

Left moralism is a Red Flag

by Anon



artwork by ben morea

“And they say the beauty is in the streets, but when I look around, it seems more like defeat...”

Defiance, Ohio – I don’t want solidarity if it means holding hands with you.

I began reading the text “police are getting more violent but black bloc tactics are making things worse” (Redflag) this morning with a raised eye brow and a sigh. These conversations have been happening for decades across the globe, typically discussed in exactly the same binaristic, conclusive way which sets out the discussion from the outset to be devoid of any good faith engagement. People often writing about this issue are people that would never engage in confrontational direct action and whose politics are electoral in nature. Reflexively, it seems, folks invested in electoral politics, democracy, particular party platforms or particular branches of leftism always hate “black bloc” tactics, create expansive diatribes about its ineffectiveness, its problems, its “violence”; ultimately its moral badness.

From the outset this article sits firmly in a position of leftist moralism, which to be brief, I’d describe as creating simplistic dualities that make things “good” or “bad” and therefore “righteous” or “sinful”. Politics so described are not only always going to be missing grey realities, they ask us to reject nuance and lean into socially constructed notions of “good”, “bad”, “right” and “wrong” etc when we know that the world we live in does not have such fixed truths, and that, depending on who we are what we think of as “good” other people with different experiences, cultures and norms may be flabbergasted and think “oh no! How bad!”

It is important for us to think about how and when our attitudes can align with dominator culture, whether there is a convenience rooted, potentially in social privilege, that allows us to think “this is good” when someone else, with a different experience could very understandably feel the opposite to that, or feel ambivalent about it because it doesn’t bolster or protect any social privilege of theirs. Moralism is a tool of control, of limited thinking, of religion and institutions. It is used to simplify us and make things seem easy, to make decisions without actually thinking. This is what the title of this article is doing from the very outset in suggesting black bloc tactics are making things worse. I ask the writer; in the settler colony of australia with fascism in its growth phase once again, where blackfullas are ongoingly incarcerated and killed still by a system that has targeted them since dispossession, alongside other minorities that face violence, humiliation and deprivation – why on earth would you blame other potential comrades for making things worse? As opposed to the rest of the literal armed forces of the state, the reformist liberalism that entrenches capitalism further, the apathy of the middle classes? And when the writer says “worse” the reader is gently directed to metabolize this as “worse for us other leftists trying to protest,” or “worse for the movement”, whilst simultaneously and subconsciously correlating black bloc tactics with some kind of erosion of “civility,” that pious and moralistic pinnacle that australia has always sat atop, it seems, and therefore something we should appeal to looking forward?

And you know what, if the article title had said “why I think Black Bloc is not helpful,” I wouldn’t feel compelled to say much of this. But this paper putting out moralistic garbage is such an embarrassment that it moved me to respond despite my cynical attitude about the usefulness of ever trying to communicate with self described leftists. In part due to this very pervasive moralism that is cultivated by righteous leftist organizations “We are correct!”, “We are right!”, “We are good!”, “This is how!”, such organizational self assurance should, and i believe does, turn off folks with a self critical lens from engagement – hence maybe why the assured marxist revolution for some reason has yet to pass and also why it seems like young and eager university aged people get engaged in left platforms, develop this moralistic self assurance, follow the party program and then slide into a middle classness or give up because the self assured correctness of their position didn’t seem to sway the unruly masses or invoke a revolution nor did it balloon the membership OR make them feel better about

themselves in any kind of sustainable manner – because moral righteousness isn't how we achieve that. This also is a hinge upon which hierarchical dismissive and paternal attitudes toward working class, “uneducated” or “lumpenproletariat” folks also develops into moral incorrectness. (Not trying to argue this here, but in my 25ish year experience of watching these spaces, there is enough consistency and correlation for me to feel like this is not controversial to say and I offer as generative criticism for those in the platform space).

