

On the Suppression of the Nebraska Rebellion and the Possibilities Therein

Irruptions

2020

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Some of you reading this were out on the streets for the May-June uprising. Some of your bodies bear traces of those events. You experienced the brutal violence cops are willing to deploy when you ask them to stop murdering Black people. Some of you felt a joy you had never felt before: a range of motion, a range of living, that only becomes possible when the people tasked with running your lives at gunpoint have lost control. Did these things change you?

This blogpost attends to the notion of transformation through struggle, and the ways that the collective energy in Lincoln has or has not been transformed by the local manifestations of the George Floyd Rebellion. We will begin by exploring transformation.

In discussing the subject of militant struggle at large, Nick Montgomery and carla bergman employ Baruch Spinoza's concepts of joy and sadness in their book, *Joyful Militancy*. In brief, Spinoza writes that joy is what increases one's capacity to act, whereas sadness is what diminishes that capacity. Montgomery and bergman use these Spinozan concepts to discuss contemporary liberatory struggle, explaining that, "Empire reacts to resistance by entrenching and accumulating what Spinoza calls sadness: the reduction of our capacity to affect and be affected" (53, original emphasis). Conversely, "[t]o be militant about joy means being attuned to situations or relationships and learning how to participate in and support the transformation rather than directing or controlling it" (48). Montgomery and bergman call those of us who work to transform ourselves and our world through struggle to be militant about joy—that is, to commit ourselves to increasing our and our friends' capacities to act.

Montgomery and bergman pinpoint struggle as one source of such joy:

Anyone who has been transformed through a struggle can attest to its power to open up more capacities for resistance, creativity, action, and vision. This sense of collective power—the sense that things are different, that we are different, that a more capable "we" is forming that didn't exist before—is what we mean by joyful transformation. (47-48)

What struggle offers us, what getting into the streets offers us, is a chance to inhabit a new "us." By embodying a new way of life, one which breaks all the rules of the old way of life, we suddenly realize that we are capable of much more than we were ever told. That epiphany ought to change the whole way we live our lives. But, again, we ask: Did our participation in the George Floyd Rebellion succeed in transforming us?

Imposed Amnesia

First, a brief recap of the Lincoln uprising. This blog has previously described the short-term neutralization of the local movement. This neutralization was achieved via the interplay of middle-class activists and the police. While the activists bent people's collective power into the form of issues and interests to be offered to a labyrinthine administrative machine,

the police temporarily recused themselves from beating protestors so as to let the energy evaporate amid speeches and marches that led nowhere.

What occurred in the wake of the May-June uprising was an erasure. As Idris Robinson says in his talk “How It Might Should Be Done”: “A militant nationwide uprising did, in fact, occur. The progressive wing of the counter-insurgency seeks the denial and the disarticulation of the event.” Lincoln has seen very well the disavowal and subsequent expunging from memory of the riots. Though many of us wear t-shirts commemorating the violent teargassing of us and our friends, collective action in Lincoln reveals a lack of collective transformation by our experiences in the uprising. Instead, the old formulae of marches and speeches resumed the throne and disavowed our experiences of rebellion. So, what was missing from Lincoln’s uprising? What diluted its staying power in the collective life of those who participated?

Circular Marches

The reimposition of capitalist drudgery played no small part in the erasure. When the moment of revolt passes, often we return to our private, individual lives that are governed by the organization of time into the hours of work and leisure. In other words, private individuality is a form of control. Spinoza might call it a sad affect, a state in which our capacity to act is diminished. During the revolt, our capacities to choose how to act become freer due to our shared power. With the reinstatement of “normal time” (i.e., the endless cycles of work and school with leisure), our power is decreased, and we become less able to act. All we can manage is to march in circles, if we can be bothered to show up at all.

Walter Benjamin famously called the revolutionary event a “Messianic cessation of happening” (263). In essence, this means that what we know as historical time is suspended; there is a rupture in the supposedly sequential unfolding of history. Benjamin describes this irruption as a kind of shock to the system, one that we rebels are tasked with remembering in order to continue to perceive the hope we discovered during the event. That is to say, if we are transformed by our participation in the revolt, then when normal time is inevitably reinscribed we at least bring with us our memories of the experience. And these memories can recharacterize how we see the abysmal day-to-day. They can remind us that we are more powerful than, can do far more than, whatever our appointed task is within the economy of death and destruction.

We cannot allow ourselves to forget this at the hands of a progressive counterinsurgency that steals our joy. We must not allow ourselves to be lined up behind a megaphones, which is an ideological firing line. But, the fact is, we have forgotten and we have been lined up. Although there are those of us who still feel the thrumming vitality of those nights on the streets, there seem to be many more of us who have forgotten or become lost. That means that the revolt did not transform us collectively. If we wish to emerge toward something different, we need to look critically at the uprising here and how it fell short of transforming us.

Empty Palaces

Amid clashes with police, members of the crowd could be overheard saying that people needed to protest out front of the capitol building in Lincoln, or outside the courthouse in Omaha. Why? Who was there to hear? Who was there to care? Even if Pete Ricketts himself was looking down from atop his phallic tower, what could he possibly do to make us more free? Should he have reminded the cops that teargas is a war crime? They knew it. Every cop in every precinct in the country knew that it was wrong to teargas people, and they did it anyway—whether there was an injunction against it or not.

So, what was it that people wanted from these places? What was there to gain from besieging halls of power and sterile office buildings and bourgeois shopping districts, which were empty even before the pandemic since they are merely smokescreens for power exercised from afar?

Another conversation amid the crowds that night, some distance from the lines of riot cops guarding the illusive halls of power: “That over there,” gesturing to the line of stormtroopers, “that’s not Nebraska. This is Nebraska—people being together, helping each other out.”

