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Political Action in Stasis

On Protests in Lincoln, Nebraska

Irruptions

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The primary function of this introductory blogpost will be the analysis of the abject failure of the present political imagination in Nebraskan activism that is manifest in the recent protests against white supremacist violence by police. However, because this is an introductory blogpost, we also aim to explain what we imagine our intervention in Nebraskan socio-political discourse to be.

We must, therefore, begin by drawing out a methodology that will situate our analyses within various political-theoretical traditions. We take as the object of our analyses political, economic, and social practices. It is our understanding that any moral agent or political subject is necessarily an effect of those practices. Thus, we are not interested in examining intention, agency, or supposedly latent meaning, but in investigating the interplay of forces.

Following this methodology, our general intention in engaging with this form of discourse is to produce particular effects: We aim to inspire international connections between points of conflict, joining together struggles in the region to a larger framework of theories and strategies developing around global revolts.

We hope our work builds toward an anonymous hum of provocative thinking.

The following analysis of Lincoln protests serves as a first step in this direction.

The Production of Leadership

The unrest surrounding the murder of George Floyd unexpectedly spread to Lincoln, Nebraska, in late May and was intensified by the murder of James Scurlock in Omaha by a white supremacist. Unsurprisingly, activists, city officials, and “the left” were woefully unprepared for these events in the city. In a similar fashion to insurrections in Ferguson, MO, after the murder of Mike Brown, there was at first no established leadership to manage the unrest. The first two nights of demonstration in Lincoln (May 30 and June 1) pre-

sented unprecedented opportunity for individuals to encounter one another and attack the local economy. But, just like Ferguson, a leadership was produced to mount a counter insurgency. Yes, this same sequence of events has played out in cities across the nation. However, Lincoln's counter-insurgency seems to us uniquely effective, worthy of a closer look.

The emergent leadership in Lincoln were young, inexperienced, middle-class activists who assumed the representative role of the voice for Black lives. Originally, they branded themselves as the Lincoln chapter of Black Lives Matter, but they soon distanced themselves from the movement's "polarizing reputation," rebranding as Black Leaders Movement, making explicit their entrepreneurial aspirations. Over the course of the summer, they called various marches and funneled energy into city budget hearings until they finally burned out in the beginning of August. We should not be surprised that these protests fizzled out; the tactics organizers deploy have movements circling the drain nearly immediately. They structured the political space of the march in such a way that every act passed through the neutralizing filter of leadership—every act was ordained. They targeted individuals who broke away from the marches (or were even caught with a spray can), claiming they were outside agitators, and threatened to turn them over to police.

The interviews contained in a [\[\[https://web.archive.org/web/20200719013823/https://journalstar.com/news/local/we-are-our-own-solution-to-our-problems-lincoln-youth-lead-local-protest-movement/article_3274f870-0735-5bc4-804d-cdc7efab61db.html\]\]](https://web.archive.org/web/20200719013823/https://journalstar.com/news/local/we-are-our-own-solution-to-our-problems-lincoln-youth-lead-local-protest-movement/article_3274f870-0735-5bc4-804d-cdc7efab61db.html) Lincoln Journal Star profile on the Black Leaders Movement quite ominously gesture toward this neutralization: One of the organizers says she "noticed there wasn't anyone in charge" when protests first began, and the article then tells us that she "didn't let things stay that way for long." She goes on to say, "As more organizers joined them... the Black Leaders Movement was formed, and the protests began to take a more peaceful and coordinated shape."

and space are part of this policing operation. Marches become an apparatus that capture us and separate us from our collective power. The only way to overcome this is to refuse to be managed and to exhaust the capacities of police. That is to say, the logic of the political space itself must be refused. When, for example, an organizer directs the crowd to march with the flow of traffic, refuse. When police create a route for marching, find ways to flow beyond those limits. If our goal is liberation, we must exceed the apparatuses that contain and govern.

The first two nights of unrest, May 30th and June 1st proved to us that we are here and that we are strong together. Now, we have to find a way to move beyond this stalemate and encounter each other again.

tactics, these tactics of disavowal, have been extremely effective, and, as we have shown, it cannot simply be chalked up to the notion of “Nebraska nice.” At the end of the day, activists in Lincoln do not want to engage in any conflict. In fact, they rather enjoy the idea that their signs or chants are enough. The police understand that they would look like brutes if they attacked protesters and also recognize they would generate unrest (this happened in May). The organizers of demonstrations in Lincoln do not want to address conflict and these protests have no intention of bringing the city’s latent antagonisms to the surface. Instead, protestors will self-police, quelling resistance before it interrupts the daily functioning of power. LPD’s job is, therefore, simply to remove the possibility of confrontation. We imagine this will be the dominant tactic if unrest continues to spread to smaller cities and rural towns.

