

The Only Way Out Is Always Through the Police

A History of the Rise and Fall of the 2020 New York Riots

No Authors nor Masters

2020

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There is a cop inside our heads, society is a power plant that runs on unwept tears, a new world is in our hearts, which is a muscle the size of a fist. Build the commune, sabotage a railroad, distribute food not bombs, canvass for votes, or weep without tears while dumping your medications into the ocean and planting a radical urban garden, but know that these fantastic deeds are happening despite yourself, on a beach beneath a world ruined and paved with all of our past failures.

Dead slogans from failed worlds carry heavy in the hearts of those with the resources and bandwidth to cast aside real-worldly matters as they sit and take their time to work things out within themselves. They murder imaginary cops inside their heads while real cops kick down real doors and smash real batons into everyone else's real bodies, drawing real blood and actually wept tears. Internalized racism, interpersonal microaggressions, and problematic de-colonial feminist transnational praxis all disappear in the path of an officer's night stick whose blow is fast approaching.

Maybe our hearts and minds are good enough for the time being, despite the unfinished work. Maybe the reason no one ever finishes the work is because we've been internalizing a struggle that was always meant to be external. We interrogate ourselves into a deep slouch as our neighbors endure the same kinds of suffering, which they've also been taught is their own fault: a war to be won or lost inside themselves. Looking inward only gets you so far, and so far, here we are.

Maybe the commune shouldn't seek to dissolve the question of needs but rather the question of nerds: nerds writing theory and visualizing data and making podcasts and spinning a world that continues to easily outrun its own collapse. Have you ever stopped and realized that you've just spent more time trying to read a boring long-form essay than it took a group of teenagers to destroy an entire business district and bring the largest city in the country to its knees?

The history of resistance is a history of failure, in New York more than ever. Each new generation of resistance fails on its own terms, and maybe all one can hope for is to fail in less embarrassing ways than the previous generation, or to fail in less embarrassing ways than one failed just a few years earlier. Another world is out there, possibly, if we can ever finish humiliating ourselves.

A new horizon of embarrassment awaits us. The truth is out there, somewhere beyond those police lines just up ahead. Maybe the truth is permanently out there and forever out of reach. We don't know for sure since we can only see what is just ahead of us, and the only way ahead is through the police.

Riots are chaotic, a cascade of unfortunate events organically spun out of control. The 2020 New York riots, or uprising, or rebellion, or whatever people need to call it, spun out of control in its own way, just like in all the other cities, but the explosion was contained and the world was put back together, just like in all the other cities. As coverage unfolded live across all platforms, the history of the riots instantly hardened into myth, so attempting an authoritative accounting of events definitely isn't the point, as if recorded truth even exists. Memories get flattened by time and someone here needs to write things down before they forget.

The rise of the social internet was accompanied by the need to render text illegible to computers. Automated bots generating illicit or harmful traffic had emerged and become a threat to authentic communication. Computer scientists invented the Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart, or the CAPTCHA. It was a test created by information security researchers and soon harnessed by tech companies as a fraud prevention tool. With the rise of hacker bot armies and the proliferation of internet proxies and TOR anonymization protocols came the need to verify the legitimacy of information communicated on the internet and, in turn, the legitimacy of the internet itself.

CAPTCHAs were eventually monetized and implemented as reCAPTCHAs, which extracted digital labor from users by having them verify the text in optically scanned books that computers were unable to recognize, or linking nouns and adjectives to photographs in order to improve image-search algorithms. Internet users helped computers become better recognition machines, which would ultimately benefit users who relied on computers to organize and index information for them. Users, relying on computers, relying on users, who relied on computers. But through this process, reCAPTCHAs would eventually turn into something with the power to reshape the world itself.

From the reCAPTCHA evolved the no-CAPTCHA-reCAPTCHA, which turned internet users with suspicious browsing patterns into teachers of artificial intelligence algorithms with applications that went far beyond database search aids. Users were now training autonomous self-driving cars to identify crosswalks, traffic lights, fire hydrants, buses, bicycles, stairs, bridges, mountains: the terrain of everyday life. Of course, no-CAPTCHA-reCAPTCHAs will never directly ask a human to identify other humans.

Meanwhile, self-driving cars mow down a few pedestrians a year, though the accidents are usually blamed on the machines' human overseers. The faulty mechanism that failed to identify the object in time was the human chaperone inside, not any inherent problem in the technology itself. Tech proponents cite the thousands of pedestrians killed each year by average people driving normal, non-autonomous vehicles. Autonomous or non-autonomous, human error was going to be killing us no matter what.

As police department budgets swell, the intelligent technologies we teach end up weaponized as robot surveillance dogs and crime prediction algorithms, early-adopted by police who beta-test them in our neighborhoods. And while the manufacturers of those tools might claim that their tech is programmed to be unbiased, the very nature of policing is such that cops will never see their subjects as equals. They're all perps and suspects, not complete humans with unabridged rights. Even for the most progressive police commissioners, we're all just numbers and demographics, a wealth of data collected to make cities safer.

Maybe our best protection against state violence begins with our own ability to identify who is human and who is not, and maybe it only works when the repression is met in real time in the real world when the stakes are at their highest. Is the cop beating you up a human? Are they a fire hydrant? Is their body-worn camera recording? Have they logged

enough implicit bias training hours? Does the crime data justify this traffic stop? Have you checked all the boxes? Do you accept the cookies?

The only way out of capitalism is through the police. The institution of policing is the most plainly understood physical manifestation of the state and the entryway to all other branches of the criminal justice system. The police are something with which nearly every person in every city has interacted, no matter one's race or socioeconomic status. If your skin is dark enough, you've likely already experienced state repression in the form of a pointless police stop. If you're white, you've probably at least observed it firsthand.

Not everyone has experience dealing with unethical landlords, student debt, immigration documents, subprime mortgages, homelessness, union busting, natural gas pipeline construction, or even climate change, which can often feel like an abstraction. But the weight of any social justice issue is instantly felt once the cops finally move in to enforce the laws that keep those unjust conditions in place.

We're taught that state bureaucracy and legislative inefficiency are the main barriers to change, but then, under the paperwork, the beach. After the petitions and boycotts and legislative efforts all fail and the suffering continues unbroken, passive outrage escalates to active disruption, which is always met with state repression whenever it begins to find success. Perhaps we simply haven't traveled far enough down the road. As the French protest slogan goes, "tout le monde déteste la police." Everyone hates the police, though maybe here in America they just didn't know it yet.

Maybe social reality was a distorted text that people were unable to recognize on their own. The puzzle had to be solved for them, optically. In the streets across all of urban America in late May and early June 2020, it felt like everyone really did hate the police. Everyone was finally done signing petitions and looking inward and waiting for change. Out of isolation and into the streets, hatred of police was the one thing we all had in common. In the streets was where we verified what was real and what was not. This was the test the state could not pass. This was the way out of our unbearable, embarrassing present.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the American anti-globalization movement blossomed. Through circumstance and skilled organizing, autonomous leftist networks found common cause with a fast-shrinking trade unionist movement, joining forces to fight for economic justice. Anarchists and assembly-line workers went on field trips to disrupt free-trade conferences and business meetings of the world's most powerful people. Creating media spectacles and getting beat up by police across the continent, they forged a tenuous model of public engagement that came to be known as "protest tourism." Like anything that makes people sincere, there was a lot to make fun of, but at least they were trying.

It wasn't total delusion. Marching alongside big labor coalitions, the reveries and calls for old-fashioned general strikes that would shut down the country seemed to actually carry some weight. Unless, that is, the unions were just using all these idealistic young protesters to float their own sinking ships before finally disappearing as a political force.

Either way, 9/11 slowed all momentum. The atomic Patriot Act was enacted in bipartisan unanimity with near-universal popular support. Repression of anti-capitalist movements accelerated at both local and federal levels, building upon the FBI's old obsession with Earth and Animal Liberation Front-style resistance, which was now officially terrorism. Setting fire to a construction site, spray-painting an animal testing lab, freeing mink into the wild: all tiny 9/11s.

Aboveboard anti-imperialist organizing culminated in the 2003 anti-Iraq-War marches, the self-proclaimed "largest protest event in human history" that brought millions of people into the streets across dozens of countries simultaneously. It didn't work, at all, but making it into a book of world records seemed to be enough of an accomplishment for the organizers, mostly leftover baby boomers who had failed to stop a different imperialist war three decades earlier using similar tactics.

Unlike the narcissist boomers of the 1960s, the bulk of the anti-globalization-era leftists didn't turn to new-age self-help wellness scams, literal cults, or, worse, electoral politics. This time around, radical networks proved more resilient. Autonomous organizing easily adapted to the rise of the open internet and its grand vision of a decentralized space for social connection: a place for friends. Those who became lost could find others on the internet and continue to stay in touch and organize. They didn't have to search for fulfillment in cultish human potential seminars that promised to maximize one's productivity and craft a more perfect individual who would craft a more perfect capitalism that would somehow, someday, work for everyone. The tech-utopian gimmick of the internet quickly fell away, but the rise of monolithic social media platforms was still better than whatever miseries the boomer leftists embraced after their stars fell.

As the years passed, law and order thrived, and by the end of the decade the New York Police Department had killed over a hundred people, closer to two hundred if killings by off-duty cops were included. Resistance against the state continued, failing over and over, a little bit better each time. Among myriad other activity, there was a disrupted world economic summit, a disastrous political convention, endless anti-war demonstrations, some university occupations, an army recruitment center bombing (still unsolved), a massive expansion of the NYPD's intelligence division, the rise of stop-and-frisk, an autocratic mayor who kept getting re-elected, an economic recession, and then, in 2011, Occupy Wall Street.

Occupy only really captured headlines after some innocent-looking white girls got pepper sprayed by cops during a peaceful march in Lower Manhattan. The NYPD had been brutalizing non-white people forever, of course, but white-on-white police violence against peaceful protesters in Greenwich Village, the graveyard of all the old white radicals who burned out and inherited their parents' multimillion-dollar townhouses, was just too much to stomach. A huge mass arrest event on the Brooklyn Bridge the following week kept Occupy on the front pages.

The whole world was watching, again, and the coverage seemed to be driven by direct confrontations with the police, not costumed activists doing media stunts in front of the New York Stock Exchange or passive crowds marching around chanting slogans. The Occupy encampment was eventually put down in a midnight shower of pepper spray, but police did a better job of keeping photojournalists away from that one.

During the two months in 2011 that Zuccotti Park was occupied, the NYPD killed three people across the city, including an 87-year-old Baptist minister out for his morning stroll when he was run down by a speeding police cruiser. In 2012, they broke their own record and killed 21 people, 19 of them Black or Latino.

Among the worst was Tamon Robinson, also run down, this time for the crime of stealing rocks from the grounds of a public housing project. The cops claimed that Robinson had effectively killed himself during the chase by running into their stationary vehicle, causing him to fall and hit his head on the ground. The decentralized Black Lives Matter movement soon emerged nationwide and intensified locally in 2013 after police in East Flatbush fatally shot 16-year-old Kimani Gray three times in the back and then choked Eric Garner to death in 2014.

