



WHAT'S WORKED IN THE PAST: LEARNING FROM FERGUSON

BY PETER GELDERLOOS

The announcement of the non-indictment of Darren Wilson caught me on the road, traveling to visit family for the Thanksgiving holiday. The next day I found myself in a protest, one of over a hundred occurring across the country. There I witnessed a scene that has played out many times before, and was probably being repeated at that exact moment in other cities.

A few protesters had just vandalized a yuppie restaurant on a strip targeted for heavy gentrification in that particular city. The windows were spraypainted with a slogan related to the murder of Michael Brown, and the restaurant's sandwich board was stolen and pulled into the streets.

"What are you doing?" a young white person complained, looking on with a combination of shock and disgust. "We're here to protest for Michael Brown!"

One of the offenders, identity obscured by a black mask, looked over at their interlocutor and laughed sardonically, "Oh yeah, gentrification and police violence have nothing to do with each other!"

"We have to do this peacefully!" the other marcher persisted.

"When has that ever worked?" the black clad anarchist scoffed.

"Um, hello? Martin Luther King!" She rolled her eyes as though she were stating the most obvious, self-evident fact in the world.

"Martin Luther King had armed bodyguards at his events, learn history!" the would-be rioter shot back.

The crowd was racially diverse. I wasn't counting, and the makeup of the protest was constantly shifting, but at times a majority were people of color. Yet the three times that I saw people object to "violence" (the use of fireworks, the vandalizing of the restaurant, and the dragging of a reflective barrier into the road as the march took to a highway, rather a safety oriented action if you ask me, given that it was dark and the protesters needed to warn off the oncoming traffic), the peace police were white. Meanwhile, the people who could be seen shooting fireworks at cops, dragging obstacles into the streets, insulting the cops, and yelling things like "burn it all down," or applauding any of these actions, were black, latino, and white.

While I did not see any white people lecture any people of color that they should be peaceful because "Martin Luther King," it is something I have seen happen elsewhere, and it is a message that constantly gets reinforced subtextually.

There is a very real debate to be had about tactics and strategies when we take to the streets in response to police killings. As I argued in Part I of this essay, that debate is largely shut down by those who seek to regenerate the police by reforming, rather than talking about abolishing the police; such reformers have the habit of vituperatively attacking others who raise that question.

It was dealt with more honestly in the streets of Ferguson, though. According to one participant's account:

"anytime I heard someone say we shouldn't throw things at the police (not because it was wrong, but out of fear they'd shoot us) I was able to have good conversations—saying it's a way we take power from them and give it to ourselves. Even when people were super upset, by the end of the conversation even if we still didn't agree it was clear we respected each other."

Wherever order reigns, however, the non-debate plays out as I have described above. There is a widely held belief,

among white people anyways, that history has already spoken, and that the only effective and ethical response to systemic injustice, and especially racism, is meek nonviolence, because, well, you know, “Martin Luther King.”

Beyond this discursive chokehold lies a very complex history that has been, in large part, falsified, and a problematic relationship between white people and people of color that seems to be repeating itself, revealing tragic parallels between white people’s involvement in the Civil Rights struggle and white people’s involvement in the unfolding movement against police violence today, even as many of those same white people cite a distorted version of the earlier struggle’s history, stripped down to exclude all the failings and all the lessons that might be learned.

I could start by pointing out how the form of nonviolence that is pedaled by the mostly white progressive Left today is a pathetically watered-down, superficial, meek comfort-zone politics compared to what was being used during the Civil Rights movement, but I will leave that to the pacifists. It’s not my responsibility to get nonviolence back into fighting shape, since I don’t believe in it anyways, given that it has always been complicit with state power, it has always been parasitical and authoritarian towards other currents in the social movements it joins, and it has always tended to water itself down over time.

