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CrimethInc.
Next Time It Explodes
Revolt, Repression, and Backlash since the Ferguson Uprising
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A year has passed since the murder of Michael Brown, one of over 1100 people, disproportionately black and brown, killed by US law enforcement in 2014. The movement against institutionalized white supremacy and police violence has spread and escalated, gaining leverage on the authorities and the public imagination despite repeated efforts to coopt it. At the same time, we are seeing extra-governmental white supremacist violence reemerge as a force in the US, as it always does whenever state strategies for imposing white supremacy reach their limits.

The illusion of social peace is evaporating. Over the past year, the National Guard has been called out three times to quell anti-police rioting. White racists have retaliated with church burnings and murders, while raising hundreds of thousands of dollars to support murderers in uniform. The lines that are being drawn may determine the geography of racialized conflict in the US for a long time to come. How did we arrive here from the first demonstrations in Ferguson? And how should we position ourselves in these struggles?

The Backstory: Crisis and Repression, Cooptation and Revolt

The racialized poverty that forms the landscape of Ferguson and so many other predominantly black districts is not just a consequence of the recession of 2008. The costs of capitalism have always been inflicted first and worst on black people, from slavery and Jim Crow to the contemporary phenomenon of “surplus humanity” for whom there is no place in the economy. And since the beginning, this has engendered black resistance.

Fifty years ago, white America faced powder keg of civil rights movements, militant black organizing, and urban riots. Because the 1960s were a time of comparative abundance and economic

growth, the United States government could afford to stabilize society by integrating some people of color into more aspects of political and economic life. But even those concessions took place at a price: while a minority of black people were offered conditional access to the middle class, the more militant organizers and the majority of black communities were ruthlessly repressed. Since then, some of the leaders of the black civil rights movement have become successful politicians, while Black Panthers remain behind bars along with a million other black people.

This is the dual operation of repression: kill or imprison the ones who won't or can't compromise, while integrating the more tractable into the power structure.

Today, in the age of global austerity, there are few resources available with which to strike bargains with the excluded. The rhetoric from politicians and pundits condemning protesters in Ferguson and Baltimore is a military operation intended to make it possible to use force against them without blowback, but it also shows that the conflict between the two sides is irresolvable: no one in power has any idea what to do about our society's racial and economic inequalities. Leaders on the left are doing their best to obscure this in order to buy time. When they bought time in the 1960s, that time was used to build the jails and prisons that hold nearly two and a half million people today, to set the stage for the gentrification that is currently demolishing entire communities of color.

This is why in 2014, neither the repressive force of the state nor the receding lure of economic success were enough to contain black rage. No wonder Ferguson exploded.

From Ferguson to Baltimore

Consult the appendix below for a timeline of the Baltimore uprising.

- **May 3** — On Sunday, the mayor lifted the curfew two days early, responding to complaints from business owners. Things had calmed down.

The post–1960s strategy of integrating black leaders into the structures of state power has also reached its limits. We saw hints of this in the 2009 uprising following the murder of Oscar Grant in Oakland, a city whose political elite includes civil rights veterans who now oversee police that behave the same as ever towards the black and poor.

Although Ferguson was a classic example of a black majority terrorized by a violent white elite, the power structure in Baltimore includes a number of black authority figures. That extends even into the police department: three of the six officers arrested for the murder of Freddie Gray are black. Yet putting black people in positions of state power hasn't done away with poverty, police killings, or other forms of structural racism in Baltimore. Black politicians may have been able to ameliorate the situation to some extent, but in the end it took the riots with which people responded to the murder of Freddie Gray to force the issue of white supremacy.

People of any background can maintain white supremacist institutions. Despite media handwringing about Ferguson's disproportionately white police force, we don't just need affirmative action among those who impose structural oppression; we need to make it impossible for these institutions to dominate people in the first place.

