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WE OUTSIDE



THE WASHINGTON SQUARE PARTIES OF 2021



A.M. & A.K.

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A YEAR AFTER the riots and mass marches of 2020, the spring and summer of 2021 belonged to kickback flash mobs, generator punk shows, raves, and other guerrilla gatherings. The focal point of the trend in New York was the bluetooth-PA dance parties in Washington Square Park. Lured by meetup maps posted to Instagram, restless youth logged off Zoom class and traveled to Manhattan to enjoy the weather, drink, get high, dance, and look for trouble.

An anarchist mutual-aid table distributed water, fruit, pizza, and a really really free minibar. Dirt bike gangs circled. M80s blasted. Something like an American version of the autonomous squares of Christiania in Copenhagen or Exarchia in Greece, the shared rowdiness of these happenings instilled a sense of solidarity and togetherness which at times felt like being in a riot. As energy peaked around midnight, improvised boxing matches or mysterious fist-fight melees broke out. Dangerous and ugly as these moments could be, most staying this late preferred them to the dull luxury of clubs and bars.

Amid the crowd were partisans of the George Floyd uprising, including members of SM28, MACC, mutual aid groups, and other anarchists hoping to find embers of a new rebellion glittering in these anti-social free-for-alls. We had been disappointed earlier that Spring when the Daunte Wright rebellion in Brooklyn Center was crushed within a few days, and Derek Chauvin's conviction seemed to have convinced some that justice prevailed. Perhaps the chaotic communalism of these parties was the reincarnated spirit of the riots, regathering heat in preparation to rage again. But the parties peaked in late June and disappeared in July with little trace, aside from a semi-permanent police-tolerated flea market ringing the park's fountain, mostly selling pre-rolled joints and streetwear, some pieces emblazoned with images of NYPD vans burning from the previous summer.

I FROM CHAZ TO WSPAZ

There were two ways that the uprising led directly to the Washington Square Park parties. The first was that the dozens of abolitionist protest groups formed during the uprising often ended their snake-marches with dance parties at the park, particularly during Pride Month. Often people would show up to these marches looking fine and fabulous, chanting Fuck 12 and glorifying the most fiery scenes of the previous summer—but this was not attire for fighting the police. Sadly, 2020 somehow taught many the false lesson that peaceful protest could be in itself revolutionary, leading to de-escalatory bullhorn wielders becoming the last remaining people calling for actions.

A second pretext was a "labor" action taken by the embattled NYPD after the uprising. Hated by seemingly everyone, the NYPD traded their posture of the heroic tough-guy for the pouting bully, like a prolonged version of the slow-down that followed the assassination of two cops in Bed Stuy at the height of protests against the murder of Eric Garner in December, 2014.

After a full year of the New York Post sensationalizing petty

Influencers like Shaman thrived in this atmosphere, where IG clout was oxygen. Many of them are simply chasing after fame—brand deals, modeling and acting gigs, and political careers. Revolutionaries like Martin and Malcolm and Sylvia and Marsha were evoked as cartoon characters on shirts and tote bags, not tireless strategists determined to change the world.

Another hard truth with which we must reckon is that many of the George Floyd rebels don't necessarily want revolution or even to abolish the police. They want the police to stop killing and brutalizing folks in their community. This is totally valid, but making that happen will take more than words and spectacle. We need a new narrative that cements violent forms of protest, such as rioting, not just as sexy and fun, or always the primary objective, but actions taken strategically in certain moments in order to build larger ruptures capable of sustaining themselves until the racist capitalist order is toppled entirely.

III

WE SAW PARTIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE RIOTS. WE HAD IT BACKWARDS.

Before the ruptures of BLM in 2015 and the George Floyd Uprising in 2020, the NYPD, hand-in-hand with real estate, had an iron grip on public life in New York. Both events showed how a little push-back can make both monolithic forces suddenly cower in fear and embarrassment. But without a return of these hostilities, they have regathered their strength and returned with a vengeance. Eric Adams' first days in office displayed strident sweeps of homeless camps while slashing of budgets for parks, food pantries, and housing. In a rebuke to de Blasio's conciliations, Adams makes no apologies for police gunplay and cover-ups as the situation in jails continues to deteriorate while the Democrats rollback bail-reform. The return of broken windows and stop-and-frisk policing are next on the agenda. If few are willing to fight against this carceral revanchism, who will fight the repression of the newfound vitality of WSP? With the future of New York in the balance, progressive politicians, eviction blockades, and snake-marches will not put the ruling class on the back foot like the uprising of 2020 did. Certainly neither will partying.

Despite this somewhat bleak outlook, the parties also offered flickers of the community and care that spontaneously emerged within the riots. As during the uprising, mutual aid groups provided free food, booze, water, clothes, and books. They may not have been the stars of the show, but they added a political content of care and solidarity that countered the party's more cannibalistic impulses. On multiple occasions, people acting abusive towards other parties were jumped and kicked out of the park. Lookout crews spread the word when police were on the move so those who needed to evade them could make a safe exit. It was not for lack of effort that the gap between the revolutionaries and revelers proved too wide. As the uprising moved from an explosion of rage into a cultural space of free expression, the door closed on the autonomous militant struggles capable of transforming life in New York.

crime and scapegoating the homeless as the ones “destroying the city” (as rents jumped above pre-pandemic levels!) wealthier New Yorkers started begging for the NYPD's return in full-force. Manhattan's previously-sympathetic wealthy liberals, many of them with proud memories of when Washington Square Park's “Sunday Sings” were a haven of beatniks, radicals, and proto-rappers, faced with party-brought public urination, graffiti, homelessness, violence, and hip hop, were finally sold on the idea that the police had been humiliated long enough, and picked up the phone.

