participants not having a space to find each other and get organized. The proliferation of autonomous zones was thus a significant step forward.

Sharing a space gave the movement a shared rhythm and a spontaneous way to organize itself. It's entirely possible that the movement in some cities would not have been able to develop the momentum it did without them. But a sentimental attachment to a territory left the movement increasingly incapable of taking the initiative or acting strategically. All the State had to do was make this particular territory uninhabitable, and the movement had no way to regroup.¹⁰

THE PRESENT MOMENT

VI.

We have never been more isolated. But our ideas are in everyone's heads.

No other political tendency was able to find its footing in the struggle or had much of interest to say about it. In the past, we aimed to build spaces of encounter between different tendencies. But today it is clear that our party stands alone.

Nonetheless, the riots and the mass refusal of work show that millions of people have intuitions similar to our own, even if they lack theoretical clarity. While keeping our distance from left milieus, we should be ambitious in the projects we take on and expect that our projects will have wide resonance.

VII.

A new layer of militants emerged out of the uprising.

These new militants will, for better or worse, find some way to intervene in future struggles. There are thus real stakes to

whether these new militants find each other and what practical and theoretical positions they settle on. Our party's task is to assist them in finding their way to some pro-revolutionary orientation, even if it is not our own.

VIII.

Over the last decade, many of us aimed to develop infrastructure that would increase our capacity to contribute to future struggles.

It is unclear how much of the infrastructure we developed turned out to be useful during the uprising. A careful audit needs to be done.

IX.

The uprising revealed real shortcomings in how we are organized.

We made few efforts at national coordination or determined local intervention. We lacked the infrastructure and capacity to absorb new people. We were often unable to think together at the pace of events or to make collective decisions that we could follow through on. We were thus always improvising. We should treat this as an occasion to experiment with organizational models.

X.

During the uprising, while our party was able to make significant tactical interventions, we were often unable to intervene in the realm of ideas. We thus helped clear an opening for other parties to take advantage of.

This is, in part, because we didn't have the infrastructure to do so. In part, because we were unsure how we wanted to intervene. But it is also, in part, because we were unable to think on our toes and keep up with events.

XI.

This orientation could thus be characterized as the nihilism of technique.

Gestures are privileged over content; tactics are privileged over strategy. The figure of the frontliner is emblematic of both the potential and limits of this approach. This orientation has become the common sense for new militants.

XII.

This temptation towards nihilism reflects the absent center of our politics.

We are unable to describe, in clear terms, what we mean by revolution or communism, or the route from here to there. We are thus unsure what distinguishes us, besides gestures, or what we have to contribute to popular debates.

-New York City, 2021

ENDNOTES

1. See “Memes without End,” Ill Will, May 16th, 2021.
2. On this problem, see “Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture,” in Endnotes Vol. 3.
3. The case of the Wendy’s is the outlier here, belonging neither to the political riot nor the storefront riot, yet unable to open a third horizon irreducible to these either. It appears as fundamentally without horizon. See Anonymous, “At the Wendy’s: Armed Struggle at the End of the World,” Ill Will, November 9th, 2020.
4. “How to shift from one frame of war to another, from one image of victory to another, how to change the nature of the conflict, while fighting it? How to not only engage in a conflict, but to wage a ‘conflict over conflict’ from within its midst, thereby posing a new problem?” Adrian Wohlleben, “Memes without End,” Ill Will, May 16th, 2021.
5. Prior to 2020 (when Portland indisputably took over this mantle), the strongest base of autonomous rebellion in the USA in the past few years (Atlanta) did not have a Left problem, while most other major cities did. The tendency among certain comrades in other cities to look to this city for a model was consequently unhelpful.
6. Auguste Blanqui, “Why There Are No More Riots.”
7. For a discussion of the coordination problem, see “The Holding Pattern” and “Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture” in Endnote 3. See also, “Theses on the Sudan Commune” on Ill Will.
8. See Auguste Blanqui, “Manual for Armed Insurrection.” See also, A. Neuberger, Armed Insurrection.
9. See Evan Calder Williams “Invisible Organization: Reading Romano Alquati,” in Viewpoint Magazine. For a similar take from a very different perspective, see David Kilcullen, Out of the Mountains.
10. For a more in depth discussion of this, see “Breeway or the Freeway” on It’s Going Down.

It's unclear when the struggle will explode on a mass scale once again, but our wager is not only that it will, sooner or later, but that there's a good chance it'll be bigger than anything we've experienced.