After the initial explosion, chief prosecutor Marilyn Mosby succeeded in averting further confrontations by announcing the filing of charges against Freddie Gray's murderers immediately ahead of the demonstrations scheduled for May Day weekend. Her decision to press charges was exceptional and courageous, but most of those charges would never have been filed if not for clashes like the ones she was trying to forestall. It is a mistake to turn people from means of protest that interrupt the status quo back to ineffective strategies that rely on the institutional channels of redress. Even if the officers responsible for Freddie Gray's death are found guilty, that will not prove that the system can police itself, but rather that it takes a full-scale uprising to impose even a modicum of con-

sequences on those who maintain it. Rather than setting out to reform the court system one riot at a time, it would make more sense to ask what these uprisings lack to become steps towards revolutionary change.

In response to that possibility, those who have the greatest cause to fear change—the authorities, the corporate media, and representatives of the middle class—set out to frame the uprising in Baltimore as pathological and puerile. The curfew that was imposed in Baltimore on April 29 along with the National Guard occupation was an extension of the curfew that had already been in place,[1] for young people in that city all year. In effect, the April 29 curfew signified the infantilizing of the whole adult population of Baltimore, an intensification of the function that the state always plays in pacifying and sidelining people.

This is the light in which we must understand the corporate media narrative about the mother who hit her son for masking up and throwing rocks on the premise she didn't want him to become yet another Freddie Gray.[2] That narrative individualizes blame for police violence—in fact, Freddie Gray was not committing any sort of crime when he was arrested. There is no *individual* solution for the structural violence directed at Freddie Gray and countless young people like him—and likely no solution that involves obeying the

[1] The 2014 article linked here blithely reassures the reader of the good intentions of the police enforcing the curfew: "The Baltimore Police have recently been trained on dealing with youth. To emphasize that those caught violating curfew are not considered criminals, the city says most children out late will be transported in vans—not in the back of police cars." Indeed, Freddie Gray was fatally injured in the back of a van, having been arrested for no criminal activity whatsoever.

[2] The counterpart of that narrative is the mother who persuaded her son to turn himself in for his role in vandalizing a police car, only to see him held on $500,000 bail—afterwards, when it was too late, she regretted telling him to entrust his fate to the authorities.

sources estimated 10,000 or more participants altogether. The atmosphere was joyous. Police were not numerous enough to contain the demonstrators, but kept them from taking highways and protected certain targets. In the jail district, prisoners joined in the chanting from behind the walls, mostly "All night, all day, we will fight for Freddie Gray." Pickup trucks overflowing with people joined the march in West Baltimore. It headed back downtown, then slowly dispersed around the time of curfew. However, at City Hall, 50–100 people stayed past curfew and at least 13 were arrested, many of those arrests violent. There was more curfew violence at the intersection of Penn and North, as well.

- **May 2** — On Saturday, there were more marches. At this point, much of the energy had shifted towards seeking amnesty for arrestees, many of whom faced severe charges. For example, one young man who smashed the windows of a police car, whose parent had convinced him to turn himself in, was being held on $500,000 bail.
  Saturday night saw the broadest anti-curfew organizing. A mostly white group met in a mostly white neighborhood; police showed up in force, but gave warning after warning to disperse and pleaded with the group not to get arrested. People agreed to disperse, since jail support resources were already spread thin. Police reportedly offered to drive people home afterwards. Meanwhile, at the intersection of Penn and North, police beat and pepper-sprayed and arrested people, especially black protestors. A fairly large number of medics and people organizing jail support were arrested at the jail for curfew violation.

role in Baltimore politics, including radical politics.
The intersection of Penn & North, where the CVS had been burned, became the default space for protestors seeking conflict to gather—similar to the QuikTrip that was burned in Ferguson. The curfew was enforced violently at 10 pm; people fought back against police, but nothing like what had happened on Monday.

- **April 30** — On Wednesday, many groups called for marches, even though the state of emergency banned all public gatherings; these marches were all granted permits at the last minute, acknowledging the leverage protesters had gained against the state. The resulting march, led by black and brown youth, was the largest anyone had seen in Baltimore for a long time, though it was dwarfed by the marches that followed on Friday and Saturday. The march conceded to police demands not to stay in front of City Hall, and made its way back to Penn Station, dispersing around 9 pm so people could get inside by curfew. More fighting ensued after curfew at the intersection of Penn and North.