Heavy-handed midnight evictions of the park began in June. Complaints remaining steady, they began closing the park two hours early—a tactic rarely employed, even during Occupy. WSP quickly appeared to be the battleground for the future of public space in New York as it fully reopened from pandemic lockdown. On one side was the Giuliani-era stance of public order and safety, in which unpermitted public gatherings were treated like broken-window omens of social decay. The other was the memory of lower Manhattan in June 2020, run by proletarian kids no longer fearful of the city's army of police.

As videos of police aggression spread across social media, a group of party organizers calling themselves the We Outside Crew called for reinforcements to strengthen and defend the parties. A decentralized activist left answered, with a mutual aid group taking a central role, journalists on-hand to document violent arrests, an anarchist film collective screening revolutionary films, followed by an open-mic speak-out on the politics of the park gathering. But radicals mostly came in little groups, without plan or much to offer, perhaps expecting to leap into action if necessary. Usually they discovered that the lawless festival had little ambition other than its own perpetuation, let alone street-fighting with police.

In turn, the police eventually tolerated just about anything until after midnight, at which point they would announce the closing of the park and move in. After some taunts back and forth, the party would peacefully retreat out of the park to the streets towards Union Square, Astor Place, or Tompkins Square Park. By the arrival of summer's dog days, the radical edge of the parties died down,

order seemed to reign between the partiers and police, and the atmosphere of the park became like any other passe downtown nightclub.

II THE INFLUENCER VANGUARD

The politics of these parties were best articulated by its most vocal defender, a We Outside Crew organizer calling himself Shaman. “That’s not your park, that’s our park!” he told a local community board convened to discuss complaints about the party. “And we’re not leaving! You’re not stopping us. If you don’t like it, go back to Long Island! Get out of our park! This is our park, not yours. Get the hell out! ... Get out of the city! We do not want you here! Understand? We don’t want any of you here! You’re disturbing our peace! ... We will never leave!”

To radical elements these words were a direct expression of the passive-aggressive class war between proletarian neighborhood parties and the park’s rich neighbors. It could have been a continuation of the “Fire Fire Gentrifier” chant targeting bourgeois eateries in gentrifying neighborhoods, or at least a defiant middle finger towards non-profits like the Washington Square Park Conservancy who use their members’ vast wealth to dictate how the public park, and life in the city in general, should be managed.

But Shaman was far less hostile to the police actually doing the board’s dirty work. Although he decried their advances against the parties, he only urged resistance in the form of returning night after night in larger numbers. A year prior, in the same park, he kneeled with NYPD Chief Terence Monohan in a confusing gesture of solidarity between the police and protesters. The same week, Shaman defended a Target from who he claimed to be “undercover detectives hired by the NYPD” posing as looters. As the most direct connection between the uprising and the parties, Shaman represented a politics of chastising individual bad actors, the “Karens and Kevins” of the West Village, rioters, and maybe some bad-apple cops.

These politics of individual resentment and faux-collectivity

neatly translated to Shaman’s turn into a full-time right-wing activist against pandemic measures once the parties died down. His IG now regularly features the latest right-wing memes, cripes about Biden, and crypto scams. Some activists at the time believed this meant Shaman had changed. But Shaman explained they were mistaken. He never had a problem with the police. His politics were always about freedom to live as he pleased, without restrictions or accountability. He thought he had made that all perfectly clear.

It was common during the uprising to label people like Shaman as undercover agents. Such things are possible, more likely he’s simply an individual who had the confidence to step to the front. Too often this type, regardless of their politics, has led the crowd to a retreat towards cultural aesthetics, perhaps because building an autonomous movement towards real confrontation risks precisely that which motivates them above all else—personal clout.

Gone were the experimental mobilizations and encampments, the graffiti covering every surface, the blockade of infrastructure and coordination between peaceful protesters and mischievous night marches. Shaman’s innovation was to reel the nihilistic youthful rampage back within the controlled parameters of aesthetics. In this sense we see from the parties that it was not violence, illegality, and joy alone that made the uprising so powerful. For the most part, the George Floyd Rebels did not come from political milieus, nor were they motivated primarily by any set of political demands. They manifested their own politics spontaneously through a collective desire to punish carceral society. Even as they burnt cop cars and looted without control, they confined themselves to that short-term goal, ambivalent to leftist mic-checks. It’s no wonder, then, that the screening of Crimethinc’s documentary about the Wendy’s Autonomous Zone in Atlanta, *We Are Now*, primarily attracted committed radicals as most passed in search of the next party spot. The youth were desperate for immediate intensity, however fleeting, not retreading the past, and certainly not spending a night in jail.