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WINSTON SMITH AND THE SPIRIT OF THE GEORGE FLOYD UPRISING



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THINGS CHANGED DRASTICALLY in the last moment of Winston Smith's life, as he was ambushed by police and US marshals. After refusing to get out of his car, police claim Winston pulled a gun on them, but the other person in the car with him at the time never saw a gun. He had instead raised his phone to record the police, and that's when they murdered him.

Winston Boogie Smith, a.k.a. Wince Me Boi, was a musician, a comedian, a person full of life and joy. He was also deeply affected by the uprising that began in his city, Minneapolis, in late May 2020. Fast forward a year later, and Winston is posting a series of videos on Instagram expressing his frustration with the state of the movement:

I think I've been quiet for too long... Like, all this protesting shit, like, y'all still coming with y'all hands up? Saying y'all surrender? Begging for y'all freedom? Asking for justice? Is y'all serious? Like, y'all serious? That's the plan? Motherfuckers been killing y'all for years? Eyy, I ride with my shit yo. Eyy, when it comes to me, that's not the plan yo. Y'all gotta figure out a new plan, and it ain't walking up, asking for justice. It ain't asking for nothing. Something wrong with y'all. I'm coming to the protest, I'm bringing the same shit they bringing.

Instead of making demands on the government and asking for justice, Winston declared his own personal war in the name of freedom:

Y'all telling motherfuckers to come with they hands up and peacefully assemble? For what? Nah, fuck that, fuck that, fuck you, fuck them, fuck anybody who's peaceful right now. Cuz when Martin Luther King was here we had a million motherfuckers marching saying let's be peaceful, and now y'all still begging for y'all freedom, so they still shooting y'all down. They must want a war. So get y'all gasoline at y'all gas station.

He also went into great detail about what methods and tactics people should use in this war:

Spread out, have y'all shit ready, hit these motherfuckers from the top of these buildings, from everywhere yo, like, it's more of us than them. That's the motherfucking plan. Get your shit, spread the fuck out, let's starting flooding they motherfucking asses. I'm getting my shit together. I'm about to just strike as much as I can, while I can, and just get up out of there, in and out, in and out, in and out. Keep sabotaging shit. And move the fuck around.

Winston called for armed insurrection against the police, and he wasn't afraid of the full implications of his position, which he refused to back down from. He lived his singularity to the fullest. Shortly after posting these videos, a warrant was issued for his arrest, on a gun charge. When police tried to arrest him at the Mall of America parking lot, he escaped in his car, allegedly driving at high speed on Interstate 494 in the opposite direction of traffic. The police finally caught up to him on June 3rd, 2021, and ended his life in a hail of bullets.

by opening a real possibility for communism? Which end up confining insurgencies within a closed field of specialized problems, the better to govern and manage them?

Answering these questions might help us break out of the impasse of debates concerning violence versus non violence, specialized groups versus mass spontaneity, guns versus no guns, etc.

PASSAGE

Stop going to the protests. Go to the gas station.

Instead of engaging with history or famous intellectuals, we've come face to face with a revolutionary born from the long hot summer of 2020. It's too early to write a conclusion to this chapter of American history. The revolt produced subjectivities which are still scattered all over the country. We are still on the highway, pedal to the floor, searching for an exit. The road, the vehicle, the map, and the destination all shape what is possible, how we will get there, and with whom.

The Black proletarian struggle is still revolutionary, partly because it continues to create new forms of humanity, but also because it continues to attack the heart of the empire in the most violent of ways. This is not because of an essential identity, but because of what Black proletarians are forced to do in this country to be free, and how they have to do it.

The passage through nihilist humanism is terrifying. It passes through the depths of the American wasteland, and its destination is unknown. Racing through the night, all we can see is what is right in front of us.

Indigenous people and the enslavement of African people was destined to be a well-armed society. A country overflowing with guns cannot avoid guns in a revolution. People will use the commodities that are immediately in their homes to fight for liberation, as well as to maintain oppression. On one level, to complain about guns in this country is akin to complaining about being wet in the middle of the ocean. But how we navigate the ocean is the difference between life and death, and so it is the same with guns in the United States.

A Fanonist vision of violence centered on armed struggle has captured and narrowed the debate around violence for many revolutionaries. A caricature of Fanonism might say something like guns and violence = good, non-violence and empty hands = bad. This caricature unfortunately takes on a real life political meaning when many sincere revolutionaries can only see the riots as child's play because there were few if any serious armed formations fighting the police. But this field of vision isn't nuanced enough to allow for the finer tactical and strategic maneuvers needed for class war, with or without guns. A narrow focus on armed struggle misses the mass dynamics of insurrection and bypasses the full range of strategies and horizons that the Black Radical Tradition has deployed in the course of its existence.

Winston Smith expressed this tension around the question of guns, at one point calling for armed struggle, and then soon after calling on people to fight with dish soap, glue, honey, bleach, or anything that can be thrown at the police. This reflects the tension between specialized groups of armed militants versus a mass uprising. Instead of fixating on a given tactic or strategy, we see a complex relationship between many different tactics, strategies, and mass spontaneous struggles.