- **May 1** — More demonstrations were scheduled for May 1 and 2; they were expected to draw people from nearby cities and likely become confrontational again. But on the morning of Friday, May 1, state's attorney Mosby announced that six police officers would be charged with crimes as a result of Freddie Gray's death; one of them is being charged with murder.
There were unpermitted marches around the city all day and late into the night. Most people gathered downtown at City Hall and McKeldin Square, the "free speech zone" where the authorities usually try to keep protestors. The march drew something like 5000 people and proceeded eleven miles, during which it picked up and lost people constantly; some

law or waiting for it to take its due course. Waiting on the courts is yet more infantilizing: hush up and let the adults take care of this.

But that sort of sidelining is becoming less and less feasible. In Ferguson and then in Baltimore, we saw children throwing rocks because their parents had already been incapacitated or imprisoned, just like in Palestine—and because, as in Palestine, they knew that there would be no payoff to behaving themselves. There has been a lot of rhetoric about fatherless children, and indeed a shocking proportion of men have been kidnapped from black communities in places like West Baltimore. But the truth is that black youth succeeded in forcing the issue of police violence where everyone else had failed. In interrupting the functioning of a system that has no place for them, they are the ones opening the possibility of real change, not the black leadership of the previous generation.

From Ferguson to Baltimore, the cycle of revolt accelerated and intensified. The arc of events that took a week and a half to unfold in Ferguson played out much more rapidly in Baltimore. Large parts of the city were in flames within two days of the first confrontations, and the National Guard was deployed almost immediately; Mosby filed the charges that effectively concluded the uprising just four days later. Despite the speedy quelling of the riots, it seems possible that the state had nearly reached the limit of what it could do to impose white supremacist inequality by main force: with the prisons packed, once the National Guard is deployed, escalating to a higher level of repression would mean declaring open war on the population.

If multiple uprisings were to occur simultaneously in the same region, control might break down completely. Hence the authorities' scrambling to mollify people they had been ignoring for years.

From Baltimore to South Carolina

A week before the murder of Freddie Gray, a police officer had murdered Walter Scott, an unarmed black man, in North Charleston, South Carolina, shooting him in the back as he fled. The killing was caught on video, and within three days the officer was charged with murder. Even in the birthplace of the Confederacy, the specter of uprising forced the authorities to impose consequences on the police.

Yet whenever governmental enforcement of white supremacy reaches its limits in the United States, independent white supremacist activity picks up. The classic example of this is the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan and similar organizations like the White League and the Red Shirts after the abolition of slavery. In many cases, it was the same sheriffs, judges, and legislators who enforced racist laws on the books donning robes and hoods to pick up where the laws left off.

In recent months, we've seen a resurgence of autonomous white supremacist activity, including a spate of church burnings that began in Ferguson immediately after the decision not try Darren Wilson for the murder of Michael Brown. But that could be only the tip of the iceberg.

In response to the uprisings of the past few years, we are seeing police—and the subset of middle-class America from which many of them are drawn—beginning to conceive of their interests as distinct from the rest of the state structure. In 2011, during the peak of Occupy Oakland, Mayor Jean Quan wrestled with the Oakland Police Department, which repeatedly asserted a contrary agenda. Something similar occurred between the NYPD and Mayor Bill de Blasio in New York City last winter, when New York City police carried out an unofficial strike demanding more unconditional support from the government—in effect, demanding the freedom to employ violence with impunity. After the Baltimore uprising, there was a lot of grumbling among Maryland police who blamed their superiors

dozen buildings were burned, most famously the CVS at the intersection of Penn and North. Corporate media played live footage of looting from helicopters, the newscasters wailing and wringing their hands about the loss of property while describing the people below in pejorative terms. Looking down uncomprehendingly at the people they said were "burning their own neighborhoods," they offered the perspective of the state—the same perspective as the drones sailing over Pakistan.

The mayor declared a state of emergency, called in police from around the state along with the National Guard, and announced a seven-day curfew to go into effect Tuesday. The overwhelmed court system was not able to keep up with all the arrestees, some of whom were eventually released without charges.