This person was quite wrong, though not entirely. Because Nebraska is the stormtroopers and the empty halls and the unprecedented lines of people at food banks as our illustrious mayor cuts CARES Act funding and urges us to go back to normal. That is Nebraska, and that is the United States of America, and that is the callous game of the nation-states.

What that person saw that night was people pulling each other out of the way of pepper bullets and washing teargas from one another’s eyes—that is what it means to be a person, to be alive. Were we able to recognize that? That we were living, some of us for the first time? Because no boss and no landlord and not even a strong-jawed cop could tell us what to do? We could move and breathe and live on our own terms.

A realization like that ought to change a person. But not much changed in Lincoln or in Omaha. Activists dragged people to the courthouses, where they demanded accountability. All that the mayors and governors and councilmembers had to do was wait until people had talked themselves into exhaustion and disillusionment. Cops were not kept out of schools. The police budget was only marginally decreased. James Scurlock’s killer escaped justice.

People should be more furious than ever, yet our anger lies buried beneath the banality of continuous murder by the very machine we are told to petition. Faced with such misery, many cannot be bothered to show up to marches anymore. And why should they? What will it achieve? The custodians of power do not even seem to notice people’s being on the streets. The powerful are not the least bit afraid of what is happening at this point. Not like they were afraid when people had each other’s backs in the face of the riot cops. Not like when cars rolled up to the police line, subs booming “Fuck Tha Police,” and people were dancing in the streets. Not like when the loudspeaker sparked to life with music at the front of the protest and the cops tried to snatch the owner from the crowd, because the most impermissible thing is for there to be unregulated joy. The cronies of power are most afraid when we show them we are living.

We must, then, find ways to come alive. We must reveal our vitality to ourselves and to each other. The riots have passed, and they will not return in the same way they did before. No one can say what will happen or when. That leaves us in the present. And, right now, we need to rediscover what was found in the predawn glow on the sweating summer streets. We must remember what many of us have forgotten. And we must start experimenting with our own power.

Like Water

In closing, we turn a curious eye to cities across the United States that are home to sustained uprisings. Our friends-in-struggle in such cities as Portland and Seattle are developing and experimenting with tactics to defend themselves from increasingly violent state and white supremacist repression while they struggle toward greater liberation. Among such experiments are those adopted from Hong Kong and elsewhere—umbrellas, traffic cones, etc.—as well as the popularization of shield walls. But, just as important as these self-defense measures (though far less reported) are the constructive strategies being deployed in these cities—Riot Ribs feeding protestors, a group of witches bringing aid to wildfire victims, and many similar free distributions of reclaimed food and other necessities.

Neither Lincoln nor Omaha got very far on either of these fronts, both of which are necessary to sustain a local movement. On the one hand, there is the need to be like water, to move in such a way that any attempts to surround (physically or ideologically) the movement and eliminate it will fail. On the other hand, evasions from power must ultimately coalesce into something purposeful. It is not enough to constantly be on the run from the state and its lackeys. There must be something to run toward. Emancipatory projects that actualize food autonomy and other forms of liberated life are vital components of the uprising.

It can be difficult to see this importance through the haze of media coverage. If it bleeds it leads, the tired trope goes, and constructive strategies aim to stem the blood loss from the US's centuries-long genocide. Expectedly, mainstream outlets talk about vandalism, but they never discuss the redistribution of food liberated from big-box grocery stores. Even Left Twitter is dazzled by the spectacle of shield walls and de-arrestings, while the rarer posts about mutual aid projects are afforded far less attention.

The Capitol Hill Organized Protests (CHOP, formerly CHAZ) was one attempt to move toward a new way of life, toward a neighborhood without police. It constitutes one experiment in constructive strategy. However, it was quick to collapse in the face of a multiplicity of factors, among which were its inability to evade attack by white supremacists or to stand up to media scrutiny. CHOP was not water, it was land, and land can be surrounded and choked (again, either physically or ideologically). By cementing themselves into place, by drawing a border, the inhabitants of CHOP were forced into a defensive posture, no longer holding the initiative. As such, mobility seems to be a particular aspect of the struggle in the United Statesian metropolis. (I.e., food trucks and other forms of mobile distribution stations are worth experimenting with.)

Beyond CHOP, few constructive projects have received much airtime. The spectacle of police brutality, and the catharsis of seeing that brutality deflected, is understandably very alluring. There is no more potent a symbol today than the blocked-up “antifa” kid throwing teargas cans back at the cops. This figure presently inhabits the hackneyed debate of freedom-fighter-vs.-terrorist. Frontliners, though indispensable, are symbolically contested figures. To remain focused on a battle over definitions of frontliners is to be lured into a trap because, like CHOP, we find ourselves surrounded by symbolic cultural structures of “peace” and “law and order” that will crush us. If we want to increase our joy, to transform ourselves and each other into something new, we must pay equal attention to and undertake as much experimentation with constructive strategies for building autonomy in the vanishingly temporary zones of our liberation.

First, find each other. Find the other people who were transformed. Then, find unexpected ways to free yourselves and those around you. Create spaces where you can be briefly free—free from the ransom price for bread and shelter, free from the violence of bosses and cops—and push the borders until the borders push back. Be ready to flee, only to regroup and try again. The effects of COVID-19, wrought by the state, demand even greater ingenuity as we do these things.

Be like water and nourish the soil around you. Most importantly of all, understand that we do not know what is planted there. We do not know what will grow. But we wish to be attuned to the possibilities beneath the soil. We wish to help it emerge, whatever it is.

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find each other.



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