The question of violence must emerge from within the experiences of the uprising itself. Along this line of thought, we see Adrian Wohlleben's *Weapons and Ethics* as making an important contribution:

We are in need of an earnest debate around tactics today: Which practices have succeeded in deepening and widening social ruptures, there-

THE SPIRIT OF THE GEORGE FLOYD UPRISING

Ain't nobody finna keep begging for no justice, motherfuckers 'bout to take they justice. Nobody finna be begging for no country, we 'bout to take our shit back.

We take Winston's words seriously as theoretical expressions of the real movement which overthrows the present state of things. At the same time, Winston's words also reflect the limited possibilities of our time.

While Winston's vision of justice is certainly a revolutionary one, there's also an undeniable nihilism underlying his thought. This is a reflection of the fact that there is no clear horizon or future to fight for in the present moment. The revolutionary worker's movement is dead. The international decolonial movements are not only dead, but have turned into nightmares, if anyone remembers them at all. The "socialist" and social democratic countries that still remain are a force of reaction and planetary destruction. Nothing more needs to be said about these cadavers. Nihilism is all we have left.

What Winston did was produce a language of revolution out of nihilism and hopelessness.

Winston spoke of putting his life on the line for his freedom and taking justice into his own hands. This is what humanism looks like when it is disentangled from the hypocrisy of the European tradition, and instead springs from the Black Radical Tradition. When Winston speaks of justice, this isn't an empty abstraction, but a moment of decision we must make if we want to be free.

Nihilist humanism is the best term we've come across to describe the contradictory mix of anti-social and social violence, pessimism and optimism, specifism and universalism, which defined the 2020 revolts.¹

The uprising was a meeting of strangers, and yet everyone was invited to take part in the festival of revolutionary violence. It didn't

¹ Shout out to our comrade Lucid Strike for originally coining the term "nihilist humanism" to describe the affect of young proletarians in the U.S.

matter what your specific vision of the future was. Your passport through this world was your actions, your willingness to fight, burn, and take risks in the moment, and this unique passport allowed all to become human in the critical sense that Frantz Fanon or Sylvia Wynter thought of humanism. This is why the rioters chanted “We All N***** Now!” as multi-racial crowds looted and fought the police.

REVOLUTIONARY SUICIDE, REVOLUTIONARY JOY

There is a tension between the level of negativity that revolution demands of us, and the necessity of joy, play, and desire. In one sense, this is the tension between revolutionary suicide and the revolutionary joy we saw in the uprising. Some imagine the riot to be a purely militaristic affair, but the violence of the riots is actually inseparable from a festive atmosphere of sharing, laughing, dancing, and being together. This tension was embodied in Winston Smith himself. He was a fun, happy person, but he also called for war, and expressed suicidal thoughts in relation to the police that were after him. He was facing several years in prison and made it clear that he would rather die fighting than let the police take him in. “I’m like, four years? I would rather die, you know what I’m saying? I’m ready to die, you know what I’m saying, for my freedom.”

Where does the desire for revolutionary suicide come from? It emerges from the hopeless conditions of revolution, its political defeat and isolation, which is inseparable from the race question in this country. No matter how badly Huey P. Newton wanted to live, he knew that his fate was death, because he realized that the Black Revolution largely stood alone. This is the underlying sentiment running throughout his autobiography, *Revolutionary Suicide*. Rather than a reactionary death, he decided he would have a revolutionary one. He wasn’t alone. The drive towards death and sacrifice was a constant theme in many Black revolutionaries’ understanding of revolution in the 1960s, from Fred Hampton to George Jackson. In one sense, they captured a dark truth about revolution, a truth which obliterates the leftist fantasy of revolution as a safe

space and fun dance party. In contrast to the 1960s, however, Black revolutionaries from the early 20th century like Hubbert Harrison, CLR James, and Claudia Jones, had less of a sense of negativity, sacrifice, and suffering, and instead saw revolution as the flowering of humanity, as a social process involving millions of people, including the non-Black proletariat. This reveals the changing historical nature of how revolutionaries have oriented themselves towards revolution, sacrifice, and joy.

Winston’s flirtation with revolutionary suicide can be seen as a mirror to the rest of our society. Here is a Black man who figures out the dark truth of this country, and in this discovery, realizes that his fate is death. What would it mean as a society for him to have a different view?

On the other side of this tension is the question of revolutionary joy. Some revolutionaries dismiss the festive parts of revolt as either childish, immature, petit bourgeois, white or a combination of all four. But this dismissal often masks the lives that most revolutionaries actually live. No revolutionary is a machine who works 24 hours a day for the revolution. Revolutionaries watch movies, listen to music, make art, make love, play sports, and have other experiences which cannot be packaged as organizing for revolution. While revolution involves a level of sacrifice, what ultimately drives a revolutionary into battle shouldn’t be sacrifice but the joy of revolt.

GUNS AND THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION

Let motherfuckers get ready for war. Go stock up the house with some food. All the shooters, suit up. Lace your boots up. It’s war fucking time. Bring your gun to the protest.

Robert F. Williams, Malcolm X, and Frantz Fanon all grasped the crucial role of violence in revolutions. At the same time, they touched upon a particular type of violence centered around a particular tool: the gun. In one sense Robert F. Williams and Malcolm X captured precisely what America was. A society born in the subjugation of