- **April 29** — On Tuesday, the city was tense. On public transportation, you could hear people bragging about what they'd looted, mostly basic necessities. Witnesses reported a feeling in the air to the effect that "We did what we had to do." Community organizations sponsored cleanup activities, as in London in 2011, and "peacekeepers" were out hoping to prevent more fighting and rioting from breaking out.

  It's important to emphasize that because so much of the population of Baltimore is black, there were black people involved in all of these different responses—black politicians, black peacekeepers, black police, black community organizers, black business owners, black rioters.

  On Tuesday, since schools were closed, Red Emma's (the primary anarchist space in town) provided a place for kids who weren't in school and for homeless youth from a shelter that had been destroyed in the rioting. Free food was collected and distributed through organizations in other neighborhoods—largely church organizations, which play a

Appendix I: Timeline of the Baltimore Uprising

from an interview US anarchists answered for the Greek anarchist news service, Apatris

- **April 12** — Freddie Gray was arrested for making eye contact with an officer. He was intentionally injured in police custody while being transported to jail, and denied proper medical care. He passed away on April 19 as a consequence of these injuries.

- **April 26** — On Saturday, there was a law-abiding protest rally in the afternoon. It concluded with a march in which participants vandalized police cars and clashed with drunk, racist sports fans. The police created a control perimeter, but inside of this space, demonstrators reportedly were free to destroy property for some hours. The police had lost control.

- **April 28** — On Monday, a message reportedly circulated among high school students via social media calling for a "purge" that afternoon at a mall in Baltimore: a reference to a Hollywood movie in which laws and policing are suspended. The mall in question is a major transit center for kids traveling to and from school. Baltimore doesn't have school buses; kids use public transit. Police preemptively shut down the mall, flooded the streets with officers in riot gear, and shut down public transportation, stopping buses and forcing everyone off of them. In this tense situation, with nowhere to go, youth began to clash with the police. In at least one instance, police officers were documented throwing rocks back at children.

  By nightfall, there were riots and fires all over the city, including some of the whiter neighborhoods. Over a hundred cars were set on fire, including many police cars, and over a

for not permitting them to use more violence against demonstrators.

This kind of frustration could give rise to new racist movements that will understand themselves as needing to *take the law into their own hands* in order to maintain law and order and defend private property. Something similar has occurred in Greece with the emergence of the fascist party Golden Dawn, which now counts a great part of the country's police officers in its ranks. That makes it especially ominous that the Oath Keepers, a paramilitary organization of former policemen and soldiers, have made repeated appearances at demonstrations in Ferguson.

Autonomous movements of all stripes have an advantage today, when government is widely discredited. Like anarchists in contrast to liberals, autonomous white supremacists are more effective than garden-variety racists because they are prepared to use direct action to achieve their goals. What is at stake here is what autonomy will mean in the public imagination: freedom and resistance to oppression, or unchecked racist violence. The discourse of autonomy is strategically precious territory; whoever is able to occupy it will be able to determine the frame within which people conceptualize social change.

For the state, the intensification of extra-governmental white supremacist activity is an opportunity to change the subject. Such activity enables the government to present itself as protecting people from racist violence, directing attention away from all the normalized ways that the state imposes such violence. The image of the National Guard holding back white vigilantes during integration in the South gave the federal government decades of credibility, even though the same National Guard put down the riots of the late 1960s. If anything like Golden Dawn or the KKK of the 1920s gets off the ground in the US today, many people currently involved in movements against police and prisons will line up behind the government again, legitimizing those institutions as necessary tools

against white supremacists even though in the long run they will always be used chiefly against the black, brown, and poor.

So far, we have yet to see a surge in organized group violence from fascists or rogue police officers. Autonomous white supremacist violence has remained the province of lone wolves like Dylann Roof, who carried out a racist massacre in Charleston, South Carolina in June 2015, reportedly with the intention of catalyzing a race war. Photographs showed him brandishing a Confederate flag and other racist insignia.

In response, activists renewed their appeal to the state legislature to remove the Confederate flag from its official place on the grounds of the state capitol. In 1961, Democratic Governor Ernest Hollings had initiated legislation to raise the Confederate flag on the capitol grounds as a symbol of resistance to the civil rights movement. Despite the end of legal segregation, the flag stood, defying an NAACP tourism boycott since 2000.