The remnants of Occupy, mostly non-Black, played minor supporting roles as BLM grew. But the crowds at the more confrontational protests were primarily younger Black people, or “Black proletarians,” as the academics liked to say, along with all of the teenagers. The self-anointed “leaders” of Black Lives Matter who seized the microphones and jockeyed for the spotlight were clearly full of shit, doing TV appearances, registering trademarks, filing for nonprofit status. Despite all that, Black youth were out on the streets, masked up and making their problems known, no matter what the activists and politicians were yelling through their megaphones at the front.

Protests after the killing of Kimani Gray were deemed “mini-riots” by the news due to some limited looting and street resistance that had taken the NYPD by surprise. Why were people chanting “NYPD SUCK MY DICK” and shouting vulgarities in their faces all night instead of “no justice, no peace” and going home? Why wasn’t anyone submitting to their arrests? Where were their leaders? Where were the calm heads with whom they could negotiate?

The department kept getting worse and bigger as the progressives in power continued increasing its headcount and operating budget. The general political strategy was to make up for the defunding of essential social services by increasing the funding and the purview of the only city agency that would never be defunded: the police. Activists organized, they walked around with clipboards, they got media exposure, they raised awareness, and everything stayed the same.

The NYPD infiltrated everyday life more and more as they gradually absorbed government functions that had nothing to do with policing. Police were now feeding the poor, doing homeless outreach, opening playgrounds, running after school STEM education programs, conducting Narcan training, teaching financial literacy, running résumé-writing workshops,

hosting church breakfasts, collecting e-waste, fixing flats, micro-chipping pets, mentoring at-risk youth. New “neighborhood policing” initiatives turned cops into social workers with guns, guidance counselors with guns, janitors with guns, preachers with guns. Cops weren’t cops, they were community advocates empowered to use violence to keep neighborhoods quiet, calm, and orderly.

In return, the NYPD received unlimited funding to enhance their brand and dig their hooks even deeper into the neighborhoods it oversaw. Why install creepy surveillance cameras everywhere when you could just set up a protection racket granting you access to the security cameras of every local business? Why plant obvious reminders of state repression on every street corner when you could just persuade local shops and landlords to link their own camera feeds directly to the police?

But it’s the 21st century; the police aren’t the mafia. This protection racket extorts the city, not small businesses. And the payments don’t come in cash stuffed in envelopes, it’s delivered in budget line items and political capital, increasing their power to decide how these communities are run. Park curfews are strictly enforced in certain neighborhoods but not in others. Sidewalk barbecues and street parties are monitored and harassed in some areas while others are left alone. Police profile communal gatherings and decide when and where socializing is allowed. They vertically patrol public housing and turn dark stairwells into shooting galleries. They control the flows of traffic. They regulate the way people move through and exist in public space. The city belonged to them, they thought.

George Floyd died under the knee of Minneapolis cop Derek Chauvin on May 25th, 2020. Panic and uncertainty over the novel coronavirus was still leading the news and the streets had all but emptied of people. Police across the U.S. were still somehow killing people at a rate of about three per day, so it wasn’t clear whether this would just be another in a long line of police killings caught on camera, passing through the public eye, fully normalized.

Some minor local protests commenced, all “orderly,” as the NYPD refers to demonstrations where nothing happens. People chant the usual chants, walk around for a few hours, end with some speeches, and everyone goes home and uploads their photos. It looked like George Floyd might just be one more name to add to the spreadsheet of the dead.

May 28

George Floyd was killed on a Monday and the video took a day or two to really circulate. As outrage built, the situation in Minneapolis escalated and full rioting broke out two days later on May 27th, with striking images of entire city blocks on fire making the rounds.

The following day, a couple hundred New Yorkers attended a hastily organized afternoon protest in Union Square Park in Manhattan. Things were loose and trending disorderly. The usual activists and megaphones hadn’t shown up in full force; maybe they were busy planning bigger demonstrations and drafting press releases and confirming politicians’ availability. The usual communist groups that glommed on and took over things also hadn’t gathered

in any meaningful way. The city was just a few months into the pandemic, everything was shut down, and people were still afraid of being outside their homes.

The ones who did show up looked like mostly unaffiliated anti-police sympathizers and some leftists, plus a contingent of teens who were always hanging out downtown anyway. The NYPD, cognizant of Minneapolis, had surrounded the entire park with cops. As the crowd got worked up at the sight of them, police eventually moved in and started pushing and yelling at people to get away from the street. They began making violent preemptive arrests, targeting anyone within reach. Bike cops in hi-viz jerseys skidded in and threw their mountain bikes into people's faces, sending protesters stumbling backwards onto the ground.

The crowd fled the park and defended themselves as best as they could with whatever was at hand: empty plastic bottles, miscellaneous trash, and, at one pivotal moment, a large plastic garbage can that police would later describe as the most violent of protest tools. It floated through the air and landed on a cop's head, bonk, and the trash inside flew out and rained down over the other cops.

All of the items were thrown in self-defense against a group of clearly out-of-control jock cops blindly swinging their batons at the air in front of them and lunging, not at anything in particular, just lunging. The crowd was too aggressive and the NYPD's trademark snatch-and-grab arrests weren't scaring and dispersing protesters the way they usually did. Whiteshirt commanders on the scene looked frustrated.

The crowd proceeded to march a few miles around the city and down to City Hall, everyone getting picked off and beaten and arrested along the way. This was protocol with any disorderly protest that happens here. Police later cited 72 arrests, which sounded a lot like a mass arrest given the relatively small size of the crowd, but it apparently didn't count since the arrests had been spaced out over the course of the march. It was all just precision policing, 72 surgical strikes taking out only the high-value agitators, no innocent civilians harmed.

Local media stuck to their usual language. People had "taken to the streets to demonstrate against police brutality in the wake of a black man's death in Minneapolis," passive voice. A death occurred, a demonstration took place, arrests were made.

Meanwhile, rioting in Minnesota continued to escalate as locals took over, looted, and set fire to a police station. A New York tabloid plastered its cover the next day with the headline "BURNING MAD." It wasn't a reference to protesters burning down the Third Precinct; it was an article about the owner of a Staten Island tanning salon who was angry about coronavirus lockdown rules.

May 29

Images of Minneapolis in the throes had spread everywhere now, and local news was spilling a lot of ink about the fragility of police-community relations. Things felt uneasy on the streets and in the parks as the NYPD mobilized as many cops as they could spare in preparation for more protests. After years of easy crowd control jobs, leadership hadn't

expected the moderate level of resistance they had seen the day before. A typical whiteshirt with twenty-plus years on the job would have seen his colleagues kill hundreds of people during his tenure and nothing beyond a few “mini-riots” had ever occurred. Some dead perp out in the Midwest, just another name to add to the list.

The way demonstrations in New York usually went was: NYPD gives peaceful marchers a few wide avenues they can “shut down” for a little bit, activists pose on some steps somewhere and get the photos they need and the video the local news wants, and then everyone goes home to see if whatever they posted is doing numbers. The wrinkle this day was that two big demonstrations had been called instead of one, and the evening protest was going to be in Brooklyn, where the majority of the city actually lives. It was also a Friday, a temperate spring day, 72 degrees, overcast.

The call was to meet in front of Barclays Center, a large sports arena bordered on one side by a busy thoroughfare and on the other by smaller streets that police were now using as staging areas. The triangular plaza in front of the arena was located directly on top of a fortified transit hub that was already teeming with cops on a normal day. It seemed like a very bad place to hold a demonstration. Yet hundreds, eventually thousands, began arriving.

As huge numbers of cops amassed on all sides, the activists shouted out their old slogans. One familiar chant emerged away from the megaphones, though, and it would end up becoming the central unifying chant over the coming days: “NYPD SUCK MY DICK.” The teens started it, obviously—the pitch of the voices was about an octave higher than it was for all the other chants. The activists tried to get everyone to change it to “NYPD KKK,” but it wouldn’t take.

The official people and official organizations tried to do their thing, shouting worn-out platitudes into everybody’s faces: no justice, no peace, shut it down, arrest killer cops, fire killer cops, prosecute, indict, reform, resist, vote, and so on. A giant digital billboard built into the Barclays Center facade cycled through ads for car insurance and Doritos, pixel wiping, over and over.

As an hour or two passed and nothing happened, people were getting bored and things gradually became less orderly as the crowd continued to grow. The official protest leaders who had originally called for the protest were fading into the background, irrelevant, and the NYPD whiteshirts were scrambling around behind the frontlines trying to figure out what to do with the crowd. The big protest from Manhattan had come over the bridge and pushed in, surrounding the area and compromising the NYPD’s careful perimeter.

The awkward plaza in front of Barclays was not designed as a public gathering space. Developers had originally planned to build an office tower there but abandoned their plans when the recession hit. It was a flat, empty, paved space with nothing but a weird grassy architectural fake hillside feature built into part of it. People were spilling out into the surrounding roadways, and, as everyone who’s ever been arrested at a New York protest knows, the roads are lava: grounds for an immediate disorderly conduct arrest.

At some point, after hours of verbal abuse from a diverse crowd that technically wasn’t doing anything wrong, the whiteshirts in front of the Barclays entrance panicked and gave the order to push their metal crowd control barricades into protesters and shove them away from the arena. The crowd pushed back, hard, and cops doused everyone at the front with

pepper spray, aiming high so the rows beyond would get a taste, too. Some teens at the rear started climbing up the steep hillside, trying to get away from the cops who were now rushing in from the sides. Frustrated cops slipped on the grass and shouted at them to come down as they tangled with the rest of the agitators below.

Something was on fire down in the plaza and dark smoke was rising over the scene. Teens were swinging their skateboards over their heads at something that sounded metal. The crowd control barricades were thrown back at police lines and a large steel sign with a map of the neighborhood and points of interest on it, installed when the arena was built, had been ripped down and heaved at advancing cops who were already ducking and dodging a hail of steady airmail.

NYPD skirmish lines were thinning as they took shots to the head, walked into mists of their own pepper spray, and desperately tried to hold onto their arrestees. They gave up on the snatch-and-grabs and removed their batons and swung them everywhere, trying to create some space. All they could do at this point was just keep everyone away from them. One cop hit a fleeing protester with enough force to split his wooden baton in half. Somewhere in the distance, fireworks were exploding.

Police did not have control of the situation, Black Lives Matter activists did not have control of the situation, Marxist-Leninist-Maoist front groups did not have control of the situation, and anarchist agitators definitely did not have control of the situation. The teens also did not have control of the situation, which is to say they were in their element. Police kept pushing further out as the crowd tripped into the surrounding streets. As the police perimeter expanded into the roadways, firecrackers exploded around their feet as they jumped and shielded their faces. The sound of shattering glass echoed through the plaza. The chaos was official. The police were no longer in control.

A large breakaway group of protesters decided that they were done getting beat up and found themselves pushing through a loosened police perimeter, flowing away from the arena, away from all the people aiming their phone cameras and crying “shame” without end. Militants began pushing traffic barriers into the roadways and everyone else immediately joined in to help push things into place.

The massive NYPD mobilization meant that their vehicles were scattered all over the area and they became instant targets. One of the first ones was an empty SUV whose rear window shattered with a tap. A younger protester picked up a large object, wound up, and threw a fastball through the remaining part of the glass. Some accelerant went in and within seconds the interior was in flames.