Instead I will start with the argument made by the protester in black, that “Martin Luther King had armed bodyguards at his events.” Such a comment will be perplexing to most white people, but in fact it is historically accurate. Coincidentally, it has only been in the past year that a certain fact has been rescued from the memory hole: that the Civil Rights movement was an armed movement and that nonviolence was a minoritarian exception—some might say aberration—within that movement, as well as in the lineage of movements against slavery and white supremacy going back centuries. Previously, only radical historians, ex-Panthers, anarchists, and followers of C.L.R. James dealt with those forgotten episodes of history, but recently the memo has even gotten to NPR with the publication of books like *This Nonviolence Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*, by Charles E. Cobb, Jr. or the forthcoming *Dixie Be Damned: 300 Years of Insurrection in the American South*.

In a summary of the former, we can read: “Visiting Martin Luther King Jr. at the peak of the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, journalist William Worthy almost sat on a loaded pistol. “Just for self defense,” King assured him. It was not the only weapon King kept for such a purpose; one of his advisers remembered the reverend’s Montgomery, Alabama home as “an arsenal.””

For a long time these have been forbidden histories, and I believe they were intentionally silenced, and largely by white people. Not only those working for the same power structures that have been trying to disarm people of color for centuries, but also those who hold power in social movements, who since the repression and the defeats of the ’60s have preferred a progressively more comfortable vision of “change”. It is unfortunate for the authorities that these forbidden histories are being resuscitated now, just in time for a post-Ferguson society, but we still face an uphill battle to return this historical memory to the collective consciousness. (Most protesters in the streets, for example, are still unaware). And one of the chief obstacles—perhaps executioner would be a more accurate term, since they hardly play a passive role—to the dissemination of this knowledge are the same progressive whites who are always ready to whip out a pithy “Martin Luther King!” faster than a cop can draw his handgun.

So far, the histories that have hit the mainstream still maintain the myth of the dominant character of nonviolence in the movements of yesteryear. In Cobb’s book, valuable as it is, armed self-defense is still auxiliary to a movement of civil disobedience. And while proponents of nonviolence should know that civil disobedience has never worked against a murderous enemy—like the Klan or the cops—without making recourse to armed self-defense or falling into a symbiotic relationship with a combative wing of the same movement, that is ultimately their problem. I would not be worried about nonviolence having fallen to such an absurd level of patent ineffectiveness if they didn’t try to extinguish the struggles of people who actually believe in fighting back against oppression, rather than negotiating with it. Or staging ritualistic die-ins in front of it, or better yet, working for it (see the relationship

between Gene Sharp's protégé Otpor and global intelligence company Stratfor).

There was an underlying tension throughout the Civil Rights movement between nonviolence (albeit an armed nonviolence) and paths of struggle that foregrounded self-defense and did not seek compromise with the existing power structures. After all, the nonviolent practice that emerged in the movement at the end of the 50s and early 60s was largely imposed by the SCLC, the SNCC (in its first incarnation), and the white New England liberals who provided most of their funding.

Beyond the Deacons of Defense, who organized armed protection to many desegregation campaigns throughout the South in the 1960s, there is the example of Robert F. Williams, president of the Monroe, North Carolina, chapter of the NAACP, one of the few chapters of the national organization that was predominantly working class. Having fought in World War II, Williams led his local chapter in advocating armed self-defense after a nonviolent campaign for local desegregation failed. In his book, *Negroes With Guns*, he describes one occasion when he had to protect himself from a lynch mob.

As the mob is shouting for gasoline to be poured on Williams and his friends, and begins to throw stones, Williams steps out of the car with an Italian carbine in hand.

"All this time three policemen had been standing about fifty feet away from us while we kept waiting in the car for them to come and rescue us. Then when they saw that we were armed and the mob couldn't take us, two of the policemen started running. One ran straight to me, grabbed me on the shoulder, and said, 'Surrender your weapon! Surrender your weapon!' I struck him in the face and knocked him back away from the car and put my carbine in his face, and told him that we didn't intend to be lynched. The other policeman who had run around the side of the car started to draw his revolver out of the holster. He was hoping to shoot me in the back. They didn't know that we had more than one gun. One of the students (who was seventeen years old) put a .45 in the policeman's face and told him that if he pulled out his pistol he would kill him. The policeman started putting his gun back in the holster and backing away from the car, and he fell into the ditch.