On June 21, days after the Emanuel Church massacre, "Black Lives Matter" graffiti appeared on Confederate monuments in Charleston and elsewhere. On June 27, Black Lives Matter activist Brittany Ann Byuarim Newsome was arrested and charged with "defacing a monument" after climbing up the flagpole at the state capitol and removing the Confederate flag. Less than two weeks later, lawmakers voted to remove it from the State Capitol.

This demonstrates the power of direct action. The tourism boycott had been ineffective; so long as the state perceived no internal threat to order, it could afford to shrug off a few lost tourist dollars and the indignation of activists. But when uprisings elsewhere around the US dovetailed with local outrage, the willingness of a few individuals to break the law hastened a process that otherwise could have dragged on decades longer. The spectacle of a state claiming to oppose racism arresting an activist for removing an officially sanctioned symbol of racism from the headquarters of the state left the lawmakers no choice—especially after the Ku Klux Klan scheduled a rally at the capitol for July 18, threatening to

are more racially and economically marginalized than us will not have cause to conclude that they have indeed been abandoned.

Fighting white supremacy in this context means spreading the clashes with the authorities, while crushing autonomous racist initiatives wherever they appear. It means confronting fascists—an essentially rearguard battle—but it also means taking the initiative in attacking capitalism and the state, intensifying the struggles we are already in. Only by foregrounding anarchist solutions to the problems of poor people, including poor white people, can we make it impossible for racists to recruit from the ranks of the poor, white, and angry.

In short: class war, not race war. We may have less time than we know.

> "That left was too lost in delusions of success almost within their hands, delusions of maneuvering together a majority, to bother even really understanding fascism coming up fast in their rear view mirror. The urgent need was to organize a working minority to counter fascism in a much more radical way. Not by trying to defend liberal bourgeois rule. All the real things that had to be done by scattered German anti-fascists later after the Nazis were put into power—such as to survive politically, to significantly sabotage the war effort, to rescue Jews and Romany and gays, to build an underground against the madness of the Third Reich—all these things were attempted bravely but largely unsuccessfully, because they had to be done too late from scratch. This is a much larger subject, too large to dive into now, but it is on the horizon, like the smoke of a distant forest fire."
>
> — J. Sakai, "When Race Burns Class"

The precarious rapport de force that has lasted since the Baltimore uprising will likely persist until another demographic enters the conflict. It's not clear how much further the state can go to maintain the current order by means of pure force. If uprisings occurred in multiple cities in the same region at the same time, or if a much broader range of people got involved, all bets would be off.

But as intimated above, the next demographic to enter the space of conflict might well be a reactionary force. South Carolina is not the only place in which struggles against state violence have shifted seamlessly into struggles against autonomous white supremacists. Some anarchists and fellow travelers have glibly invoked "social war" or "civil war," without fully grasping that such wars usually end up playing out along ethnic and religious lines in the most reactionary manner.[3] As the tensions in our society increase, it is up to us to render it possible to imagine other lines of conflict. The Dylann Roofs of the world and their equivalents within the halls of power want nothing better than to see society split into warring racial factions, with poor whites joining police and other defenders of the middle class to suppress the rage of the black and disaffected. White people must not countenance this division, even out of a wrongheaded desire to stand aside out of respect for black autonomy. That would spell doom for the most marginalized people in this struggle, however much good liberals might applaud their courageous efforts from afar. Rather, we have to produce a narrative of multiethnic struggle against white supremacy and capitalism by participating directly in the clashes that are occurring right now—both so that it will be impossible for white supremacists to convince potential converts that the important lines dividing society are racial, and so that those who

[3] While 19th century France saw a series of civil wars fought along class lines, it is telling that the only civil war in the history of the United States was initiated by those who wished to preserve slavery.

create an additional spectacle of explicit racists outside the legislature allied with filibustering Republicans within. On July 9, the legislators voted to take down the Confederate flag, rebranding themselves as anti-racists. As in Ferguson and Baltimore, direct action had shifted the terrain, compelling officials to scramble to catch up.