The spandex bike cops rode in about thirty seconds too late and formed a protective circle around their burning vehicle. They froze and awaited instructions from their captains as hundreds of disorderly leftists and POC youth stood nearby, heckling them, amassing numbers as all the people fleeing the violence at Barclays turned corners and ran to join them.

Dark clouds had moved over Brooklyn and a light rain came and went. Barclays Center was in the distance, still surrounded by hundreds of cops, its digital billboard glowing like a shitty specter. Perhaps half of the original crowd, mostly the peaceful ones, had marooned themselves at the arena or headed home, probably for the best.

Graffiti had occurred, windows had become broken, things were catching fire. The group of thousands was finally dispersing, but not in the way the police wanted. Unmanageable groups both large and small with no singular identity following no particular tactic had broken apart and flowed into the surrounding neighborhood like a tide, shooting north in the direction of gentrified Fort Greene.

Fort Greene had been a majority Black neighborhood for most of the 20th century but was now a shining example of the new wave of Brooklyn gentrification that had begun near the turn of the millennium. The historic neighborhood was upzoned with empty promises of affordable housing and Class A office space, which would bring a new surge of glass-wrapped real estate that would lift all property value and attract corporations and high-income earners alike.

Developers and politicians planted a huge modernist sports arena at the bottom of it all, like the dot in an exclamation mark. The Barclays Center is a massive toilet seat of a building, deliberately corroded with a decorative rust that drips down when it rains and permanently stains the sidewalk below a burnt orange hue. At once shiny and rusting, Fort Greene is now majority white, a salted field of blue-tinted glass sprouting six billion dollars worth of poured concrete and steel into the sky, tax-exempt.

The unruly crowd swiftly spread into the area, refracting through the collapsing wall of cops like a prism, or a cat squeezing past a door left ajar, shoving through and throwing the police perimeter wide open. Property destruction continued and anything with NYPD markings was tagged and smashed. On adjacent blocks, piles of garbage were spontaneously catching fire and plumes of smoke floated through the area, clogging scanner traffic and sending a general ambience of civil unrest through the pretty brownstone-lined streets.

Spectacular video out of Minneapolis the previous night showed a Target department store looted and then engulfed in flames. Target Corp, a well-known financier of right-wing political causes, was based in Minneapolis, so it was a fitting target. There was actually a Target a few blocks away from Barclays, but in the wrong direction. A commercial-grade pile of garbage behind it was set on fire anyway, in solidarity. An errant Target shopping cart was later discovered nearby and filled with trash, which was lit on fire and pushed alongside the march until one of its wheels gave out and it was abandoned, melting, in solidarity. Someone on the wrong side of history came out of a million-dollar brownstone and hosed it down.

It was impossible to measure the size of the crowd as people fanned out, dropped out, or joined in along the way. Marked and unmarked police cars double parked in the street were getting wrecked, leaving behind scenes that looked like the aftermath of a car crash. Perhaps a thousand people were marching along the edge of Fort Greene Park, forcing unprepared cops at the intersections ahead to huddle and pull back.

One whiteshirt stayed behind to make a last stand to save his precious van, but a protester ran up with a chunk of concrete, leapt off their feet, and did a Michael Jordan spread-eagle slam dunk directly into the center of the windshield with the captain standing just a few feet away. Already becoming surrounded, he gave chase, hesitated, then turned and fled. Soon, another van along the park became fully involved and eventually totaled as everyone cheered, or gawked at least. Some fireworks found their way onto the back seat, and the sparks caught.

It wasn't the first or even second NYPD vehicle lit on fire that night, but it was the one that got the most attention, probably because fire looked nicer at night and because police had admitted defeat and abandoned the area, relieving tension and allowing everyone to relax a little. People recklessly posed for photographs, celebrated, howled, or just stared and smiled.

There was no fearsome black bloc with uniforms and goggles and homemade shields, no special tactical formations, no secret encrypted communications networks coordinating protester movements. And though the militant resistance that evening was kicked off by people of color back at the arena responding to brutal police violence, the crowd that had ended up around the van bonfire was exceptionally diverse, perhaps the most multiracial demonstration in New York City history, united solely by their hatred of police.

The NYPD had been forced to keep their distance for hours now as the crowd degentrified the neighborhood and lowered property value. Cops were standing just a few blocks away on an incline with a perfect view of their vehicle on fire and their precinct area trashed. Police unions would claim that the cowardly higher-ups had forced cops on the ground to back off, but that wasn't true. Any cop who got close was physically attacked and sent back either injured or ducking for cover.

The specialized disorder control units with their bikes and scooters and armor must have been deployed somewhere else, or maybe the commanders realized that their hundred-million-dollar riot control teams were useless in the face of an actual riot. Meanwhile, all the normal uniformed officers filling the gaps kept getting injured by flying objects, so they had been issued large riot shields that they clearly were not trained to use, awkwardly wielding them around like sheets of heavy corrugated steel.

Around the same time as the bonfire at Fort Greene Park, a large breakaway group in nearby gentrified Clinton Hill was attempting to storm the 88th Precinct, a castle-like fortress built in the 19th century. This would have seemed extremely foolish just a few days earlier, but seeing Minneapolis fall and hearing all the rumors coming in about uprisings happening in other cities, anything seemed possible now.

The precinct was surrounded and vandalized and the crowd tried to rush the doors, but cops beat and pepper sprayed them back. Instead of abandoning the station like police in Minneapolis had done, the cops trapped inside had sent a call over the radio for a mobilization equivalent to the response for a full-scale terrorist attack, rushing in hundreds of cops from neighboring precincts to protect the building. The crowd was pushed back and the fearless ones at the front arrested and yanked inside to be processed. The outside of the station and its windows were wrecked, along with the police cars lining the sidewalks. Scores of cops flooded into the area, uncoordinated, waiting for direction, trying to block off streets they had already lost, all turned around, angry, confused.

It was rounding midnight and people who had been arrested earlier in the day at Barclays were getting released, texting and asking where the party was. The main chant filling the streets was still the non-gendered "NYPD SUCK MY DICK," which was fine. Resistance continued into the night in small pockets, especially around the 79th Precinct in Bed-Stuy and back in Fort Greene at the Ingersoll Houses projects, which police had been terrorizing for decades.

The highest-profile arrests of the riots occurred later in two separate instances of botched molotov attacks, one of them on a van full of cops, captured on cell phone video, and the other on an empty police vehicle, captured in an almost comically incriminating Weegee-style flash photograph that made all the papers.

May 30

The sun rose over Brooklyn and the ashes of burned cop cars dusted the streets and shattered glass crunched underfoot. It felt like things had never ended the previous day, like the events were all still unfolding live. Reading the news wasn't necessary when you could just walk outside and see for yourself what was happening; just head to any popular outdoor gathering spot and see if anything was getting out of hand, or follow the police helicopters. The only outside news you needed to know was that what was happening here was happening everywhere in every big city across the country, decentralized, organic, and leaderless. Institutions were being set on fire, statues were being torn down, territory was being reclaimed, and the police were finally feeling the consequences of what they had done.

Over the past 24 hours, NYPD vehicles had been speeding all over Brooklyn, narrowly missing protesters and pedestrians alike as they barreled down side streets and drove up and down curbs. They were mostly driving with their lights and sirens off, trying not to attract attention since all police vehicles were being targeted now, even the ones that weren't empty.

Police were using their vehicles as crowd dispersal weapons, pushing through groups of marchers and forcing people to dive out of their way. Cops in unmarked cars were cruising around and swinging their doors open to knock down errant protesters as they sped by. It was no accident that the lasting images from the riots here were of cop cars on fire, or cop cars with all of their windows smashed, or cop cars covered in tags, or cop cars being danced upon.

Video of two NYPD SUVs slowly plowing through a crowd of protesters in gentrified Prospect Heights in Brooklyn was getting millions of views online. Most of the police violence over the past day was face-to-face: cops taking baseball swings at people with their batons, throwing steel bike barricades into people's faces, repeatedly punching protesters' heads as they piled on top of them, pepper spraying state legislators, breaking bones, causing seizures, shoving the elderly onto sidewalk asphalt. But two videos of the SUVs accelerating through the crowd, shot at a distance and from above, were the ones that got the most media outrage that weekend.

Around the same time, a third NYPD SUV was menacing people on a nearby side street until someone shattered its rear window with the edge of a metal garbage can. Other assorted missiles followed, and then people came in swinging skateboards at the side windows, ramming the vehicle with bike barricades, and tossing metal outdoor dining chairs at it. Instead of revving through the protesters, the driver performed a quick three-point turn and sped away, back from wherever it came. No one got run over; everyone cheered.

Meanwhile, the usual activist groups were trying to capitalize, posting online flyers for conventional protests at the usual locations around the city. No one really knew how those turned out because people had stopped paying attention to that old chain of command. What brought youth of color and leftists out to a specific area was word-of-mouth, not some nonprofit issuing a press statement telling everyone to be in a certain place at a certain time.

So now it was Saturday and Flatbush was a hotspot. Just like the day before, a scheduled protest had gotten out of control after aggressive cops had started making arbitrary violent arrests. It evolved into a tense standoff with police penned in by hundreds of people at one intersection and another crowd one block over penning them in on the other side, sticking them in a kettle of their own making. All the surrounding streets were lined with cop cars that were all tagged or smashed, each and every one. Residents watching from their stoops and out their windows heckled. Heaps of airmail were being thrown, glass shattering, orange traffic cones flying overhead. The exact goal here wasn't clear, but whatever was happening, everyone was feeling good about it and no one was going to be stopping anytime soon.

Police couldn't muster enough reinforcements to deal with the Flatbush crowd, which meant that things must have been breaking out all over the city. Maybe too many cops were calling in sick or were simply opting out, since this wasn't the kind of easy overtime they were used to. In a desperate attempt to clear the area, an NYPD helicopter descended and hovered about 50 feet off the ground, angling down and blowing dirt and debris from an adjacent lot into people's faces and bending tree branches from the force of the wind. It all just made people more angry, especially since this was a residential area, not some corporate plaza or riverfront highway or Manhattan park. A lot of the people outside yelling at the cops lived right there.

A rumor spread that the blowhard president of the police officers' union was somewhere nearby, visiting station houses around the borough and trying to boost morale among the troops, who were obviously losing. The mayor was attempting to do the same, accompanied by a media entourage. Search parties were assembled, to no avail.

Back in Flatbush, the sun had set and another NYPD vehicle was engulfed and surrounded by revelers. Hundreds of teens and other locals were celebrating, posing for photos in front of the flames and doing ill-advised live broadcasts for their friends. Someone drove right up to the unrest, got out of their car, opened all the doors and blared a Pop Smoke song as the cop car smoldered. A line of police were well within sight, looking on but unable to do anything. They eventually rushed and were quickly beaten and pushed back, shooting pepper spray to create space and make their escape. The helicopter came back, but no one cared. An MTA bus had been abandoned in the intersection for some reason. Someone climbed on top so the pilot could more clearly see their raised middle fingers.

Unlike the Brooklyn street party, something with a more overtly political bent seemed to be unfolding over in Lower Manhattan. A crowd of hundreds was heading downtown, marching and shouting and approaching Soho, the upscale shopping district. It was a motley and spontaneous alliance of POC youth and black-clad radicals. Everyone was working together without any leaders telling them what to do or what was allowed and what was not. The balance of teenaged crews and more familiar-looking militants looked nearly even.

