

Mass Politics and the Spirit of May 28th

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In the turn to populism represented by the DSA, the left showed it had learned the wrong lesson from the Trump era. It was not any specific rhetoric that made Trump a political behemoth, because his messages fluctuated in wild contradictions day to day, even line by line. Trump's rabid fanbase was instead the result of his adept appeal to a type of person who thinks a certain way, wants to live a certain kind of life, and is ready to join a mass movement/tribe/cult devoted to that yet-unnamed identity. When, during the 2018 midterms he declared himself a nationalist, he was more right than even he knew, for he had created his own nation: MAGA.

Trump's success had always been in finding the easiest path to success, and through Twitter and television he savvied that this mass was out there waiting for a name, aesthetic, and leader. We now know that despite the handful of post-fascist intellectuals in his orbit, the sophisticated palingenetic appeal of MAGA, the structurally antisemitic America First campaign against the "global elite", and the xenophobia of Build the Wall, were all instinctively reverse engineered from the anxieties of the GOP base and anti-political "lumpen" middle classes. By trying to contain these explosive desires within the demands of the big bourgeoisie, the Republicans were approaching the inertia of their so-called rival Democrats. Just as Democrats legitimize themselves by sucking at the grassroots of organized labor and social movements, Trump channelled the energies of the active conservative movement (Tea Party, Patriotic militiamen, Minutemen, Blue Lives Matter, Libertarians, White Nationalists, etc.) into the Republican Party, temporarily giving it new life.

Unfortunately, the Democrats are far better managers of their active base than the Republicans, whose ham-fisted theatrics after Trump's 2020 loss nearly led to a split in the party. Examples can be found in every instance of popular struggle: the Women's March of January 2017, one of the largest mass mobilizations in US history, was easily reduced to a fundraising and electoral campaign for Democrats, and the blockades of international airports and Abolish/ Occupy ICE camps that followed were quickly plumbed into an NGO/ Non-Profit professionalization pipeline.

But before they could gain control, these moments were confronted by the obvious next step of direct action: the Women's March demonstrating the numbers existed to shut down the country against threats to reproductive rights. The airport blockades actually did shut down airports, until a court decision stayed Trump's Muslim ban executive order. ICE facilities around the country were forced to reroute their detainees, switch to teleconference, and even close and relocate. But immediately upon success of these measures, the professionals swoop. The blockades only make the state crueler, they argued, demanding that adventuristic elements respect their authority, trust the courts, check their privilege, and allow them to continue the Sisyphean work of harm reduction.

Compare this to the May 28th, 2020 explosion that was the George Floyd Uprising. After years of being told to elect politicians who would push for police reform, the people of Minneapolis said enough was enough, taking their city back in a fiery purge of mourning, destruction, and self-preservation. Fearing for their lives, city politicians actually resolved to disband the Minneapolis police—a decision easily reversed once they regained control of the streets.

The vanguard of the George Floyd Uprising were not activists, but a new generation of rebels, largely Black and lower-class. Many were veterans of Black Lives Matters who learned their lesson in 2014, but many others were too young to participate then, yet instinctively knew what had to be done to avenge George Floyd and make the cops think twice before killing again. This, more than the few isolated incidents of sympathy strikes by bus drivers, represents the proletarian desires beating in the heart of the working class as a whole, yearning to break free immediately, collectively, en masse.

The challenge of those like us who want to develop a tendency faithful to the uprising—while trying to overcome its limits—is to theorize how this mass movement can convince millions more to follow the proletarian vanguard into the next uprising.

An immediate contradiction in thinking through this shift is that so many participated in the uprising as individuals who spontaneously built ad-hoc crews. If this is the model for contemporary revolution, old left ideas about the workers' movement, the social movement, and the party should adjust. Throwing oneself into the riots and being transformed by the struggle itself was more important than trying to win everyone over to one particular strategy or organization.

Transformative moments like these did occur during the uprising. In downtown Manhattan, cultural venues, churches, art galleries, and cafes were converted into shelters or free stores to supply or hide the rioters. Elsewhere, workplaces across the country were forced to reckon with pay disparity and other forms of daily racist treatment and complicity with the police and prisons. The trend of corporate wokeness that followed is better understood as a desperate attempt to placate these questions, rather than the demand of the uprising as it spread into professional settings.

It is also notable that this mass rebellion occurred at the highest point of unemployment in the United States since the Great Depression. But unlike the mass movements that were contained by the jobs programs of the New Deal, the uprising did not call for a jobs program, nor did it emerge from the specific conditions of specific workplaces. It was instead a revolt of the precariat against a world that has become itself a massive workplace.

This is not to challenge the importance of the traditional working class, however narrowly defined. It is this class, alone, which has the power to really shut production down, and then start it running again as it sees fit. Previous Marxist attempts to analyze urban riots have often made the mistake of emphasizing the separation between the lower-class and the working-class by either pejoratively or patronizingly invoking the nebulous category of the lumpenproletariat. The uprisings' main participants were neither petty bandits nor counterrevolutionary opportunists, but workers, freshly unemployed or otherwise, and their teenage children. They can be found driving taxis, driving buses, doing gig work, selling clothes online, selling drugs, doing sex work, and working at the same retail shops that were looted and burned. This group is no longer at the margins of the working class, but a massive plurality of it. This demonstrates the necessity of understanding the participants in the uprising as a vanguard faction of the working class.

When referring to the vanguard as the real movement, we are quoting Marx's definition of communism as "the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence." Orienting towards

the real movement distinguishes revolutionaries from populists and reformists—especially those factions of the left that have embraced arguments that the failure of Sanders to beat Biden were due to his being “too woke”, or that the uprising itself was misguided because carceral solutions poll well among Black voters. Their interest, like the Democrats, is to maintain society basically as is. To the extent that they do orient towards the working class, it is only towards those elements that stand in contradiction to its revolutionary pole: the proletariat.

The proletariat succeeds when it moves towards overcoming the contradiction of humanity with capital. It fails when it recreates the world as it is: ordered by race, gender, and class. In the joyous, multiracial rebellion of 2020, we saw this order temporarily break down in the streets of America. The new subjectivity manifested there was not a voter, did not have a leader, sought neither reforms nor non-reformist reforms, did not want to make America a more just society. It was a mass politics qualitatively different from what is useful for the failing political parties.

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