Yet by focusing attention on removing the Confederate flag from the state capitol, activists had displaced rage against the racist murders in South Carolina onto a symbolic issue that legislators could address. The role of the Ku Klux Klan here aptly illustrates how extra-governmental white supremacist activity can be advantageous for the state.

This was the context in which Klansmen and women, police, and protesters attending a black-organized counterdemonstration converged upon the state capitol grounds of Columbia, South Carolina on July 18, 2015. The Klansmen hoped to attract the attention of angry whites who felt victimized by recent victories against white supremacy; if they could present themselves as the sole remaining defenders of a flag and a tradition abandoned by the authorities, they would win new adherents for extra-governmental white supremacist organizing. The authorities hoped to preserve order, showing that they could control opponents of the state on both sides, in order to keep the state itself central for all seeking social change. The protesters, as usual, were divided between a variety of goals and methodologies; they ran the gamut from religious pacifists to black separatists to predominantly white anarchists.

The day ended in a rout for the Klan, with a multiethnic crowd including anarchists chasing them back to their cars and pelting them with projectiles as the overextended police struggled to protect them. More Klansmen went to the hospital than protesters went to jail. The demonstrators had prevented the Klan from asserting an image of strength, hopefully discouraging dissatisfied white people from joining them. At the same time, compared to the events in Ferguson and Baltimore, the police had ceased to

be the chief subject of the demonstrations; Dylann Roof, the controversy about the Confederate flag, and the Klan rally had shifted the subject away from policing and other normalized and fundamental aspects of the white supremacist power structure, towards exceptional and symbolic expressions of white supremacy. As social conflicts polarize and more and more people on both sides break off from state-based strategies, it will be especially important to continue confronting the institutionalized white supremacy of the state.

Next Time It Explodes

The police in the St. Louis area have continued their pattern of killing someone every month or so since the protests there last August and November. The police in Baltimore and South Carolina will surely continue killing, as well, even if they are more anxious about the consequences; apparently, it requires this level of perpetual violence to preserve the current social order. It will take more than reforms, more than individual uprisings, to put a stop to police murder.

Over the past seven years, we have seen a slow, steady escalation in the tactics that protesters in the United States feel entitled to employ. In 2008 and 2009, only the most radical student groups went so far as to occupy universities; in 2011, Occupy became the watchword of an entire mass movement. During the Occupy movement, only the most radical groups went so far as to blockade anything; during the Black Lives Matter protests of November and December 2014, people around the United States employed blockading on a regular basis. During the protests that spread from Ferguson in 2014, only the most enraged participants engaged in vandalism, arson, and looting; yet protesters in Baltimore escalated to vandalism, arson, and looting as soon as their demonstrations escaped police control. All this illustrates the value of pushing the

envelope: demonstrating new tactics, however unpopular they may be at the time, so that they enter the public imagination for future use.

This escalation has been matched by a shift in popular discourse. During the flashpoints in Ferguson and Baltimore, some media outlets published daring editorials explaining the riots as acts of desperation, or making arguments for why people had given up on nonviolence. We have not seen such a public validation of militant tactics in the US for decades.

Yet there is a big difference between validating and participating. These pundits seem to have obtained all the credibility of endorsing militant tactics without any of the inconveniences of employing them. All of these editorials are concerned only with explaining and legitimizing what they essentially treat as exotic phenomena; the implication is that the rest of us might accept what the rioters are doing from a distance, but certainly not participate in it ourselves. Other aspiring allies arrive at the same conclusion from a different direction, being so careful not to usurp the agency of the most affected communities that they end up standing aside entirely or putting their weight behind lower-risk initiatives.

But it is dangerous and unethical to leave the greatest risks to the most vulnerable people. If it makes sense for the most marginalized and targeted to risk their lives to interrupt the functioning of the system that is killing them, it makes even more sense for the rest of us to do so. It's not a question of understanding the uprisings, but of joining and extending them in order to render them unnecessary. That doesn't necessarily mean invading others' neighborhoods: the next time a Ferguson or a West Baltimore erupts, it might be most effective for those who wish to show solidarity to initiate actions elsewhere, in order to overextend the authorities. Nor should it mean centralizing ourselves in the narrative: solidarity means taking on the same risks that others are exposed to—nothing more, nothing less.