The writer concludes “It’s time for the left to draw a line in the sand and make it clear the black bloc is not welcome at our actions” which articulates a few points of tension – who ‘owns’ an action? Does someone have a rule book? Are you going to make one? Are the people in the black bloc not comrades already in the movement? How will you police/enforce this? Who is the “left” that you are imploring in this sentence? Maybe even further to this; what exactly is action-y about a protest? What “actions” are you referring to? because as far as I can tell these leftist groups do not undertake “action” – they go to a protest or counter rally with a banner and walk around a bit trying to sell newspapers. This is not an action. A counter rally is not an action. An action can take place within a counter rally or protest – but these activities are not actions in themselves. They are literally engaging in the democratic process; gathering, chanting, holding a banner, hoping citizens and politicians notice the message, going home. This message sending (via mainstream media essentially so it’s corrupted anyway, otherwise into echo chambers for likes) to other potential comrades to join, but moreso, to politicians – to demonstrate that their political position is in trouble; and that unless you reform your position we will protest more and we will vote you out! This is not challenging to the system of settler colonial capitalist liberal democracy. These approaches reify the system’s processes of reform, the legitimacy of state actors and are typically not led by mob which could hint at a decolonial approach – but is never anywhere to be seen in my experience within platformist left groups. Groups who seemingly try to set out the agenda and rules of how to protest, how to resist, and who is welcome to.

(A note on blak leadership; it is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to “decolonial” thrusts within australia. We should be guided by and lift up blak voices, but this doesn’t mean a total removal of our agency if we aren’t blak – of course we can criticize blak ideas or leadership, but this must be on our own journey of decoloniality in relationality to people with ideas we critique and the land we live on. Critique that is flippant and un-relational or (more commonly) reactionary and defensive (worse; dismissive) will be experienced by mob as exerting settlerism, whiteness or racism; offer critiques generatively and relationally, and if you don’t, well it will probably cause tension and continue to polarize what is a tiny radical movement against the people that radical movements should most be fighting alongside. Also, of course, blak people are not a monolith so expect plurality and inconsistency from us mob too!)

Now, take a deep breath as I attempt to discuss this article blow by blow, apologies in advance: (note the writer could not, in the end, to bring a blow by blow response as the tangents required to respond to all of the problems of the text would make this rather too long a thing to be bothered writing).

The sound of an exploding flashbang grenade is hard to describe; the noise thunders through your skull and leaves you disoriented. They are violent, dangerous and potentially lethal devices, designed for use as part of military and armed police operations.

Is how this article gets off the ground, going further to discuss other weapons used by police by saying “Yet they are now being deployed regularly on the streets of Melbourne as a tool of protest management” whilst then going on to explain that globally police are militarizing to smash domestic dissent and that this has been increasingly happening for decades. It honestly feels like the writer is trying to scare people, not only of police but also of supposed black bloc tactics (because; police). It seems clear with this dramatic introduction that the writer has

been traumatized and has experienced fear in and around these events. This is fine and makes sense, its fucking scary! But it's not ok to weaponize and create drama with this tangible fear. We have to learn to process, don't project our trauma, and protect ourselves as best we can from the very real injuries, mental and physical, that the state will bring down on us if they can/need to/want to.

The thread that is not sewn here is that all of the weapons and repressive tactics that are employed by states and police across the world are not simply in response to black bloc tactics or militant resistance – the article itself goes on to describe the government's refusal to deny permission for marches, anti union legislation, and laws that target climate activism as problems that need to be pushed back against. All of these activities get heavily repressed, increasingly so; they are at risk of police weaponry yet they are not black bloc, in fact they attempt to play by the rules and experience repression and violence the same as if they were a black bloc. At s11 in Melbourne in 2001 protesters got brutalized by militarized police using batons and pepper spray (as it was known then) – these people were not engaging in black bloc tactics. They were attempting to blockade the event that they were protesting -what I would call an action! – a so-called non violent direct action, as part of a protest. Does the writer know about this? Has the writer heard of the Kent State Shootings in Turtle Island where the police gunned down dozens of students protesting peacefully against war killing four in 1970? What success, exactly, has the writer seen from social movements that do not engage in action, let alone militant action that has any associated risks? Is the writer foolish enough to believe police when they scapegoat militant protestors as the reason for increasing repression? Of course it's easy to manufacture consent with some dramatic words and a bag of rocks, but does the writer think these increasingly repressive and violent tactics would not be employed on a more passive movement? On an even larger and more passive movement? Does homie think capitalism will let us vote for a so-called 'revolution' and some just and peaceful transition will take place when their political party of choice is in power? When, then, does the writer think it would be appropriate to engage in the battle for physical usurpation of space over police and capital? Against fascism? Against settler colonialism? Was Oct 7 2023 an inspiration for you for its heroism and bravery? Or did that just make things worse? (and no I'm not equating a melbourne black bloc with Al Aqsa Flood, but these things exist I believe on the same spectrum – and I would never compare the organization, planning and undertaking of the two as equal in any way but the moralist reaction against such action would be the same.)

