

What They Mean
When They Say Peace
&

The Making of
“Outside Agitators”



Two Essays on the Rebellion in Ferguson

WHAT THEY MEAN

when they say peace

“I’M COMMITTED TO MAKING SURE the forces of peace and justice prevail,” Missouri Governor Jay Nixon said in Ferguson on Saturday, August 16, after a week of conflicts sparked by the police murder of teenager Michael Brown. “If we’re going to achieve justice, we first must have and maintain peace.”

Is that how it works—first you impose peace, *then* you achieve justice? And what does that mean, the *forces* of peace and justice? What kind of peace and justice are we talking about here?

As everyone knows, if it weren’t for the riots in Ferguson, most people would never have heard about the murder of Michael Brown. White police officers kill over a hundred black men every year without most of us hearing anything about it. That silence—the absence of protest and disruption—is the *peace* which Governor Nixon wants us to believe will produce *justice*.

This is the same narrative we always hear from the authorities. First, we must submit to their control; then they will address our concerns. All the problems we face, they insist, are caused by our refusal to cooperate. This argument sounds most persuasive when it is dressed up in the rhetoric of democracy: those are “our” laws we should shut up and obey—“our” cops who are shooting and gassing us—“our” politicians and leaders begging us to return to business as usual. But to return to business as usual is to step daintily over the bodies of countless Michael Browns, consigning them to the cemetery and oblivion.

Governor Nixon’s *peace* is what happens after people have been forcefully pacified. His *justice* is whatever it takes to hoodwink us into accepting peace on those terms—petitions that go directly into the recycle bin, lawsuits that never produce more than a slap

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on the wrist for the killers in uniform, campaigns that may advance the career of an activist or politician but will never put an end to the killing of unarmed black men.

Keeping the Peace in Ferguson

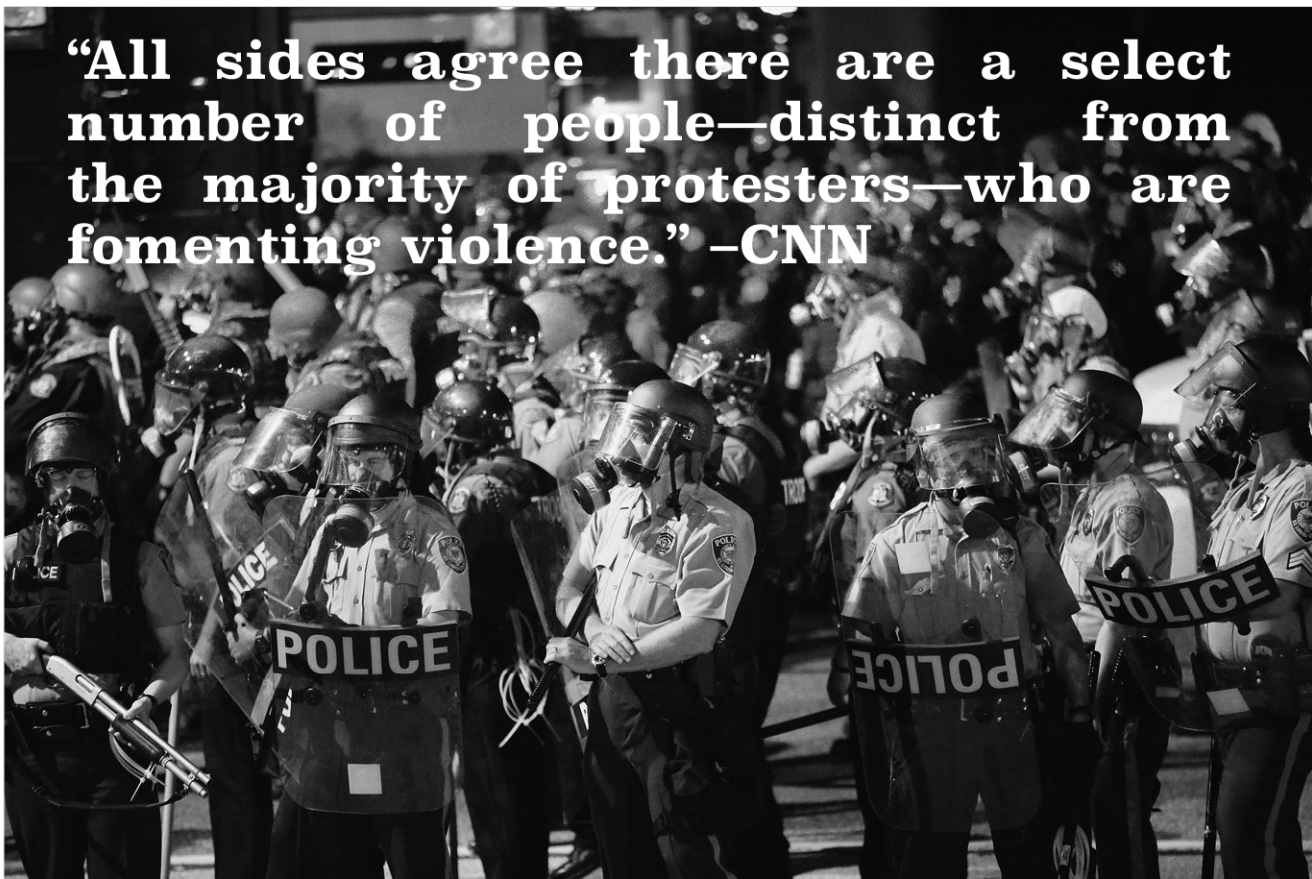
PERMIT US TO PROPOSE ANOTHER IDEA about how to address conflicts—what we might call the anarchist approach. The basic idea is straightforward enough. Real peace cannot be imposed; it can only emerge as a consequence of the resolution of conflict. Hence the classic chant: *no justice, no peace*.