Big store windows and historic facades along Broadway were initially getting tagged with the usual leftist scrawl but eventually the windows became smashed, no slogans, and a few people had proper hammers this time. All the garbage along the way was thrown into the streets and lit on fire. Anything with an NYPD logo on it was tagged, smashed, and, like the other garbage, set alight.

Broadway became a kind of assembly line of property destruction. A few intrepid teens began venturing inside the corporate chain stores instead of just breaking the windows. The first ones in bypassed the cheap clothing up front and headed straight for the cash registers. The crowd's tastes turned more upscale when the march reached the part of Soho with the overpriced streetwear and designer names. There were no cops in sight. Every store was getting hit.

There was some minor looting back in 2013 after Kimani Gray was killed, but that was basically just people flash mobbing a Rite Aid and a few other stores and running from the cops. This was sustained and it was happening in some of the country's richest zip codes. It wasn't a quick outburst and a footchase. It wasn't clear where the police even were.

Incidentally, since there were no cops around, this felt like possibly the safest protest in the history of New York City protests. A police van crept up to the rear of the march and had something heavy tossed at it, crushing the windshield. The cop driving it immediately got out and began striding forward, paused, assessed the situation, and returned to their van and just sat there, waiting.

Some kids busted into a CVS and ran out clutching a cash register drawer. An empty police SUV was covered in tags and its windows smashed and sides dented in, obscuring a pair of cops who were hiding behind it with their guns drawn down by their sides. Maybe this wasn't the safest protest in the history of New York City protests. The march moved on, passing by a smoldering NYPD van that must have been set on fire hours before, and then it just kept on going north, forever.

May 31

A deep and critical look at the rise and fall of the George Floyd rebellion on the streets of New York and how it relates, was informed by, and differs from past waves of social struggle and revolt.

by No Authors nor Masters

December 2020

There is a cop inside our heads, society is a power plant that runs on unwept tears, a new world is in our hearts, which is a muscle the size of a fist. Build the commune, sabotage a railroad, distribute food not bombs, canvass for votes, or weep without tears while dumping your medications into the ocean and planting a radical urban garden, but know that these fantastic deeds are happening despite yourself, on a beach beneath a world ruined and paved with all of our past failures.

Dead slogans from failed worlds carry heavy in the hearts of those with the resources and bandwidth to cast aside real-worldly matters as they sit and take their time to work

things out within themselves. They murder imaginary cops inside their heads while real cops kick down real doors and smash real batons into everyone else's real bodies, drawing real blood and actually wept tears. Internalized racism, interpersonal microaggressions, and problematic de-colonial feminist transnational praxis all disappear in the path of an officer's night stick whose blow is fast approaching.

Maybe our hearts and minds are good enough for the time being, despite the unfinished work. Maybe the reason no one ever finishes the work is because we've been internalizing a struggle that was always meant to be external. We interrogate ourselves into a deep slouch as our neighbors endure the same kinds of suffering, which they've also been taught is their own fault: a war to be won or lost inside themselves. Looking inward only gets you so far, and so far, here we are.

Maybe the commune shouldn't seek to dissolve the question of needs but rather the question of nerds: nerds writing theory and visualizing data and making podcasts and spinning a world that continues to easily outrun its own collapse. Have you ever stopped and realized that you've just spent more time trying to read a boring long-form essay than it took a group of teenagers to destroy an entire business district and bring the largest city in the country to its knees?

The history of resistance is a history of failure, in New York more than ever. Each new generation of resistance fails on its own terms, and maybe all one can hope for is to fail in less embarrassing ways than the previous generation, or to fail in less embarrassing ways than one failed just a few years earlier. Another world is out there, possibly, if we can ever finish humiliating ourselves.

A new horizon of embarrassment awaits us. The truth is out there, somewhere beyond those police lines just up ahead. Maybe the truth is permanently out there and forever out of reach. We don't know for sure since we can only see what is just ahead of us, and the only way ahead is through the police.

Riots are chaotic, a cascade of unfortunate events organically spun out of control. The 2020 New York riots, or uprising, or rebellion, or whatever people need to call it, spun out of control in its own way, just like in all the other cities, but the explosion was contained and the world was put back together, just like in all the other cities. As coverage unfolded live across all platforms, the history of the riots instantly hardened into myth, so attempting an authoritative accounting of events definitely isn't the point, as if recorded truth even exists. Memories get flattened by time and someone here needs to write things down before they forget.

The rise of the social internet was accompanied by the need to render text illegible to computers. Automated bots generating illicit or harmful traffic had emerged and become a threat to authentic communication. Computer scientists invented the Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart, or the CAPTCHA. It was a test created by information security researchers and soon harnessed by tech companies as a fraud prevention tool. With the rise of hacker bot armies and the proliferation of internet proxies

and TOR anonymization protocols came the need to verify the legitimacy of information communicated on the internet and, in turn, the legitimacy of the internet itself.

CAPTCHAs were eventually monetized and implemented as reCAPTCHAs, which extracted digital labor from users by having them verify the text in optically scanned books that computers were unable to recognize, or linking nouns and adjectives to photographs in order to improve image-search algorithms. Internet users helped computers become better recognition machines, which would ultimately benefit users who relied on computers to organize and index information for them. Users, relying on computers, relying on users, who relied on computers. But through this process, reCAPTCHAs would eventually turn into something with the power to reshape the world itself.

From the reCAPTCHA evolved the no-CAPTCHA-reCAPTCHA, which turned internet users with suspicious browsing patterns into teachers of artificial intelligence algorithms with applications that went far beyond database search aids. Users were now training autonomous self-driving cars to identify crosswalks, traffic lights, fire hydrants, buses, bicycles, stairs, bridges, mountains: the terrain of everyday life. Of course, no-CAPTCHA-reCAPTCHAs will never directly ask a human to identify other humans.

Meanwhile, self-driving cars mow down a few pedestrians a year, though the accidents are usually blamed on the machines' human overseers. The faulty mechanism that failed to identify the object in time was the human chaperone inside, not any inherent problem in the technology itself. Tech proponents cite the thousands of pedestrians killed each year by average people driving normal, non-autonomous vehicles. Autonomous or non-autonomous, human error was going to be killing us no matter what.

As police department budgets swell, the intelligent technologies we teach end up weaponized as robot surveillance dogs and crime prediction algorithms, early-adopted by police who beta-test them in our neighborhoods. And while the manufacturers of those tools might claim that their tech is programmed to be unbiased, the very nature of policing is such that cops will never see their subjects as equals. They're all perps and suspects, not complete humans with unabridged rights. Even for the most progressive police commissioners, we're all just numbers and demographics, a wealth of data collected to make cities safer.

Maybe our best protection against state violence begins with our own ability to identify who is human and who is not, and maybe it only works when the repression is met in real time in the real world when the stakes are at their highest. Is the cop beating you up a human? Are they a fire hydrant? Is their body-worn camera recording? Have they logged enough implicit bias training hours? Does the crime data justify this traffic stop? Have you checked all the boxes? Do you accept the cookies?

The only way out of capitalism is through the police. The institution of policing is the most plainly understood physical manifestation of the state and the entryway to all other branches of the criminal justice system. The police are something with which nearly every person in every city has interacted, no matter one's race or socioeconomic status. If your skin is dark

enough, you've likely already experienced state repression in the form of a pointless police stop. If you're white, you've probably at least observed it firsthand.

Not everyone has experience dealing with unethical landlords, student debt, immigration documents, subprime mortgages, homelessness, union busting, natural gas pipeline construction, or even climate change, which can often feel like an abstraction. But the weight of any social justice issue is instantly felt once the cops finally move in to enforce the laws that keep those unjust conditions in place.

We caught up with @RebelSteps on our latest podcast to talk about autonomous organizing + action in #NewYork in 2020 + the lessons they leave us with today. From mutual aid + the pandemic, the George Floyd rebellion, rent strikes + fighting the far-Right. <https://t.co/DWHR01lcjD> pic.twitter.com/Xlcy7i47iH

— It's Going Down (@IGD_News) February 11, 2021

We're taught that state bureaucracy and legislative inefficiency are the main barriers to change, but then, under the paperwork, the beach. After the petitions and boycotts and legislative efforts all fail and the suffering continues unbroken, passive outrage escalates to active disruption, which is always met with state repression whenever it begins to find success. Perhaps we simply haven't traveled far enough down the road. As the French protest slogan goes, "tout le monde déteste la police." Everyone hates the police, though maybe here in America they just didn't know it yet.

Maybe social reality was a distorted text that people were unable to recognize on their own. The puzzle had to be solved for them, optically. In the streets across all of urban America in late May and early June 2020, it felt like everyone really did hate the police. Everyone was finally done signing petitions and looking inward and waiting for change. Out of isolation and into the streets, hatred of police was the one thing we all had in common. In the streets was where we verified what was real and what was not. This was the test the state could not pass. This was the way out of our unbearable, embarrassing present.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the American anti-globalization movement blossomed. Through circumstance and skilled organizing, autonomous leftist networks found common cause with a fast-shrinking trade unionist movement, joining forces to fight for economic justice. Anarchists and assembly-line workers went on field trips to disrupt free-trade conferences and business meetings of the world's most powerful people. Creating media spectacles and getting beat up by police across the continent, they forged a tenuous model of public engagement that came to be known as "protest tourism." Like anything that makes people sincere, there was a lot to make fun of, but at least they were trying.

It wasn't total delusion. Marching alongside big labor coalitions, the reveries and calls for old-fashioned general strikes that would shut down the country seemed to actually carry some weight. Unless, that is, the unions were just using all these idealistic young protesters to float their own sinking ships before finally disappearing as a political force.

Either way, 9/11 slowed all momentum. The atomic Patriot Act was enacted in bipartisan unanimity with near-universal popular support. Repression of anti-capitalist movements accelerated at both local and federal levels, building upon the FBI's old obsession with Earth and Animal Liberation Front-style resistance, which was now officially terrorism. Setting fire to a construction site, spray-painting an animal testing lab, freeing mink into the wild: all tiny 9/11s.

Aboveboard anti-imperialist organizing culminated in the 2003 anti-Iraq-War marches, the self-proclaimed "largest protest event in human history" that brought millions of people into the streets across dozens of countries simultaneously. It didn't work, at all, but making it into a book of world records seemed to be enough of an accomplishment for the organizers, mostly leftover baby boomers who had failed to stop a different imperialist war three decades earlier using similar tactics.

Unlike the narcissist boomers of the 1960s, the bulk of the anti-globalization-era leftists didn't turn to new-age self-help wellness scams, literal cults, or, worse, electoral politics. This time around, radical networks proved more resilient. Autonomous organizing easily adapted to the rise of the open internet and its grand vision of a decentralized space for social connection: a place for friends. Those who became lost could find others on the internet and continue to stay in touch and organize. They didn't have to search for fulfillment in cultish human potential seminars that promised to maximize one's productivity and craft a more perfect individual who would craft a more perfect capitalism that would somehow, someday, work for everyone. The tech-utopian gimmick of the internet quickly fell away, but the rise of monolithic social media platforms was still better than whatever miseries the boomer leftists embraced after their stars fell.