The writer suggests that resistance to these "encroachments" (an ideal that reifies colonial "rights" based thinking/civil liberties both of which presuppose hierarchy and oppression) is possible, and there are effective tactics for us to push back against repression. So now we're just protesting against our repression to increase our ability to be a political actor? As opposed to fighting for the world we want we "demand," "Please mr state, let us send our political messages." The article says the "most obvious" effective tactic is to mobilize "significant" numbers so that "crude" repression becomes, magically, "significantly harder." Is "crude repression" shorthand for violence? Is "mobilizing significant numbers" a smart end goal tactic? Once again, what experience or logic does the writer have for assuming this? Does it make sense for police to open fire on a protest of hundreds of thousands of people that poses zero threat to The Way Things Are™? Who are peacefully engaging in a march exemplifying the democratic values of civic engagement and our oh so special "right" to protest? Of course not. On one hand the police are not concerned with mass passive movements because they are playing by the rules – participating in the farce of democracy – yet on the other hand if this pretend movement was somehow a threat, what example does the writer have to suggest police would not gun it down with violence? When recognizing the global trend of increasing militarized and violent police armed with high tech shit, why would the writer attempt to shift blame onto others that are employing a different tactic instead of understanding we live amongst increasingly repressive and violent standing armies employed by the state?

The next paragraph might be the one I'm most triggered by, below I will try to address some of the discrepancies I notice.

When our numbers are smaller, it still matters what tactics we adopt. Tactics have to have the aim of making the action meaningful to those involved, helping encourage passive sympathisers to get more involved and being defensible to those not already invested in the issue. To do this, our message needs to be clear and our tactics must seem reasonable and effective. When mobilisations have a comprehensible message and approach, it makes it easier to win wider support to the cause. This doesn't necessarily prevent repression, but it makes the political cost to the authorities much higher.

The assumptions that fill this paragraph are many and its assertions rather arrogant. It mentions encouraging passive sympathizers, the defensibility of tactics to broader society, clear messaging, and the need to seem reasonable. It then acknowledges none of these things prevent repression and invokes democratic electoral process as if another changing of the guard would fulfil whatever it is we might be protesting for, or that there would be a moral victory if politician A was voted out because they didn't listen.

Tactics are how you're trying to achieve your goal and it's clear from this paragraph that, to the writer, the goal is getting more people involved in whatever their cause is. That is, the goal of the (any?) mobilization is to appeal to more people to invest in mobilizing. Now, if that's not your reason for protesting something or doesn't make sense for you tactically, then what motivation is there to use the vague approach the article offered us as *the way* to get more people involved? But let's take that as the goal for a moment. The very notion that a "clear message", tactical defensibility, reasonable-ness, and "effectiveness" (in what?...message spreading i suppose) is what garners wider support is totally telling on yourself. Are we so brainwashed by a political program – or so utterly middle class – that we can't understand what could inspire people to action might not just be a clear message about a just cause, but could also be some rupture with the norm that illuminates unforeseen possibilities, a smashed window, a hooded group doing as they wish, an aesthetic, a demeanor, or a dead CEO. Just because it's not true for you, doesn't mean it's not for others; to see police stations burning, to see riot cops covered in paint and in retreat, or to see fascists on their heels – these things can be very inspiring for people, especially people that aren't wrapped up in the specialized language of the political classes. Who don't put their energy into words but prefer seeing action, it's the de-bureaucratization of resistance. (and i think thats whose attention you should be actually trying to get, not middle class sympathies). This isn't promoting a dumbing down of anything to 'smashy smashy yay', its promoting pulling the veil away from this hegemonic attitude about "the way The Left Does Things" and demonstrating that, actually the working class is full of resistance and discontent now, but because of political blinkers these folks don't see criminal refusal as resistance or potential tactics, but rather a lumpen proletariat of uncouth stupidity who don't know what the 'right' tactics are, or what oppresses them.

Tactics, of course, should be meaningful to participants, otherwise the only reason people would undertake them is moralism ("it's the right thing to do") and I would suggest this guilt/righteous complex is what actually motivates most of the left. We aren't offered individual reasons to tear down this world. Often individualism is scorned by the left. But from my experience, the drive to utilize tactics because a tactic *in and of itself* expands my sense of liberty and agency, is paramount. This doesn't mean I don't think of or care about the collective or potential fallout, but I act for *me*, not because it's 'the right thing to do'. When we choose tactics because we move from the 'It's the right thing to do' end – we will never have our soul in our movements. It's all guilt, obligation and deference (to a higher ideal).