"There was a very old man, an old white man out in the crowd, and he started screaming and crying like a baby, and he kept crying, and he said, 'God damn, God damn, what is this God damn country coming to that the n****s have got guns, the n****s are armed and the police can't even arrest them!' He kept crying and somebody led him away through the crowd."

When Williams was expelled from the NAACP for his militant views, the local chapter simply elected Mabel Williams as their new president, and continued their practice of armed self-defense. Highlighting the importance of economic injustice, both Williams developed a socialist politics and lived in exile in Cuba after fleeing the country to evade trumped up kidnapping charges.

The Black Panther Party, which was demonized in the media at the time of its existence, is obviously well known, for it plays a different function within the process of historical amnesia. The BPP has become a symbol for all forms of black militancy in the '60s, even though there were hundreds of different strains and currents of revolutionary thought and practice in the movement. And what is remembered about the Panthers is little more than their style. Their program, their splits and conflicts, their relations with other groups and movements at the time, their eventual evolution into the Black Liberation Army, and all the lessons that can be gleaned from this knowledge, has been consigned to the memory hole. They were merely the ones with the afros, the berets, and the rifles, who met with a tragic end, reconfirming the pacifist contention about the futility of violence.

The Panthers are either romanticized or vilified. To me, they were an authoritarian and macho organization (though no more authoritarian and macho than King's SCLC) composed of many intelligent, brave, radical individuals trying to take an important step forward in the struggle, achieving some accomplishments and committing

some errors.

More interesting to me are the nameless ones, the people who did not participate in any formal organization, yet who played a critical role in the few gains the Civil Rights movement achieved. More disparaged even than the BPP, these individuals have been consigned by the dominant historiography to the mob. Just like the rioters of Ferguson, whom we all have to thank for keeping Michael Brown's memory alive, without whom this conversation would not even be possible, those who were assigned mob-status in what are portrayed as the darker moments of the Civil Rights movement are presented as cruel, unthinking, self-destructive, and demonic.

In fact, the mob member is nothing more and nothing less than the archetype for a person of color, in the white supremacist imagination. It was this same archetype that was drawn on to create the concept of race, primarily in the Virginia colony, as transplanted aristocrats had to divide and conquer an unruly labor force of exiled Irish, kidnapped poor from the English cities, Africans stolen from their homes, and enslaved Natives. In the early years, these enslaved underclasses often ran away together to the mountains or the swamps, and from time to time they rebelled together, killing their masters and breaking their chains. It is this image that is preserved in the figure of the mob, and this elite fear that we reproduce when we also spurn, disparage, or avoid such a formation.

I do not believe that my enemy's enemy is my friend, but I do believe that my enemy's nightmare can serve as a figure of hope or beauty. Colonial society's obsession with law and order, its fear of the dark Other, which coalesce in its absolute condemnation of the mob, illuminate another way forward.

In the Civil Rights movement, the story of Birmingham provides a perfect example of the intelligence and effectiveness of this acephalous, decentralized formation of resistance, a true hydra, to refer to the writings of ex-Panther and prisoner Russell "Maroon" Shoatz or historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker.

Most people only know half the story. In 1963, a civil disobedience campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, the bastion of segregation in the South, forced the desegregation of the city and paved the way for the Civil Rights Act, which was the major victory of the Civil Rights movement, as far as legislation is concerned.

What fewer people know is that the Birmingham campaign was a repeat of SCLC's 1961 campaign in Albany, Georgia, which turned out a complete failure. King was banking on being able to fill up the jails and still have recruits willing to engage in civil disobedience, shutting the system down, but the authorities simply made their jails "bottomless" by shipping detainees elsewhere. A couple years later, black residents of Albany rioted, suggesting what they thought about their experience with nonviolence (these riots are not mentioned in most chronologies of the movement).

In Birmingham, the 1963 campaign was unfolding the same way, and King was running out of recruits willing to offer themselves up for arrest. Then the riots started. Thousands of locals fought with police, injuring many of them, burned the very white businesses that were refusing to desegregate, and took over a large part of downtown, holding it for days. By fighting back directly, they instantly made a desegregated, cop-free zone in the center of their city. Anxious to keep other people from learning the same lesson, Birmingham business leaders and politicians immediately agreed to legislate the desegregation that rioters had already accomplished (in fact they had won something even more potent: not only could blacks enter white businesses, but they didn't have to pay for anything). President Kennedy finally started paying attention and urged Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act. It was the rioters who won civil rights.