Left to itself, a state of imbalance tends to return to equilibrium. To maintain imbalances, you have to introduce force into the situation. The greater the disparities, the more force it takes to preserve them. This is as true in society as it is in physics.

That means you can't have rich people and poor people without police to impose that unequal relation to resources. You can't have *whiteness*, which inflects and stabilizes that class divide, without a vast infrastructure of racist courts and prisons. You can't keep two and a half million people—nearly a million of them black men—behind bars without the constant exertion of potentially lethal violence. You can't enforce the laws that protect the wealth of good liberals like Governor Nixon without officers like Darren Wilson killing black men by the hundred.

The militarization of the police is not an aberration—it is the necessary condition of a society based on hierarchy and domination. It is not just the police that have been militarized, but our entire way of life. Anyone who does not see this is not living on the business end of the guns. These are the *forces of peace and justice*, the mechanisms that “keep the peace” in a dramatically imbalanced social order.

Sometimes they appear as surveillance cameras, security guards, police stopping and searching or shooting us. Other times, when that becomes too controversial, the *forces of peace and justice* reappear as the good cops who really seem to care about us, the earnest politicians who want to make everything better—whatever it



takes to get public opinion back on the side of the ones who shoot the tear gas. Still other times, the *forces of peace and justice* are community leaders begging us to leave the streets, accusing us of being “outside agitators,” or promising some more effective outlet for our rage if only we will cooperate—anything to thwart, discredit, or defer immediate concrete struggle against injustice. In every case, it’s the same swindle: peace now, justice later.

But real peace is impossible until we put an end to the violent imposition of inequalities. All the conflicts that are currently suppressed by the forces of order—between developers and residents, between rich and poor, between the racially privileged and everyone else—must be permitted to rise to the surface. Make it impossible for anyone to coerce anyone else into accepting a relationship that is not in her best interest: then, and only then, there will be an incentive for everyone to address conflicts and reach accord.

This is the only way forward, but it’s a daunting prospect. It is not surprising that people often blame those who stand up for themselves rather than coming to terms with how deep the divisions in our society run. This explains why so many apparently well-meaning

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pundits have pretended not to understand why people would engage in looting as a form of protest against the murder of Michael Brown. The same constant imposition of force that took Michael Brown's life separates millions like him from the resources they need on a daily basis. In this light, looting makes perfect sense—as a way of solving the immediate problems of poverty, of rebelling against the violence of the authorities, and of emphasizing that change has to be more thoroughgoing than mere police reform.

Let us not resent those who *get out of hand* for reminding us of the conflicts that remain unresolved in our society. On the contrary, we should be grateful. They are not disturbing the peace; they are simply bringing to light that there never was any peace, there never was any justice in the first place. At tremendous risk to themselves, they are giving us a gift: a chance to recognize the suffering around us and to rediscover our capacity to identify and sympathize with those who experience it.