As the years passed, law and order thrived, and by the end of the decade the New York Police Department had killed over a hundred people, closer to two hundred if killings by off-duty cops were included. Resistance against the state continued, failing over and over, a little bit better each time. Among myriad other activity, there was a disrupted world economic summit, a disastrous political convention, endless anti-war demonstrations, some university occupations, an army recruitment center bombing (still unsolved), a massive expansion of the NYPD's intelligence division, the rise of stop-and-frisk, an autocratic mayor who kept getting re-elected, an economic recession, and then, in 2011, Occupy Wall Street.

Occupy only really captured headlines after some innocent-looking white girls got pepper sprayed by cops during a peaceful march in Lower Manhattan. The NYPD had been brutalizing non-white people forever, of course, but white-on-white police violence against peaceful protesters in Greenwich Village, the graveyard of all the old white radicals who burned out and inherited their parents' multimillion-dollar townhouses, was just too much to stomach. A huge mass arrest event on the Brooklyn Bridge the following week kept Occupy on the front pages.

The whole world was watching, again, and the coverage seemed to be driven by direct confrontations with the police, not costumed activists doing media stunts in front of the New York Stock Exchange or passive crowds marching around chanting slogans. The Occupy encampment was eventually put down in a midnight shower of pepper spray, but police did a better job of keeping photojournalists away from that one.

Critical analysis of the anti-police uprising in #NewYork. Looks at the social forces that propelled many outside of activist circles into the streets + ways in which the State + the Left was able to divide the rebellion between "good" + "bad" protesters. <https://t.co/AQsmFkTwsI>

— It's Going Down (@IGD_News) June 24, 2020

During the two months in 2011 that Zuccotti Park was occupied, the NYPD killed three people across the city, including an 87-year-old Baptist minister out for his morning stroll when he was run down by a speeding police cruiser. In 2012, they broke their own record and killed 21 people, 19 of them Black or Latino.

Among the worst was Tamon Robinson, also run down, this time for the crime of stealing rocks from the grounds of a public housing project. The cops claimed that Robinson had effectively killed himself during the chase by running into their stationary vehicle, causing him to fall and hit his head on the ground. The decentralized Black Lives Matter movement soon emerged nationwide and intensified locally in 2013 after police in East Flatbush fatally shot 16-year-old Kimani Gray three times in the back and then choked Eric Garner to death in 2014.

The remnants of Occupy, mostly non-Black, played minor supporting roles as BLM grew. But the crowds at the more confrontational protests were primarily younger Black people, or "Black proletarians," as the academics liked to say, along with all of the teenagers. The self-anointed "leaders" of Black Lives Matter who seized the microphones and jockeyed for the spotlight were clearly full of shit, doing TV appearances, registering trademarks, filing for nonprofit status. Despite all that, Black youth were out on the streets, masked up and making their problems known, no matter what the activists and politicians were yelling through their megaphones at the front.

Protests after the killing of Kimani Gray were deemed "mini-riots" by the news due to some limited looting and street resistance that had taken the NYPD by surprise. Why were people chanting "NYPD SUCK MY DICK" and shouting vulgarities in their faces all night instead of "no justice, no peace" and going home? Why wasn't anyone submitting to their arrests? Where were their leaders? Where were the calm heads with whom they could negotiate?

The department kept getting worse and bigger as the progressives in power continued increasing its headcount and operating budget. The general political strategy was to make up for the defunding of essential social services by increasing the funding and the purview of the only city agency that would never be defunded: the police. Activists organized, they walked around with clipboards, they got media exposure, they raised awareness, and everything stayed the same.

The NYPD infiltrated everyday life more and more as they gradually absorbed government functions that had nothing to do with policing. Police were now feeding the poor, doing homeless outreach, opening playgrounds, running after school STEM education programs, conducting Narcan training, teaching financial literacy, running résumé-writing workshops, hosting church breakfasts, collecting e-waste, fixing flats, micro-chipping pets, mentoring

at-risk youth. New “neighborhood policing” initiatives turned cops into social workers with guns, guidance counselors with guns, janitors with guns, preachers with guns. Cops weren’t cops, they were community advocates empowered to use violence to keep neighborhoods quiet, calm, and orderly.

In return, the NYPD received unlimited funding to enhance their brand and dig their hooks even deeper into the neighborhoods it oversaw. Why install creepy surveillance cameras everywhere when you could just set up a protection racket granting you access to the security cameras of every local business? Why plant obvious reminders of state repression on every street corner when you could just persuade local shops and landlords to link their own camera feeds directly to the police?

But it’s the 21st century; the police aren’t the mafia. This protection racket extorts the city, not small businesses. And the payments don’t come in cash stuffed in envelopes, it’s delivered in budget line items and political capital, increasing their power to decide how these communities are run. Park curfews are strictly enforced in certain neighborhoods but not in others. Sidewalk barbecues and street parties are monitored and harassed in some areas while others are left alone. Police profile communal gatherings and decide when and where socializing is allowed. They vertically patrol public housing and turn dark stairwells into shooting galleries. They control the flows of traffic. They regulate the way people move through and exist in public space. The city belonged to them, they thought.

George Floyd died under the knee of Minneapolis cop Derek Chauvin on May 25th, 2020. Panic and uncertainty over the novel coronavirus was still leading the news and the streets had all but emptied of people. Police across the U.S. were still somehow killing people at a rate of about three per day, so it wasn’t clear whether this would just be another in a long line of police killings caught on camera, passing through the public eye, fully normalized.

Some minor local protests commenced, all “orderly,” as the NYPD refers to demonstrations where nothing happens. People chant the usual chants, walk around for a few hours, end with some speeches, and everyone goes home and uploads their photos. It looked like George Floyd might just be one more name to add to the spreadsheet of the dead.

May 28

George Floyd was killed on a Monday and the video took a day or two to really circulate. As outrage built, the situation in Minneapolis escalated and full rioting broke out two days later on May 27th, with striking images of entire city blocks on fire making the rounds.

The following day, a couple hundred New Yorkers attended a hastily organized afternoon protest in Union Square Park in Manhattan. Things were loose and trending disorderly. The usual activists and megaphones hadn’t shown up in full force; maybe they were busy planning bigger demonstrations and drafting press releases and confirming politicians’ availability. The usual communist groups that glommed on and took over things also hadn’t gathered in any meaningful way. The city was just a few months into the pandemic, everything was shut down, and people were still afraid of being outside their homes.

The ones who did show up looked like mostly unaffiliated anti-police sympathizers and some leftists, plus a contingent of teens who were always hanging out downtown anyway. The NYPD, cognizant of Minneapolis, had surrounded the entire park with cops. As the crowd got worked up at the sight of them, police eventually moved in and started pushing and yelling at people to get away from the street. They began making violent preemptive arrests, targeting anyone within reach. Bike cops in hi-viz jerseys skidded in and threw their mountain bikes into people's faces, sending protesters stumbling backwards onto the ground.

The crowd fled the park and defended themselves as best as they could with whatever was at hand: empty plastic bottles, miscellaneous trash, and, at one pivotal moment, a large plastic garbage can that police would later describe as the most violent of protest tools. It floated through the air and landed on a cop's head, bonk, and the trash inside flew out and rained down over the other cops.

All of the items were thrown in self-defense against a group of clearly out-of-control jock cops blindly swinging their batons at the air in front of them and lunging, not at anything in particular, just lunging. The crowd was too aggressive and the NYPD's trademark snatch-and-grab arrests weren't scaring and dispersing protesters the way they usually did. Whiteshirt commanders on the scene looked frustrated.

The crowd proceeded to march a few miles around the city and down to City Hall, everyone getting picked off and beaten and arrested along the way. This was protocol with any disorderly protest that happens here. Police later cited 72 arrests, which sounded a lot like a mass arrest given the relatively small size of the crowd, but it apparently didn't count since the arrests had been spaced out over the course of the march. It was all just precision policing, 72 surgical strikes taking out only the high-value agitators, no innocent civilians harmed.

Local media stuck to their usual language. People had "taken to the streets to demonstrate against police brutality in the wake of a black man's death in Minneapolis," passive voice. A death occurred, a demonstration took place, arrests were made.

Meanwhile, rioting in Minnesota continued to escalate as locals took over, looted, and set fire to a police station. A New York tabloid plastered its cover the next day with the headline "BURNING MAD." It wasn't a reference to protesters burning down the Third Precinct; it was an article about the owner of a Staten Island tanning salon who was angry about coronavirus lockdown rules.

May 29

Images of Minneapolis in the throes had spread everywhere now, and local news was spilling a lot of ink about the fragility of police-community relations. Things felt uneasy on the streets and in the parks as the NYPD mobilized as many cops as they could spare in preparation for more protests. After years of easy crowd control jobs, leadership hadn't expected the moderate level of resistance they had seen the day before. A typical whiteshirt with twenty-plus years on the job would have seen his colleagues kill hundreds of people during his tenure and nothing beyond a few "mini-riots" had ever occurred. Some dead perp out in the Midwest, just another name to add to the list.

The way demonstrations in New York usually went was: NYPD gives peaceful marchers a few wide avenues they can “shut down” for a little bit, activists pose on some steps somewhere and get the photos they need and the video the local news wants, and then everyone goes home to see if whatever they posted is doing numbers. The wrinkle this day was that two big demonstrations had been called instead of one, and the evening protest was going to be in Brooklyn, where the majority of the city actually lives. It was also a Friday, a temperate spring day, 72 degrees, overcast.

The call was to meet in front of Barclays Center, a large sports arena bordered on one side by a busy thoroughfare and on the other by smaller streets that police were now using as staging areas. The triangular plaza in front of the arena was located directly on top of a fortified transit hub that was already teeming with cops on a normal day. It seemed like a very bad place to hold a demonstration. Yet hundreds, eventually thousands, began arriving.

As huge numbers of cops amassed on all sides, the activists shouted out their old slogans. One familiar chant emerged away from the megaphones, though, and it would end up becoming the central unifying chant over the coming days: “NYPD SUCK MY DICK.” The teens started it, obviously—the pitch of the voices was about an octave higher than it was for all the other chants. The activists tried to get everyone to change it to “NYPD KKK,” but it wouldn’t take.

The official people and official organizations tried to do their thing, shouting worn-out platitudes into everybody’s faces: no justice, no peace, shut it down, arrest killer cops, fire killer cops, prosecute, indict, reform, resist, vote, and so on. A giant digital billboard built into the Barclays Center facade cycled through ads for car insurance and Doritos, pixel wiping, over and over.

As an hour or two passed and nothing happened, people were getting bored and things gradually became less orderly as the crowd continued to grow. The official protest leaders who had originally called for the protest were fading into the background, irrelevant, and the NYPD whiteshirts were scrambling around behind the frontlines trying to figure out what to do with the crowd. The big protest from Manhattan had come over the bridge and pushed in, surrounding the area and compromising the NYPD’s careful perimeter.

The awkward plaza in front of Barclays was not designed as a public gathering space. Developers had originally planned to build an office tower there but abandoned their plans when the recession hit. It was a flat, empty, paved space with nothing but a weird grassy architectural fake hillside feature built into part of it. People were spilling out into the surrounding roadways, and, as everyone who’s ever been arrested at a New York protest knows, the roads are lava: grounds for an immediate disorderly conduct arrest.