We turn, by way of conclusion, to Tom Nomad’s “What is Policing.” Nomad reminds us that policing is a logistical operation that projects its presence across space. At the same time, policing has its limitations:

This numerical limitation implies the inability to project across all space simultaneously, all the time, and therefore requires movement, action, which in itself generates conflict and modifies the dynamics of terrain, and thus the dynamics of operation. The police have developed all sorts of ways to amplify their projection through preparing the ground, so to speak. So much time and resources are spent by police departments every year on DARE programs, Neighborhood Watch, and auxiliary programs, all to amplify this projection. (Nomad, 110)

Activist leadership becomes an unpaid logistical operation for police that amplifies their projection. The management of bodies

Here, little analysis is needed. The activist readily admits that their project was to paralyze the potentiality of the event, to transform the protest into something compatible with the status quo and its political infrastructure.

Thus, we watched the numbers dwindle and the crowds grow more white and liberal with each demonstration.

Lincoln Police Department happily played to the activists’ egos, and instead of tear-gassing protesters as they had in June, they removed themselves from the equation. With no visible force to resist, it was as though the police altogether vanished from the minds of these middle-class activists, who contented themselves with chanting at empty halls of power. Meanwhile, the police continued to harass Black bodies in poor neighborhoods—the same Black bodies that were excluded from the marches of the Bourgeoisie and threatened with police intervention.

What occurred in this situation suggests a different configuration of power and force than is perhaps typically imagined. Power acted from within the crowd itself, managing its own organization and composition. The actions of the crowd were determined, not by the direct repression of the state, but by a system of management that developed via the interplay of liberal activism and city police tactics. To put it more concretely, Lincoln Police realized that attacking crowds would only antagonize them, so they instead left the policing to the crowd’s leadership. Everyone who knew better stayed far away from these marches. It was a shift from autonomous actions and the absence of political decorum to permitted marches and a simulacrum of resistance that arrested the movement in a stasis from which it never recovered. “This is what democracy looks like!” Indeed, it is. That is to say, democratic political space is shaped in such a way that protest will always neutralize itself as long as it operates according to the logic of the space. We really cannot emphasize enough how exclusionary these marches in Lincoln were and how the Black proletariat were banished from the very beginning by the middle-class leadership.

New Leadership

At the end of the summer, a new leadership emerged, calling themselves Fight for Black Lives. If this group ever had emancipatory ambitions, they were obscured by the theatrics of its leadership and poor strategies. This group was even more willing to work with police than the Black Leaders Movement. The allegiance between Fight for Black Lives and LPD was made public after an unhinged wingnut attempted to drive through the crowd. LDP let him go, and instead charged a protester for attempting to intervene (making LPD's position clear). However, instead of recognizing LPD's antipathy, the activists asked for police escorts. When questioned about coordinating with police, their primary organizer shouted into a megaphone, "We gotta work with police until we don't need them anymore," as though the police were a vanguard party. Prior to this tone deaf move, between thirty and fifty people had consistently marched with Fight for Black Lives. These numbers diminished to roughly ten when the police escorts began.

As usual, it was not just police who controlled the flow of bodies in the march. Fight for Black Lives' young organizer had also been spreading conspiracies of "outside agitators" in the crowd, declaring into the megaphone, "I don't know how much longer things will be peaceful tonight. I didn't want to scare anyone, but there are outside agitators here who want to loot and discredit the movement." A crew of bicyclists, who had attempted to obscure the police's vision, were singled out that night. We never saw them return to demonstrations.

Of course, the police escorts did nothing to protect the remaining few who did continue to march, and when, a week after the first incident, another car harassed protesters LPD did nothing. The young organizer announced after that night that they would no longer be working with police (only after another protester called him out for this). Sadly, this was a lesson that activists here needed to learn (many still do), but more importantly it reveals that this

leadership only exposes protesters to more harm by not taking seriously the threat that police pose.

Lincoln police have benefited greatly from the new leadership. The so-called leadership here only strengthened the police's control over the protests because the forces of policing and activism worked together to create an utterly immobile body politic.

We have yet to point out the stark contrast between strategies used by Lincoln police and Omaha police, but it is worth mentioning. Demonstrations in Omaha persisted energetically due to OPD's overtly violent response. Mass arrests and riot control tactics only angered protesters in Omaha. On the other hand, as we have already discussed, LPD utilized a hands-off approach after the first few nights of physical violence; cops even showed up "in support" of protesters.

Here, again, we can draw out some of the operative logic of the two strategies from their differing effects. In brief, clear lines of enmity serve to constitute partisan combatants, and the back-and-forth play of violence between groups quite visibly draws these lines, producing those subjectivities. Thus, when policing appears as battle, the conditions of battle are set, and what occurs within that field will take the form of battle. But if the violence of policing disavows itself, if enmity is not the manifest distinction between the crowd and the police, other possibilities emerge. In the case of Lincoln protests, the disavowed force of the police directed crowds down streets as though the march was a parade (indeed, one of the cops repeatedly referred to the protest as a parade during a confrontation with the aforementioned bicyclists), and liberal activists ensured that the composition of the crowd was respectable, civil, middle-class.

Simultaneously, LPD's Crimestoppers website continues to doxx protesters alongside petty shoplifters. Therefore, we must clarify that violence which disavows itself is still a violence, perhaps a more insidious violence. And precisely for this reason LPD has emerged as a model for other cities. Their de-escalation