For we can only experience tragedies such as the death of Michael Brown for what they are when we see other people responding to them *as tragedies*. Otherwise, unless the events touch us directly, we remain numb. If you want people to register an injustice, you have to react to it immediately, the way people did in Ferguson. You must not wait for some better moment, not plead with the authorities, not formulate a sound bite for some imagined audience representing public opinion. You must immediately proceed to action, showing that the situation is serious enough to warrant it.

Ferguson is not unique—there are countless such towns across the United States, in which the same dynamics play out between police and people. The rebellion in Ferguson will surely not be the last of its kind. Those of us who don't buy into Governor Nixon's program of *peace now, justice later* must prepare ourselves for the struggles that are soon to unfold. May we meet one day in a world without tear gas, in which skin color is not a weapon.

THE MAKING OF “Outside Agitators”

ON AUGUST 19, TEN DAYS AFTER police murdered Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a slew of corporate media stories appeared charging that “criminals” and “outside agitators” were responsible for clashes during the protests. CNN alleged that “all sides agree there are a select number of people—distinct from the majority of protesters—who are fomenting violence,” quoting a State Highway Patrol Captain, a State Senator, and a former FBI assistant director to confirm this.

Today’s militarized police understand that they are operating on two different battlefields at once: not only the battlefield of the streets, but also the battlefield of discourse. So long as most people remain passive, the police can harass, beat, arrest, and even kill people with impunity—*certain people*, anyway. But sometimes protests get “out of hand,” which is to say, they actually impact the authorities’ ability to keep the population under control. Then, without fail, police and politicians proceed to the second strategy in their playbook: they declare that they support the protesters and are there to defend their rights, but a few bad apples are spoiling the bunch. In this new narrative, the enemies of the protesters are not the police who are gassing and shooting people, but those who resist the police and their violence. When this strategy works, it enables the police to go back to harassing, beating, arresting, and killing people with impunity—*certain people*, anyway.

Sure enough, a few hours after these articles about “criminals” and “outside agitators” appeared, the St. Louis police killed another man less than three miles from Ferguson. Here we see how defining people as “criminals” and “outsiders” is itself an act of violence, setting the stage for further violence. You can predict police behavior at protests with a fair degree of accuracy based on the rhetoric they deploy in advance to prepare the terrain.

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So when we hear them say “outside agitators,” we know the authorities are getting ready to spill blood. All the better, from their perspective, if people buy into this rhetoric and police themselves so no officer has to get his hands dirty. This is often called for in the name of avoiding violence, but self-policing returns us to the same passivity that enables police violence to occur in the first place. How many people would have even heard about Michael Brown if not for the “criminals” and “agitators” who brought his death to our attention? Self-policing also preserves the impression that we all choose



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this state of affairs of our own free will, reinforcing the impression that anyone who does not is an outsider.

What is an “outside agitator,” anyway? Deploying the National Guard to a town of 21,000 people— isn’t that outside agitation? When Occupy Oakland was in the news in 2011, there was a lot of rhetoric about “outside agitators” coming to the city to start trouble with police, until it came to light that over 90% of Oakland cops lived outside of Oakland. Surely if anyone deserves to be labeled outside agitators—in Ferguson, Oakland, or any other community around



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the US—it is the authorities.

But what about people who come from out of town to participate in protests? The CNN article claimed that “among those arrested are residents of Chicago, Brooklyn, Washington, San Francisco, Austin, Des Moines, and Huntsville, Alabama, according to jail records.”

This might sound like convincing evidence to middle class readers. But anyone who has been poor and precarious knows that the permanent address you give when you are arrested may not be the same as the place you actually live. You might give a different address because you aren’t sure your current housing will last, because the landlord doesn’t know your place has more people in it than are named on the lease, or simply because you don’t want local vigilantes to know where to find you. Instead, you might give a more reliable long-term address, perhaps from another state.