At some point, after hours of verbal abuse from a diverse crowd that technically wasn’t doing anything wrong, the whiteshirts in front of the Barclays entrance panicked and gave the order to push their metal crowd control barricades into protesters and shove them away from the arena. The crowd pushed back, hard, and cops doused everyone at the front with pepper spray, aiming high so the rows beyond would get a taste, too. Some teens at the rear started climbing up the steep hillside, trying to get away from the cops who were now rushing in from the sides. Frustrated cops slipped on the grass and shouted at them to come down as they tangled with the rest of the agitators below.

Something was on fire down in the plaza and dark smoke was rising over the scene. Teens were swinging their skateboards over their heads at something that sounded metal. The crowd control barricades were thrown back at police lines and a large steel sign with a map of the neighborhood and points of interest on it, installed when the arena was built, had been ripped down and heaved at advancing cops who were already ducking and dodging a hail of steady airmail.

NYPD skirmish lines were thinning as they took shots to the head, walked into mists of their own pepper spray, and desperately tried to hold onto their arrestees. They gave up on the snatch-and-grabs and removed their batons and swung them everywhere, trying to create some space. All they could do at this point was just keep everyone away from them. One cop hit a fleeing protester with enough force to split his wooden baton in half. Somewhere in the distance, fireworks were exploding.

Police did not have control of the situation, Black Lives Matter activists did not have control of the situation, Marxist-Leninist-Maoist front groups did not have control of the situation, and anarchist agitators definitely did not have control of the situation. The teens also did not have control of the situation, which is to say they were in their element. Police kept pushing further out as the crowd tripped into the surrounding streets. As the police perimeter expanded into the roadways, firecrackers exploded around their feet as they jumped and shielded their faces. The sound of shattering glass echoed through the plaza. The chaos was official. The police were no longer in control.

A large breakaway group of protesters decided that they were done getting beat up and found themselves pushing through a loosened police perimeter, flowing away from the arena, away from all the people aiming their phone cameras and crying "shame" without end. Militants began pushing traffic barriers into the roadways and everyone else immediately joined in to help push things into place.

The massive NYPD mobilization meant that their vehicles were scattered all over the area and they became instant targets. One of the first ones was an empty SUV whose rear window shattered with a tap. A younger protester picked up a large object, wound up, and threw a fastball through the remaining part of the glass. Some accelerant went in and within seconds the interior was in flames.

The spandex bike cops rode in about thirty seconds too late and formed a protective circle around their burning vehicle. They froze and awaited instructions from their captains as hundreds of disorderly leftists and POC youth stood nearby, heckling them, amassing numbers as all the people fleeing the violence at Barclays turned corners and ran to join them.

Dark clouds had moved over Brooklyn and a light rain came and went. Barclays Center was in the distance, still surrounded by hundreds of cops, its digital billboard glowing like a shitty specter. Perhaps half of the original crowd, mostly the peaceful ones, had marooned themselves at the arena or headed home, probably for the best.

Graffiti had occurred, windows had become broken, things were catching fire. The group of thousands was finally dispersing, but not in the way the police wanted. Unmanageable groups both large and small with no singular identity following no particular tactic had bro-

ken apart and flowed into the surrounding neighborhood like a tide, shooting north in the direction of gentrified Fort Greene.

Fort Greene had been a majority Black neighborhood for most of the 20th century but was now a shining example of the new wave of Brooklyn gentrification that had begun near the turn of the millennium. The historic neighborhood was upzoned with empty promises of affordable housing and Class A office space, which would bring a new surge of glass-wrapped real estate that would lift all property value and attract corporations and high-income earners alike.

Developers and politicians planted a huge modernist sports arena at the bottom of it all, like the dot in an exclamation mark. The Barclays Center is a massive toilet seat of a building, deliberately corroded with a decorative rust that drips down when it rains and permanently stains the sidewalk below a burnt orange hue. At once shiny and rusting, Fort Greene is now majority white, a salted field of blue-tinted glass sprouting six billion dollars worth of poured concrete and steel into the sky, tax-exempt.

The unruly crowd swiftly spread into the area, refracting through the collapsing wall of cops like a prism, or a cat squeezing past a door left ajar, shoving through and throwing the police perimeter wide open. Property destruction continued and anything with NYPD markings was tagged and smashed. On adjacent blocks, piles of garbage were spontaneously catching fire and plumes of smoke floated through the area, clogging scanner traffic and sending a general ambience of civil unrest through the pretty brownstone-lined streets.

Spectacular video out of Minneapolis the previous night showed a Target department store looted and then engulfed in flames. Target Corp, a well-known financier of right-wing political causes, was based in Minneapolis, so it was a fitting target. There was actually a Target a few blocks away from Barclays, but in the wrong direction. A commercial-grade pile of garbage behind it was set on fire anyway, in solidarity. An errant Target shopping cart was later discovered nearby and filled with trash, which was lit on fire and pushed alongside the march until one of its wheels gave out and it was abandoned, melting, in solidarity. Someone on the wrong side of history came out of a million-dollar brownstone and hosed it down.

It was impossible to measure the size of the crowd as people fanned out, dropped out, or joined in along the way. Marked and unmarked police cars double parked in the street were getting wrecked, leaving behind scenes that looked like the aftermath of a car crash. Perhaps a thousand people were marching along the edge of Fort Greene Park, forcing unprepared cops at the intersections ahead to huddle and pull back.

One whiteshirt stayed behind to make a last stand to save his precious van, but a protester ran up with a chunk of concrete, leapt off their feet, and did a Michael Jordan spread-eagle slam dunk directly into the center of the windshield with the captain standing just a few feet away. Already becoming surrounded, he gave chase, hesitated, then turned and fled. Soon, another van along the park became fully involved and eventually totaled as everyone cheered, or gawked at least. Some fireworks found their way onto the back seat, and the sparks caught.

It wasn't the first or even second NYPD vehicle lit on fire that night, but it was the one that got the most attention, probably because fire looked nicer at night and because police had admitted defeat and abandoned the area, relieving tension and allowing everyone to

relax a little. People recklessly posed for photographs, celebrated, howled, or just stared and smiled.

There was no fearsome black bloc with uniforms and goggles and homemade shields, no special tactical formations, no secret encrypted communications networks coordinating protester movements. And though the militant resistance that evening was kicked off by people of color back at the arena responding to brutal police violence, the crowd that had ended up around the van bonfire was exceptionally diverse, perhaps the most multiracial demonstration in New York City history, united solely by their hatred of police.

The NYPD had been forced to keep their distance for hours now as the crowd degenerated the neighborhood and lowered property value. Cops were standing just a few blocks away on an incline with a perfect view of their vehicle on fire and their precinct area trashed. Police unions would claim that the cowardly higher-ups had forced cops on the ground to back off, but that wasn't true. Any cop who got close was physically attacked and sent back either injured or ducking for cover.

The specialized disorder control units with their bikes and scooters and armor must have been deployed somewhere else, or maybe the commanders realized that their hundred-million-dollar riot control teams were useless in the face of an actual riot. Meanwhile, all the normal uniformed officers filling the gaps kept getting injured by flying objects, so they had been issued large riot shields that they clearly were not trained to use, awkwardly wielding them around like sheets of heavy corrugated steel.

Around the same time as the bonfire at Fort Greene Park, a large breakaway group in nearby gentrified Clinton Hill was attempting to storm the 88th Precinct, a castle-like fortress built in the 19th century. This would have seemed extremely foolish just a few days earlier, but seeing Minneapolis fall and hearing all the rumors coming in about uprisings happening in other cities, anything seemed possible now.

The precinct was surrounded and vandalized and the crowd tried to rush the doors, but cops beat and pepper sprayed them back. Instead of abandoning the station like police in Minneapolis had done, the cops trapped inside had sent a call over the radio for a mobilization equivalent to the response for a full-scale terrorist attack, rushing in hundreds of cops from neighboring precincts to protect the building. The crowd was pushed back and the fearless ones at the front arrested and yanked inside to be processed. The outside of the station and its windows were wrecked, along with the police cars lining the sidewalks. Scores of cops flooded into the area, uncoordinated, waiting for direction, trying to block off streets they had already lost, all turned around, angry, confused.

It was rounding midnight and people who had been arrested earlier in the day at Barclays were getting released, texting and asking where the party was. The main chant filling the streets was still the non-gendered "NYPD SUCK MY DICK," which was fine. Resistance continued into the night in small pockets, especially around the 79th Precinct in Bed-Stuy and back in Fort Greene at the Ingersoll Houses projects, which police had been terrorizing for decades.

The highest-profile arrests of the riots occurred later in two separate instances of botched molotov attacks, one of them on a van full of cops, captured on cell phone video, and the

other on an empty police vehicle, captured in an almost comically incriminating Weegee-style flash photograph that made all the papers.

May 30

The sun rose over Brooklyn and the ashes of burned cop cars dusted the streets and shattered glass crunched underfoot. It felt like things had never ended the previous day, like the events were all still unfolding live. Reading the news wasn't necessary when you could just walk outside and see for yourself what was happening; just head to any popular outdoor gathering spot and see if anything was getting out of hand, or follow the police helicopters. The only outside news you needed to know was that what was happening here was happening everywhere in every big city across the country, decentralized, organic, and leaderless. Institutions were being set on fire, statues were being torn down, territory was being reclaimed, and the police were finally feeling the consequences of what they had done.

Over the past 24 hours, NYPD vehicles had been speeding all over Brooklyn, narrowly missing protesters and pedestrians alike as they barreled down side streets and drove up and down curbs. They were mostly driving with their lights and sirens off, trying not to attract attention since all police vehicles were being targeted now, even the ones that weren't empty.

Police were using their vehicles as crowd dispersal weapons, pushing through groups of marchers and forcing people to dive out of their way. Cops in unmarked cars were cruising around and swinging their doors open to knock down errant protesters as they sped by. It was no accident that the lasting images from the riots here were of cop cars on fire, or cop cars with all of their windows smashed, or cop cars covered in tags, or cop cars being danced upon.

Video of two NYPD SUVs slowly plowing through a crowd of protesters in gentrified Prospect Heights in Brooklyn was getting millions of views online. Most of the police violence over the past day was face-to-face: cops taking baseball swings at people with their batons, throwing steel bike barricades into people's faces, repeatedly punching protesters' heads as they piled on top of them, pepper spraying state legislators, breaking bones, causing seizures, shoving the elderly onto sidewalk asphalt. But two videos of the SUVs accelerating through the crowd, shot at a distance and from above, were the ones that got the most media outrage that weekend.

Around the same time, a third NYPD SUV was menacing people on a nearby side street until someone shattered its rear window with the edge of a metal garbage can. Other assorted missiles followed, and then people came in swinging skateboards at the side windows, ramming the vehicle with bike barricades, and tossing metal outdoor dining chairs at it. Instead of revving through the protesters, the driver performed a quick three-point turn and sped away, back from wherever it came. No one got run over; everyone cheered.

Meanwhile, the usual activist groups were trying to capitalize, posting online flyers for conventional protests at the usual locations around the city. No one really knew how those turned out because people had stopped paying attention to that old chain of command. What brought youth of color and leftists out to a specific area was word-of-mouth, not some

nonprofit issuing a press statement telling everyone to be in a certain place at a certain time.