Maybe you want to have fun with friends in the street, maybe you want to feel empowered as you see police turn and run because they for once are scared of you, maybe you want to smash a window, maybe you want to see some chaos, make some chaos, maybe you want to experience some liberty, a moment of exaltation when you queer kiss the fuck out of each other just to piss some haters off because they can't erase that moment of demonstrated love and beauty. What tactics would be meaningful for you? as a person, not as a movement of discipline that plays respectability politics with a society we should all despise (secret; leftists seemingly don't despise this society!).

Ok, now lets look at the writer's understanding and depiction of those who do "black bloc tactics". Well, apparently they are "known for turning up" (sleight of hand that implies these folks are not in communities doing heaps of shit all the time already) in distinct uniforms "designed to protect their identities and shield them from police attack" – both seem like a good idea to me considering the increasing repression the writer discussed earlier which includes weapons and surveillance tech etc. Added to this line is "with the aim of carrying out anonymous acts of violence". Firstly, whilst the black bloc is associated with many different approaches and goals (depending on the situation), there are many people who dress in black bloc in solidarity with others also dressed this way. The anonymity of the black bloc is more effective when there are more folks dressed the same, so no Mr Cop, not everyone dressed in black bloc is trying to "carry out violence" but people may like the potential feeling of increased safety? The feeling of togetherness and solidarity? Or to see someone else in the bloc do some gnarly shit that gets your heart racing and to which you feel connected (a momentary salve for the disconnexion and total lack of "a part of somethingness" chronically instilled on us and the degenerative condition of our modern loneliness society. And yes! Just being at a protest can give us this feeling too! But! I'd say the quality of this feeling is reproduced a million fold when what you are a part of is so despised or terrifies the establishment and carries more risk).

Also to save anyone reading this i will not even go down the lengthy path of reminding this writer that describing damage against property as violence is some straight up capitalist propaganda and that scolding anyone, ever, for desiring to erupt against this system with malicious intent (against some property) and calling it violent is some straight screw shit. This is not to say that I believe it's always the smartest thing to do, but I will always commend bravery before I condemn a difference in approach – and both of those things can and do happen in one moment and also are informed by experience and learning. ("Hey! I hope you're having a good time! Be careful! Also, I don't think pushing over that person was very nice or helpful and right now I think until there is more cover we should defend the rally rather than be on the offensive; I've got your back no matter what though".)

Further, the article goes on to demonstrate a complete lack of understanding, suggesting that the black bloc "sees itself" as "striking more serious blows against the system." Has this person forgotten the black bloc is actually made up of individual humans, is not a monolith, and that not everyone doing it thinks the same thing at all? How dare he state what other people are thinking?! Does he realize that people within it have and do undoubtedly participate in other forms of resistance? And that no one is under any illusions about what possibilities could occur in this colony at this moment within a black bloc? (mostly due to the "tactical differences"/comfortable cowardice of the middle classes that in some senses I'm trying to describe here). In fact! For an Australian person (leftist actually! Not Ben Fordham!) to be writing an article hand wringing about black bloc is just frankly hilarious – as far as this writer knows there has never been a large black bloc undertake significant actions in Australia ever. They reference a recent anti fascist mobilization and a weapons conference last year in Narm where the bloc's attention was apparently focussed on the police and "other times" "it" "has involved *fairly random* (emphasis mine – what precisely is random about targeting firms supplying the Zionist

entity?) attacks on businesses and property” – all are Melbourne based occurrences, infrequent, low level moments of rupture. To wring hands and write an article based on this tiny number of people who are trying something novel in a country as debased and apathetic as australia is a total disgrace. Especially when on the two occasions mentioned; Land Forces expo and the Oct 19 counter rally, the primary instigators of violence was, from all media i could trust and the comrades I spoke to, initiated by the police and of course escalated by them when protestors (whether bloc or not!) tried to defend themselves and the rally.

Folks dressed in black bloc, willing to defend a counter rally or an attempted blockade deserve that acknowledgement of bravery before an admonishment for “ineffectiveness”. That doesn’t mean there isn’t room for that conversation to happen, but this traumatized and scared writer, who pretty clearly would never take these steps to physically defend comrades (especially not the wrong ones) could probably use reeling it in a tad. I understand that having people around you do things that you are morally affronted by and you think is a tactical misstep is frustrating. Surely we have all experienced feelings like this before, but to let these feelings result in tirades of dusty, half baked critiques that paint diverse individuals as some kind of “enemy of the left” that must be routed from the space is not only counter intuitive and silly, its moralistic authoritarianism. It is on this axis of moralism and authoritarianism that relationships between anarchist/autonomist folks and socialist /platformist folks often come to friction – can the left drop it’s moralism? Can anarchists drop their arrogant disavowal of people in certain political groups? Both of these things can happen, but this is not toward some kind of left unity (a hollow reference shirked away from in original article because of tactical fucking difference, yawn) but rather it’s toward decolonial multitudes – we are not the same, we have very different ideas – do we cross over sometimes? Yes? Could we, to whatever degree, agree and support other ‘types’ of comrades whilst being able to engage in respectful critique, different projects, different ‘work’? Surely. Can we push ourselves to articulate the “whys” and “hows” of our principles effectively instead of reactionarily, often personal and even worse within carceral cancellation culture? With some learning and therapy, maybe, yes!