Some veterans of the SNCC write about the decreasing effectiveness of civil disobedience in those years:

"The philosophy of nonviolence hit shakier ground when SNCC began its period of community organization in the South, having to face continual threats of perhaps deadly violence from whites. [...] As a result, once strict

guidelines of nonviolence were relaxed and members were unofficially permitted to carry guns for self defense. [...] Eventually whites began to understand the tactic, and nonviolence became less powerful. [...] If there was no more public violence for SNCC to rise above, SNCC's message would be weakened. Thus, protesters were no longer beaten publicly. Instead they were attacked and beaten behind closed doors where newspaper reporters and television cameras could not reach. As southern whites intended, discrete violent oppression began to destroy the image of martyr that SNCC had carefully constructed through nonviolent protest. [...] Soon after, the Harlem Riots took place. It was the first urban race riot, and brought the topic of black-initiated violence into public debate. Such actions were no longer assumed to be counter productive. This event, and eventually the rise of black power, led to the fall of nonviolence in SNCC."

So whenever somebody says "Martin Luther King," the message should be, "We know, we know, nonviolence doesn't work." Even King was moving away from a strict attachment to nonviolence, speaking in favor of rioters and the armed Vietnamese, before they killed him. This was after 1963, years in which he doesn't appear in the official histories, when he was doing things and saying things that white progressives never refer to.

For example, King told Alex Haley in 1965: "Over the past several years, I must say, I have been gravely disappointed with such white "moderates" [those who consider themselves "enlightened" and "sympathize with our goals but cannot condone our methods of direct action"]. I am often inclined to think that they are more of a stumbling block to the Negro's progress than the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner."

This quote raises an interesting question. What was the role of white people in the Civil Rights movement? They seem to be absent from the stories above, as well as the best known episodes of the movement. The only real exceptions are Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, two white New Yorkers killed in Mississippi alongside James Chaney.

In fact, a large number of white people participated in the movement, working alongside King in the SCLC, taking part in other organizations like CORE, going on Freedom Rides, and above all, helping fund the movement and putting pressure on media and politicians. There were also mostly white organizations like SDS and Weatherman that formed a part of the larger constellation of social struggles that were influenced by the Civil Rights movement and fed back into the continuing battle against racial oppression. Weatherman, for example, maintained ties with the Black Panthers.

And though many white people did go to prison, only a few faced the level of repression the FBI brought down on the black liberation movement (and usually it was white people who had engaged in armed struggle, like David Gilbert or Harold Thompson). In other words, many more white people survived the struggle intact; what's more, they were able to become influential academics, politicians, or business leaders. The implication is that they are the ones, above all, who have written the official history of that era, a history that has been amputated, distorted, and falsified. And while they may have been radicals in their youth, they and the generations they have influenced have become increasingly like the "enlightened" moderates King warned about.

Mumia abu-Jamal writes about how Dr. King was "calming" for the white psyche, whereas the Panthers were frightening. And in many ways, the white middle class was the audience that a large part of the movement was performing for. They constituted, and they still constitute today, a virtual public, mobilized by the media, that lays down the norms for acceptable civic behavior. They determine whether a dissident social group is granted some legitimacy, or whether the police will be justified in annihilating them.

The same dynamic is reproduced today as white progressives essentially audit the rebellions that are sparked by the inevitable casualties of heavyhanded policing in poor neighborhoods primarily inhabited by people of color. They can refuse to see those rebellions as acts of resistance, instead fearfully dismissing them as senseless race riots, as was generally the case with the L.A. Riots of 1992. Or they can participate, in order to tame them, to make them

more comfortable for the typical white person who does not have to put up with daily police violence.