So now it was Saturday and Flatbush was a hotspot. Just like the day before, a scheduled protest had gotten out of control after aggressive cops had started making arbitrary violent arrests. It evolved into a tense standoff with police penned in by hundreds of people at one intersection and another crowd one block over penning them in on the other side, sticking them in a kettle of their own making. All the surrounding streets were lined with cop cars that were all tagged or smashed, each and every one. Residents watching from their stoops and out their windows heckled. Heaps of airmail were being thrown, glass shattering, orange traffic cones flying overhead. The exact goal here wasn't clear, but whatever was happening, everyone was feeling good about it and no one was going to be stopping anytime soon.

Police couldn't muster enough reinforcements to deal with the Flatbush crowd, which meant that things must have been breaking out all over the city. Maybe too many cops were calling in sick or were simply opting out, since this wasn't the kind of easy overtime they were used to. In a desperate attempt to clear the area, an NYPD helicopter descended and hovered about 50 feet off the ground, angling down and blowing dirt and debris from an adjacent lot into people's faces and bending tree branches from the force of the wind. It all just made people more angry, especially since this was a residential area, not some corporate plaza or riverfront highway or Manhattan park. A lot of the people outside yelling at the cops lived right there.

A rumor spread that the blowhard president of the police officers' union was somewhere nearby, visiting station houses around the borough and trying to boost morale among the troops, who were obviously losing. The mayor was attempting to do the same, accompanied by a media entourage. Search parties were assembled, to no avail.

Back in Flatbush, the sun had set and another NYPD vehicle was engulfed and surrounded by revelers. Hundreds of teens and other locals were celebrating, posing for photos in front of the flames and doing ill-advised live broadcasts for their friends. Someone drove right up to the unrest, got out of their car, opened all the doors and blared a Pop Smoke song as the cop car smoldered. A line of police were well within sight, looking on but unable to do anything. They eventually rushed and were quickly beaten and pushed back, shooting pepper spray to create space and make their escape. The helicopter came back, but no one cared. An MTA bus had been abandoned in the intersection for some reason. Someone climbed on top so the pilot could more clearly see their raised middle fingers.

Unlike the Brooklyn street party, something with a more overtly political bent seemed to be unfolding over in Lower Manhattan. A crowd of hundreds was heading downtown, marching and shouting and approaching Soho, the upscale shopping district. It was a motley and spontaneous alliance of POC youth and black-clad radicals. Everyone was working together without any leaders telling them what to do or what was allowed and what was not. The balance of teenaged crews and more familiar-looking militants looked nearly even.

Big store windows and historic facades along Broadway were initially getting tagged with the usual leftist scrawl but eventually the windows became smashed, no slogans, and a few people had proper hammers this time. All the garbage along the way was thrown into the

streets and lit on fire. Anything with an NYPD logo on it was tagged, smashed, and, like the other garbage, set alight.

Broadway became a kind of assembly line of property destruction. A few intrepid teens began venturing inside the corporate chain stores instead of just breaking the windows. The first ones in bypassed the cheap clothing up front and headed straight for the cash registers. The crowd's tastes turned more upscale when the march reached the part of Soho with the overpriced streetwear and designer names. There were no cops in sight. Every store was getting hit.

There was some minor looting back in 2013 after Kimani Gray was killed, but that was basically just people flash mobbing a Rite Aid and a few other stores and running from the cops. This was sustained and it was happening in some of the country's richest zip codes. It wasn't a quick outburst and a footchase. It wasn't clear where the police even were.

Incidentally, since there were no cops around, this felt like possibly the safest protest in the history of New York City protests. A police van crept up to the rear of the march and had something heavy tossed at it, crushing the windshield. The cop driving it immediately got out and began striding forward, paused, assessed the situation, and returned to their van and just sat there, waiting.

Some kids busted into a CVS and ran out clutching a cash register drawer. An empty police SUV was covered in tags and its windows smashed and sides dented in, obscuring a pair of cops who were hiding behind it with their guns drawn down by their sides. Maybe this wasn't the safest protest in the history of New York City protests. The march moved on, passing by a smoldering NYPD van that must have been set on fire hours before, and then it just kept on going north, forever.

May 31

The rioting had jumped from historically Black Brooklyn to white, moneyed Manhattan, and now the activists with megaphones had a new mission: to convey an idealized image of protesters as peaceful and respectable and nonviolent, and to re-assert their monopoly on lawbreaking spectacle. If people were going to be disobeying laws en masse, it would have to be organized under some kind of centralized authority with media outreach, police coordination, tightly controlled optics, and lots and lots of speeches.

Activists peacefully marched back and forth across the city all afternoon, crossing bridges, shutting down empty highways, shouting ancient social justice slogans. People had started making big deals about "Black-led" protests, which seemed to be code for cop-friendly marches led by shallow, brand-oriented Black activists with raised fist logos and social media audiences to grow. They were constantly calling themselves "revolutionaries" like a vintage documentary, except a terrible reboot that had the protagonists holding hands with cops instead of posing with rifles on courthouse steps.

One of the big Black-led protests started out in Lower Manhattan, incidentally in front of the city's most prominent courthouses. So-called "protest leaders" literally held hands with white-shirted police captains and both sides joined together and chanted "peaceful protest"

at a bank of news cameras. It could have been worse: images of another Black-led protest in Brooklyn showed a deeply embarrassing basketball-themed march in which demonstrators stoically dribbled basketballs down the street while chanting “We. Are Not. A Threat.”

The big march eventually ended up back in Brooklyn at the Barclays Center, as if they were trying to perform a nonviolent do-over of the rioting two days before. A Black protest leader stood at the frontlines with their back to the police holding a sign that read “ORGANIZED ANGER SPEAKS LOUDER” and aimed it at protesters. The back of the sign, facing the police, was blank.

A group of Black girls was yelling obscenities at some cops and an older Black man argued with them until he finally blurted out, rhetorically, “man why are you so mad?” A Black woman spoke through a mobile public address system urging people to dial back their rage because, she said, “screaming will never get you heard.” A Latino man gave interviews to reporters while patrolling the crowd and rooting out suspicious “antifa” members wearing telltale black clothing. Unofficial peace marshals threw their bodies in front of the Target store, urging marchers not to loot it.

Someone with their back to the cops pleaded, “don’t give them a reason to shoot us,” to which somebody else retorted, “they’re already shooting us.” No one was allowed to yell vulgarities or hurl insults at the police. In fact, all of the cops were just a “distraction” from the real protest work. The actual aim, it seemed, was to yell at other protesters, not the police.

The protest leaders got what they asked for. As demonstrators of various races and ethnicities yelled at each other about the virtues of violence versus nonviolence, hundreds of riot cops surrounded the area and moved in, beating everyone with batons, making rough arrests, and successfully dispersing the divided crowd.

Back in Manhattan, Union Square was slowly filling up with hundreds of Black youth, along with a few hundred less-Black radicals. The riot squad showed up, unarmored, riding mountain bikes and scooters, ready to continue doing easy traffic control like they’d been doing at the peace marches all day.

Things fell apart sometime after the sun set, and a series of police vans in front of the park were overrun and destroyed. The crowd moved down Broadway but was blocked by dozens of cops who seemed prepared for this. They did their snatch-and-grabs and pepper spray routine, but the crowd was too mobile and too many things were happening at once. The police were misdeployed all over the city, just like the previous nights.

In the middle of Broadway, someone with a hammer, or maybe a crowbar, or perhaps a pipe, snuck up on a whiteshirt and absolutely leveled them, swinging as hard as they could and smashing their helmet in before skipping away. The cop was dazed, likely concussed, but seemed fine otherwise. A nearby cop panicked and pulled his gun, swinging it around and aiming it at random groups of protesters for a few seconds until another whiteshirt came in and told him to put it away.

Rowdy teens were still flowing like water out of Union Square, overwhelming police at every intersection. Marked police vans hidden on side streets were smashed with skateboards or bricks or metal pipes from construction sites or whatever tools were around, and then the fluid and fire would go in. Something went through a giant plate-glass CVS window on the ground floor of the New School building, site of the old university occupations.

Teens were running inside and grabbing candy, tossing bulk boxes of Snickers bars into 5th Avenue for everyone to take. Interests aligned, Black youth and the slightly-less-Black militants seamlessly worked together as they made their way around Manhattan.

The march snaked north, smashing blocks upon blocks of corporate storefronts and discovering more cop cars on side streets to light up. The crowd was somehow growing as it swarmed through Midtown and Times Square, the NYPD's hallowed turf, centerpiece of the city's magical 1990s crime turnaround. The usual counter-terrorist officers holding assault rifles, paid six figures a year to stand around all day and pose for photos with tourists, had retreated a block or two away from the oncoming crowd, just like all the other cops.

The flagship Best Buy was ransacked. Someone was standing at the broken window with an armful of iPads, tossing boxes out into the crowd like a free t-shirt giveaway. Everyone was overjoyed, literally glowing—some of the iPads were floor models that still had their screens lit up.

Meanwhile, a large contingent down at Union Square had managed to circumvent police lines and continue south. Some of them were now in the process of cleaning out hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of luxury goods from stores all over Soho. Others had come and planned ahead: they parked their cars down the block, popped the trunks, ran in with friends and grabbed as much they could hold, jogging back and stuffing their cars full. Someone explained that the cars had been rented out-of-state with scammed credit card numbers, which explained why they didn't care about vehicle identifications or leaving their keys in the ignitions. At one point a running Mercedes was abandoned in the middle of the street after police showed up and started chasing away looters on foot.

The media focused on the high-end fashion, but people were also going for functional goods. Looters streamed out of REI with two-thousand-dollar mountain bikes and rode them away, fiddling with the gear shifters as they spun their pedals. Assembled skateboards were grabbed and immediately made of use for both transport and destruction. Every CVS was hit; that was just a given at this point. Prescription bottles of Viagra were left scattered outside a Duane Reade along with a pile of other items from the store's pharmacy.

Someone went out of their way to smash the elevated windows of the Supreme store. But all the racks and shelves inside had been cleared out in advance because they knew the looters would be coming for them. And yet, teamwork got everyone through the building's freight entrance doors around the side and the entirety of the stock room was liberated. At Flight Club, another popular streetwear store, a crowd had nearly gotten past the wooden boards and metal roll gate when an unmarked police SUV careened toward the crowd out of nowhere, hopping the curb and obliterating some historical monument outside the church next door as shoppers scattered.

Just like the police, all the local beat reporters who prided themselves on catching and exposing criminals either could not keep up or were simply too scared to venture into the free zone. All their details about this phase of the riots would be gleaned from unreliable police sources, social media chatter, or wealthy Soho residents interviewed the morning after. The only place these reporters felt safe was behind police lines, so there would be no chance that they would get this story right, since there were no police lines anymore. One

crime reporter posted shaky cell phone video shot from the inside of a moving car. Not very intrepid.

Watching large swaths of wealthy Manhattan island ceded to Black youth and whisking around the neighborhood inside a tornado zone of felonies was interesting enough, but it soon became repetitive, politically speaking. Some looters were not happy about all the fires getting in the way of their work. This crowd had little interest in confrontation and property destruction, despite the anti-authoritarian Purge-like aura conveyed on social media. Instead of girding for a standoff, everyone would sprint away whenever someone shouted about the cops coming. It was understandable. Felony burglary charges were serious and they wouldn't immediately get dismissed like all the disorderly conduct arrests at the normal protests.