Still, let’s imagine that some of these arrestees who gave out-of-town addresses are in Ferguson for the very first time. Wouldn’t that make them outside agitators? Perhaps it would, if the issue was specific to Ferguson alone and they had no stake in it. But in “Chicago, Brooklyn, Washington, San Francisco, Austin, Des Moines, and Huntsville, Alabama” the police have killed black men under identical circumstances. The militarization, brutality, and systematic racism of the police are in effect all around the country, not just in Ferguson. When people are suffering the same forms of oppression everywhere, it makes sense for us to come to each other’s assistance, to make common cause.

This is not outside agitation. It is solidarity.

So long as we understand the problems we face individually, we will be powerless against them. Solidarity has always been the most important tool of the oppressed. This is why the authorities go to such lengths to demonize anyone who has the courage to take risks to support others. Throughout the civil rights struggles of the 20th century, participants who are celebrated as heroes today were tarred as “outside agitators.” The term has a long history on the tongues of racists and reactionaries.

In this light, it is ironic, if not unexpected, that one of the corporate media stereotypes of the “outside agitator” is the “white anarchist”—as if all anarchists were white. It’s no longer considered decorous to call people race traitors, so the allegation is inverted: white people who fight alongside black and brown people must not have their best interests at heart, certainly not as much as the police and corporate media do. Although declaring oneself an anarchist does not magically free a white person of the racism that pervades our society, it is racist indeed to attribute all the unrest in Ferguson to “white anarchists,” denying the existence or agency of black and brown participants.

This is the corporate media attempting to play a race card of its own, in order to create divisions between those who struggle against police brutality. It’s not surprising that the authorities would seek to create discord along racial lines—one of the chief reasons race was invented was to divide those who would otherwise have a common interest in overturning hierarchy.

To emphasize this once more, we have to understand the deployment of rhetoric about “outside agitators” as a military operation intended to isolate and target an enemy: divide and conquer. The enemy that the authorities are aiming at is predominantly black and brown, but it is not just a specific social body; it is also an aspect of our humanity, a part of all of us. The ultimate goal of the police is not so much to brutalize and pacify specific individuals as it is to extract rebelliousness itself from the social fabric. They seek to externalize agitation, so anyone who stands up for herself will be seen as an outsider, as deviant and antisocial.

This would be more likely to succeed if most people were integrated into comfortable places in their power structure. But the problem with their strategy, at this particular historical juncture, is that more and more of us are finding ourselves outside: outside a steady workplace, outside a recognized position of political legitimacy, outside the incentives that reward people for keeping quiet. We are finding ourselves outside, and finding each other. We are finding that it doesn’t make sense to go on being docile, that our only hope is to stake everything on fighting together for our collective

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survival rather than contending amongst ourselves for a place in the hierarchy.

Next time, the authorities will be lucky if the disturbances are confined to a single town, so they can accuse those who go there of being outside agitators. The racism and police brutality for which Ferguson is now infamous are widespread. The next conflagration could spread everywhere, like Occupy did. Stop killing us, or else.

Appendix:

Struggles against the Police—A Reading List

The conflict in Ferguson over the murder of Michael Brown is only the most recent of many such uprisings around the US. This is an incomplete review of firsthand accounts and analyses of the previous precedents for struggles against policing.

Los Angeles, CA (April 1992) *No We Can't All Just Get Along: Hip Hop, Gang Unity and the LA Rebellion & From Passive to Active Spectacle: Afterimages of the LA Riots*

Cincinnati, OH (April 2001) *How Fast It All Blows Up*

Oakland, CA (January 2009) *Unfinished Acts: The Context, Conflicts, and Consequences of the 2009 Oakland Rebellions*

Seattle, WA (January to March 2011) *Burning the Bridges They Are Building: Anarchist Strategies Against the Police in the Puget Sound, Winter 2011*

Atlanta, GA (October 2011 to March 2012) *Don't Die Wondering: Atlanta Against the Police Winter 2011–2012*

Anaheim, CA (July 2012) *The Anaheim Anti-Police Riot, A Love Story*

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Brooklyn, NY (March 2013) *The Flatbush Rebellion*

Durham, NC (November 2013 to January 2014) *Unforgiving and Inconsolable: Durham Against the Police*

...Finally, from participants in the events in Ferguson, we recommend *An Eye for an Eye Makes Our Masters Blind: One Account of Last Night's Anti-Police Riot* and *Let Us Not Become Police, Let Us Not Become Sheep*, both posted at antistatestl.noblogs.org



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