I am absolutely not saying that nonviolence is a white thing and violence is what people of color use. I don't believe that race predetermines people's opinions or experiences, though it does generate patterns in terms of what people are subjected to by a racialized society. I know that within black communities of resistance, to name one example, there are still debates on what lessons to draw from the Civil Rights and black liberation movement. I personally take inspiration from the thinking of certain ex-Panthers, like Ashanti Alston, Russell "Maroon" Shoatz, and Lorenzo Komboa Ervin. There are also veterans of the more militant wing of the struggle who still believe in a hierarchical, Maoist-inspired method, and there are still those who believe in nonviolence.

While I do think that an honest reading of history disproves the commonplace that "nonviolence worked," which is basically what white people mean when they exclaim, "Martin Luther King!", I don't think that history is univocal, that it leads to any single, correct answers regarding how to create a better world. What's more, how could there be one answer? Every individual and every community has different needs, and everyone faces different consequences when they go up against this system.

A person of color is going to face a higher risk of injury or imprisonment if they fight back than I would. This means that I cannot make tactical decisions for anyone else. But in the hands of many white progressives, this fact turns into the argument that fighting back is "privileged," something only white people can do. This assertion is as patronizing as it is inaccurate. While the "Black Bloc" method of rioting is still carried out mostly by white people—after all, it was imported from Germany—this is only one of many ways that people choose to fight back. In fact, a politics of comfort, the ability to dissent without being punished, is one of the defining privileges of whiteness, though white people have to play by certain rules to enjoy it. And peacefulness is chief among those rules.

When something like Ferguson happens, people of color will suddenly appear in the media in greater quantity, urging nonviolence. White progressives take this as confirmation that their stance is not inflected by race, and in fact their comfort politics is just a way for them to be good allies following the leadership of people of color. But that is exactly how they are supposed to react. The legitimization of nonviolence is nothing but a spectacle, and they are the intended audience.

I don't know if the activists, ministers, and scholars cast in the role of "community leaders" by the media engage in fair debates within their communities, if they're making good tactical decisions in their circumstances, or if they even believe what they are saying. It isn't my place to say. Regardless, they are used as figureheads by white media to deliver a reassuring message to a white audience. The same activists, with the same credentials, would not be given any air time by the big media corporations or the big NGOs and protest organizations, mostly reliant on white philanthropy, if they questioned the validity of nonviolence. Like consumers with a big budget, white progressives are determining the kind of products that are being sold to them without ever being aware of the marketing. Whether it's designer shoes or protest strategies, the dynamics are the same, and above all they reinforce the worldview where buying and selling are normal activities and the market is understood as a natural force.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to view these opinions as products, at least when they are being packaged by the media. At every level of the spectacular treatment of this conflict, property relations are asserting themselves over and against human life. When kids are getting shot down in the streets, some vigilantes are taking up arms not against the police but against the looters, to defend "property rights". By other means, proponents of nonviolence are doing the same thing, since a condemnation of the riots is above all support for the sanctity of property over life.

I think it can be a good thing that more white people are finally reacting to police violence and taking to the streets, but not if they participate in the unfolding movement in the same way as they participated in the Civil Rights movement.

After all, the current movement is in many ways a continuation of Civil Rights. And the latter was just one manifestation of the centuries-old fight against oppression and domination, which in this country has largely been about race, due to the way North America was colonized. There is a strong argument for the assertion that the Civil Rights movement neither won nor ended. If the shared goal of the movement was to end racial inequality and oppression, it was principally the legal-minded, college-educated portions of the movement who were asserting that the focus of that goal should be change at an institutional, legislative level. Their assertions have proven false. Perhaps the only concrete victories of the movement were to end Jim Crow segregation, institute a legal basis for racial equality, and substantially increase the percentage of registered black voters. At least as far as statistical evidence is concerned, these changes have not been accompanied by an increase in the quality of life for black people and other people of color, nor a substantial decrease in the disproportions between white people and people of color in any significant criterion from income to incarceration and police killings.