Like, I think Omar’s article is fucking terrible and anyone who agrees with it has simply folded themselves into the arms of socially acceptable moralism and the convenience and simplicity of socialist organizing principles. But does that mean I think Omar is a bad person or a piece of shit? Of course not, he’s just a dude having a reckon and I respect that (we have to respect that!), do i think people that agree with it are pieces of shit? Of course not! The reality is making a break from that which is the moral, those cultural foundational inscribed ideas of “good” and “bad” takes quite a bit of disinterring the world we are all in and came up in. Reflexively it feels easy and natural to agree with “reasonableness” because it’s so ingrained for us to think of confrontation as “bad,” and I believe to some degree politicised folks (alongside those engage in criminality) have come to terms with this. Even going to a rally to have a firm stance against something in australia is worthy of controversy as culturally we dont really fucking do that! But here we have, within that space, people know they are being confrontational to anti confrontationalism, that almost libidinal cultural drive to tell others off for doing it wrong – and yet it is this drive that we must disinter individually and ultimately socially, to free ourselves from our own authoritarianism. To ‘kill the cop in our heads’ as they say. Learn to speak and disagree and listen to those with which we have differences respectfully (yes! even when you have steam coming out of your ears over said difference – these differences will feel “unaccpetable” or “offensive” with out fucking doubt) – and to act on your own terms, demonstrating autonomy and moving with respect, even when we know we don’t get that back from ‘comrades’. We need to not speak for others and make assumptions or rules, or even, try this; believe that others that you disagree with are always trying their best and are good people despite the frustration their action or inactions cause you. I believe all camps can benefit from attempting to do this work relationally, and i respect anyone’s limitations or refusals to work across difference (especially when it hurts and yes im mostly thinking about being blak and trying to work with settlers or other power dynamics like misogyny, homophobia or terfism

being present), but think that should be taken as an individual action – not as a “this is also what others should think...” kind of line. When we get hurt, process your pain (and no it’s never fair and is ongoing forever) but we don’t need to weaponize our pain to convince people of our politics – that is also unavoidably moralistic (even if we are “from below”).

There is actually far more to say about the article’s blindspots, assumptions and weaknesses but to have even gotten this far was, for this writer, a bit of an exercise in staying present, noticing feelings, having feelings and keeping calm as I formulated these words. It is really hard to not be reactionary. It is really hard to not be moralistic. All people from all political positionalities battle with this; accusations of liberalism are often moralistic grandstanding trying to feel better than or make another feel bad, accusations like this article’s do the same, it wants to create a feeling of “OmG the black bloc is soooooo stupid”; detangle yourself from these authoritarian desires to be ‘more correct’ and swim in the far more chaotic reality that our thoughts and feelings are manifestations of a lifetime of teachings and learnings – many of which we didn’t ask for or seek (all of our experiences unique, our position in the world has impacts on determining what we might feel ‘appropriate’) – and that “I” can and should only be deterministic about myself, not others, and that the most important thing is that we demonstrate our values by demonstrating them, not imposing them onto others by yelling them on the internet or podcasts in arrogant and presumptive ways. “Join the right team”. It’s the demonstration of our values that has the potentiality of inspiration – whether those values require tactics be the ‘clear message’ and the (social) ‘defensability’ of your actions, or the bravery and symbolically “clear message” (the public can interpret symbols funnily enough!) of your actions. There are different types of people who will get inspired by different types of demonstration of values – it is simply this writer’s conclusion that more people are more likely to be moved to action are inspired by the latter (if leftist culture can stop being the cops about it too) whereas the former often simply takes a moral position, reproduces liberal democracy and weaponizes it to the detriment of liberty both collectively and individually.

Apologies, respect, and health to all my comrades looking to unsettle nationhood, settler futurity, capitalism and whiteness. Everyone else; get on board – you’re welcome here.