Jim Crow segregation is over, but a subtler form of segregation that had already been developed in northern cities from New York to Chicago by the time of the Civil Rights movement is the law of the land. As city administrators smelled the changing winds in the '50s and '60s, they applied for federal "urban renewal" grants and demolished thriving black neighborhoods across the South, from places like small, rural Harrisonburg, where I used to live, to southern Harlems, cultural centers like Richmond and Miami. In their places they built highways and incinerators, or they constructed new buildings for white businesses, and located new housing projects for the displaced black residents in less desirable neighborhoods. Housing and Urban Development proved to be a much more potent weapon than the Ku Klux Klan for the maintenance of a white supremacist system. And who needs the Ku Klux Klan when you have Google? Even more efficient than a powerful government bureaucracy, tech companies like Google or Microsoft are rapidly gentrifying historically black and latino neighborhoods from San Francisco to Seattle.

If you consider that the outer boundary of San Francisco's gentrification is Oakland, these two beachheads of the new style of gentrification line up with sites of some of the fiercer and more innovative battles against police killings in the last five years: the cases of Oscar Grant and John T. Williams.

This is not a coincidence. Policing is crucial to the gentrification of a neighborhood, as well as to the maintenance of slum status in poor neighborhoods like Ferguson that the system intentionally neglects. And while many aspects of police strategies in these two kinds of neighborhoods differ—"broken windows" theory and hyperaggressive policing against quality of life offenses in the former, military-style operations, denial of services, and even complicity in the drug trade in the latter—both strategies result in the killings of people of color.

Though the media and the other institutions that educate us have cut us off from our histories and achieved a widespread social amnesia, we are affected by the past, and we continue to play out dynamics that began a long time ago. Whether we reference dominant histories or subversive histories—people's histories—determines whether we learn from past mistakes or repeat them.

Nonviolence has the dubious honor of narrating people's histories that are almost identical to the official history. Nonviolence worked, the Civil Rights movement won, and so on. In the Ferguson solidarity protest I attended, a young black person, before urging us to "burn everything," said "this has been going on since Emmett Till." He was referencing a much different history than the white person who tried to stop a few vandals by spouting "Martin Luther King!"

Many people in Ferguson and greater St. Louis have decided to take up arms against the police, first in August after Michael Brown was killed, and again in November after the non-indictment of Darren Wilson was announced. Both the proponents of nonviolence and the media have been downplaying the use of weapons by protesters, but the gunfire, aimed in the air or directly at police, has been a transformative characteristic, setting

Ferguson apart from previous responses to police killings, and presenting a real danger, and therefore a limit, for the cops, as well as a danger for the protesters (several of whom were injured by friendly fire). Rather than shy away from the danger, shouldn't we at least be talking about whether it is preferable to the one-sided war that police, in times of social peace, are continuously waging against some of us?

Leave it to Fox News to denounce those who take up weapons as mindless thugs or demons. I think people who live on the frontline of the war being waged by police know exactly what they're about. I also think we should grant them the respect of placing them in the same tradition as Robert Williams and the Monroe NAACP, the Panthers, and militias of freed slaves a century before that.

There are also plenty of black people in Ferguson or beyond who have chosen to respond peacefully. Some have the very real fear of being shot by police. Others are careerists, or belong to vanguardist organizations like the New Black Panther Party (pretty uniformly denounced by members of the original Panthers). Some want to make a nonviolent strategy work in the present circumstances. Others wanted to give the courts a chance to right the wrong of Michael Brown's murder, and have since given up on a peaceful response.

As a white person, I have to ask myself how to relate to this struggle. White proponents of nonviolence will typically try to cast other whites who engage in riskier and more combative tactics as privileged and racist, while they cast themselves as "allies" following the lead of people of color. However, those they tokenistically claim to follow are the ones the media have given the loudest voice, and those who are preaching the exact form of peaceful protest they already have a preference for, that won't require them to go out of their comfort zone or face a level of confrontation with police that their privilege usually protects them from.

Clearly, people on the ground in Ferguson have responded with a variety of forms of resistance. It turns my stomach when outsiders basically go shopping and choose the form that fits their preconceived preferences and notions of resistance, and then claim they're in solidarity with "Ferguson," as though that were some homogenous body.

I think true solidarity can only exist between people or groups that have their own autonomous struggles. And while white people will never know what it is like for people of color in this society, I don't think I can trust a white person who does not have their own reasons for hating police. If they make all the right choices that white people are taught to make—go to university, get a high-paying job, be a good citizen, and if you must protest, do it peacefully, if you must riot, do it at a sports match—they may not have had any experience with a cop worse than an argument over a speeding ticket (although I think a certain dogmatic view of white privilege erases the experiences of poor whites or whites with mental health problems, who often have demeaning run-ins with cops, and who are frequently attracted by right-wing discourses, perhaps because only the Right will grant them victim status).

But if they do not make the normalized choices, if they do not accept the limits of what is supposed to pass for freedom under democratic capitalism, they will learn firsthand, either in their own bodies or watching it happen to loved ones, about prison, police torture and beatings, surveillance, repression, and the presumption of guilt. In other words, they will learn the nature of police.

Once I understand the nature of the police, it makes sense to me to respond every time the cops kill someone. Solidarity means that I seek out others who are facing the same problem, albeit inevitably from a different perspective. Naturally, those who prefer peaceful methods will link up with others with the same preferences, just as those who prefer combative methods will find each other. It makes for a more robust struggle if people with different methods also form relationships and learn how to complement rather than denounce one another; however the historical lesson that reformists and those who seek institutional dialogue and advancement will inevitably sell out the grassroots and the more radical currents, could help avoid major betrayals during the process of forming relationships across difference.

At a minimum, solidarity in this current struggle dictates that we do not constrain the choices of those who are most affected by police killings (though I think the label of “most affected” in this case excludes not only whites but also economically mobile activists of color who fly in from across the country). One way that white people might fail at that is by starting a riot every time locals were trying to organize a vigil. That didn’t happen in Ferguson. What did happen was that progressive whites, together with professional activists of various races, tried to criminalize and prevent non-peaceful responses. They faced an uphill battle in Ferguson, but they succeeded in pacifying solidarity events around the country, preventing protesters from taking the lead of folks in Ferguson, experiencing rage at the same level, or engaging in the same bold process of taking over space and learning how to fight back.

It’s a shame that this happened, because a multiracial crowd can accomplish things that other crowds cannot. I have mentioned how police in Ferguson and St. Louis were uncharacteristically restrained, and did not open fire on rioters and looters the way they did in L.A. in ’92 or New Orleans in ’05. Perhaps they held back this time because there were more white people in the streets, or because they feared a wider insurrection, or both. In any case, if more white people took part in fierce, combative responses to police killings rather than constraining those responses, the State would either have to step back as crowds pushed cops out of entire neighborhoods, allowing communities to experiment with police-free zones and other forms of autonomy, or they would have to start shooting more white people, which would drastically undermine one of the most important hierarchies for upholding State power in this country.

An honest conversation about tactics and strategies in the streets is sorely needed, and at a broader scale than has happened in the past. A long list of manipulations and clichés makes that conversation impossible, aided by the fact that many people still trust the media as a forum for a social conversation, or they don’t notice when discourses crafted in and for the media (often by academics and NGO activists who are seduced by the power of a sound bite) infiltrate their own thinking. The media weigh in heavily on the side of nonviolence, finding purchase in the common misconception that nonviolence has worked in the past.

If we can resurrect subversive, or even just factually vigorous, histories of the Civil Rights movement and other struggles, and rediscover the thread of continuity from those times to the ones we currently inhabit, we can lay the groundwork for a much more intelligent discussion of how to move forward.

But moving forward requires us to think about where we are going, and the artificial consensus on nonviolence pales in comparison to the consensus that has been manufactured around the police; good or bad, they are necessary, and at the very most they must be reformed.

The rocks on which the present movement will founder and break apart, or which it will climb to finally leave behind the cesspool of problems that have cycled and recycled for centuries, is the question of a world without police.

If we can effectively engage with this question, we might be able to surpass the miseries of reformism that devoured the Civil Rights movement and left us with the problem of police killings that haunts us today.

Peter Gelderloos has participated in various initiatives to support prisoners and push the police out of our neighborhoods. He is the author of several books, including The Failure of Nonviolence.

*To be continued in Part III: A World Without Police
This is the second part of a three part series.
You can also read Part I: The Nature of Police, the Role of the Left*

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