As looting goes, it was more of a business venture than a personal shopping trip. No one was checking sizes as they cleared the racks, and the first things people went for were the registers or the MacBooks stashed in the back offices. It was a simple redistribution of wealth, though it did look kind of silly in the process. People were waddling around trying to hold ridiculous amounts of goods in their arms, they were accidentally running into each other slapstick style, they were ripping clothing off mannequin bodies, pulling sets of rolling luggage behind them, walking around with contractor-grade trash bags thrown over their shoulders like Santa Claus. People looted the Lego store. The streets were littered with Viagra and candy.

It was obvious that cops had been instructed to keep far away and out of sight, probably in order to not increase tensions in a battle they were already seriously losing. The people who were still out that late were pretty focused on their work at that particular moment, anyway. No one was going to be spontaneously storming a police precinct or trying to flip over a police van tonight; their arms were full.

June 1

The mayor announced a state of emergency and instituted an 11 PM curfew with a complete ban on vehicular traffic in Manhattan below 96th St, but it was clear that there were scores of people who didn't care about what he or the governor or the president or the media or what "community leaders" were saying or what flimsy reforms they had begun promising. The ones that did care held their orderly demonstrations earlier in the day, behaving nicely, holding signs, giving quotes denouncing the looting and property destruction. Their condemnations may have had caveats about riots being the language of the unheard, but the main thing the media and politicians needed were quotes that separated the agitators from the legitimate protesters who only wanted their voices heard and who were making sensible demands, none of which included the NYPD sucking their dicks: the impossible demand.

Activists were now even colonizing the traditional "NYPD SUCK MY DICK" chant, keeping the cadence but changing the words to "NYPD TAKE A KNEE." Some white shirted NYPD leaders obliged, to the media's delight. Holding hands and raising fists with the

highest-ranking uniformed member of the New York Police Department and surrounded by a wall of photojournalists, the entire moment had been orchestrated by mainstream “violence interrupter” activists after people had begun throwing plastic water bottles at police during a standoff in Washington Square Park. A trend of cops facing off against protesters and kneeling together in solidarity had spread throughout the country and the media was loving it. It was about as meaningful as a Pepsi commercial. Afterward, a local journalist overheard the first kneeling white shirt shrug to a colleague and say, “they did it in Queens...I mean, if it stops the riots....”

Night fell and things seemed to be picking up, but it was different. Protest activity more neatly converged in Lower Manhattan and all the pockets of resistance that had been appearing everywhere simultaneously the past few days—the hectic scanner traffic announcing a disorderly group of 500 in Union Square, disorderly group of 100 in Flatbush, orderly group of 1,000 at Barclays, 300 disorderly in Harlem—seemed to be cooling off. Stores in Soho had been cleared out and heavily locked down, with more cops and more private security guards milling around storefronts with additional wooden fortifications covering the windows.

Youth were hanging out around Union Square, as usual, and some crews ventured about, swinging skateboards through random windows and grabbing things nobody needed. Meanwhile, a big rally in front of police headquarters in Manhattan turned into a march and headed uptown, gradually shedding the less militant along the way. Corporate storefronts were getting shattered, but not without some vocal disagreement from some in the crowd. Police cars were being quietly tagged, not spectacularly totaled.

The march strolled through Soho without much fanfare and approached the Astor Place Starbucks, almost certainly the most frequently smashed storefront in contemporary New York City protest history. A young Black teenager in the march exclaimed to a friend with a mixture of confusion and disappointment, “it’s all white niggas.” It was true, relatively. Someone clad in black darted out from the crowd and smashed the window.

The march continued on and fragmented somewhere around Herald Square and spread into Midtown once again, most of the politically-oriented protesters moving on as the looting began. A small group broke into Macy’s and got themselves all arrested. That made headlines, but the serious looting had moved on to the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, which was mostly small independent shops. The city and real estate developers had been trying to gentrify the neighborhood for years, but still, it was a tougher dynamic to explain to people than the previous nights. Teenagers running around Manhattan grabbing cash and candy bars and fighting the police made much more sense and captured the essence of the outrage much better than organized crews pulling up in trucks and ripping entire ATM machines out of the ground. A video of a Bronx cop getting hit by a speeding car and flying into the air like a ragdoll circulated on social media, but it looked like a genuine accident.

June 2

Things were still generally out of control, so the mayor bumped the curfew up to 8 PM. This actually brought more protesters out, specifically the non-militant white ones who felt like they had to do something to support the cause beyond just posting symbolic black squares on Instagram. With the curfew in place, now all it took to perform a heroic act of civil disobedience in solidarity with Black People was to simply be outside at night. Everything was more organized and controlled, even coherent in its demands. There were more megaphones, more signs, more boring chants, more social justice activists, more peace policing, more predictability. Thousands gathered in an orderly fashion to shout slogans at an empty skyscraper with the words “Trump Tower” on it.

As their bosses eagerly took knees and hugged Black-led protest leaders across all five boroughs, the uncontrollable elements of the crowds faded away amid the new endless rejoinders to not “provoke” the cops or “take the bait.” The Black protesters who spoke out against the cop-hugging were scolded far worse than the non-Black people who did, ensuring that the protests would be as colorless and obedient as possible.

The mayor and NYPD leadership had been facing harsh criticism for their inability to stop the looting, so all officers were put on 12-hour shifts and given the go-ahead to make mass arrests, even at the orderly marches. Police returned to their usual crowd control tactics, breaking up peaceful gatherings and piling on top of anyone they could grab.

Angry, marginalized New Yorkers looting 5th Avenue certainly looked bad for the city, but helmeted cops marching down 5th Avenue indiscriminately swinging night sticks and beating up nonthreatening white people might have looked even worse. With more reporters and cameras around to capture the violence, media uproar and politician outrage over the mass arrests and protest brutality became the leading story.

Racial, political, and even gender divisions within the crowds were becoming increasingly stark. Random grifters with mysterious backgrounds and no previous interest in social justice kept showing up to protests wearing signature clothing and carrying distinctive props. They climbed onto tall platforms and raised their fists and summoned the mild amount of charisma needed to convince large groups of white people and journalists that they spoke for an entire “community,” if not a whole generation. The more they spoke, the more the grifters’ motives started to show. But no one was about to shout down a strong Black woman yelling clichés about justice and love and change, even when they ended their speeches by telling everyone to follow them on Instagram, spelling out their handles, letter by letter, through their megaphones.

Protest leaders took thousands of fresh faces who had never been to a demonstration before and led them directly into corridors of waiting cops and on long marches to “shut down” far-off highways and desolate bridge roadways, all easily handled with minimal police resources.

The big march this evening started in Brooklyn and was led onto the Manhattan Bridge, but the cops over on the Manhattan end were tired and wanted their overtime pay without having to actually walk around following a march, so they forced everyone to turn around and go back to Brooklyn. The cops back on the Brooklyn side were also tired, so they turned

the march back the other way. Thousands of people were now stranded on the bridge with nowhere to go and nothing to do.

After about an hour, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez announced that she was on her way from Queens to personally broker a deal with the NYPD and avoid a mass arrest situation. The Brooklyn cops eventually relented before she showed up, allowing the crowd to pass so long as they promised to end the march and disperse. It was nearly midnight and everyone was exhausted. The march split up and the protesters all went back home to whichever part of Brooklyn they were gentrifying.

June 3

Thousands were still showing up for rallies and marches across Manhattan and select parts of Brooklyn, but they were not very organic nor were they leaderless. Protesters who violated the 8 PM curfew continued to be beaten and arrested by the hundreds, the overwhelming majority of them white. There were plenty of police brutality media moments as lumbering cops beat their way into maximum overtime hours, but, like most caught-on-camera protest repression, the outrage was fleeting. It may have been novel for the people getting beat up by cops for the first time in their lives, but the rest of the city seemed largely inured to NYPD protest violence, nodding their heads as the mayor called the videos “troubling” and promised to look into it.

June 4

A small coalition of radical affinity groups had been hyping a march in the South Bronx that was to be explicitly militant and anti-police, circulating digital flyers with cop cars on fire and all. Past actions from this self-described “formation” had gone fine, despite no one ever lighting a cop car on fire at any of them. Unlike the rioting and the more spontaneous looting and property destruction a few days earlier, NYPD knew about this one in advance and had ample time to draw up a battle plan along with a PR strategy to handle the inevitable backlash that comes with mass arrest events.

The Bronx organizers and all the people who parachuted in, plus some local residents and delivery people who had the misfortune of being in the vicinity, were all kettled, beaten, and arrested almost immediately after the march began. Human Rights Watch published a detailed investigative report about the brutal arrests a few months later, which will be useful for when the United Nations extradites NYPD leadership to the Hague and puts them on trial for violating international human rights laws. The report is a depressing read best described as police brutality porn, erotica for cops who get turned on by beating up protesters, or for social justice people who like to revel in their own defeats.

The icing on this particular cake was that the white-shirt who oversaw the Bronx operation was the same high-ranking chief who had taken a knee in Washington Square Park a few days before. There was never an official racial breakdown of the hundreds of arrestees,

but the South Bronx is 3% white and the share of white people arrested that night was much, much greater than 3%. The critical elements from the first few days of the uprising—POC youth and unaffiliated “Black proletarians”—had barely shown up. The “FTP formation” fell apart a few weeks later, publicly imploding in a flurry of official statements that no one read.

June and Beyond

Thousands of people, mostly white and mostly led by a small handful of Black grifters of various activist and non-activist origins, continued to walk around in peaceful, orderly marches in defiance of the curfew. The combination of aggressive police response and endless boring demonstrations even allowed the mayor to end the curfew one day ahead of schedule. NYPD only made a small number of protest arrests over the rest of the month, mostly snatch-and-grabs whenever things appeared to be getting disorderly, or if the cops got bored.

A couple of nonprofit organizations, one of them a Democratic Party PAC, established an occupation of City Hall Park that lasted a single month before flaming out, accompanied by—what else—an official statement posted on Instagram. Nine years earlier, Zuccotti Park had to be violently cleared out in the dead of night to end Occupy Wall Street. This occupation, in a much more visible and far less isolated location, was tolerated by the city and left to quietly self-destruct on its own. The uprising in New York was over.

The arc of the moral universe that bends toward justice might be long, but riots compress time and can shorten the distance between us and justice. Across a few days in New York in the plague year 2020, the arc of the moral universe bent through 292 cops, 303 police vehicles, 450 capitalist storefronts, and millions of dollars’ worth of property and goods.

As the riots recede into memory and the political reforms all fail, the NYPD continues to innovate new and expensive techniques of repression. More glitter than guns, every dollar spent in the service of keeping everything the way it is. If there was any tactical lesson to be learned, it was that rioting is timeless, tried and true. Even the most sophisticated and overfunded police forces can’t put them down on their own.

New reform efforts mint new laws and new laws mint new injustices. Policing in America was invented to protect private property: slave patrols in the South and cargo shipment protection in the North. The ostensible abolishment of slavery was achieved through unimaginable violence in a war spurred by a Supreme Court decision to formally legalize slavery. With the end of the Civil War came new laws that created new and novel forms of oppression. Sharecropping, Jim Crow segregation, poll taxes, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and its kin filled the gaps left by the end of slavery. As each new piece of legislation and executive action and constitutional amendment promised to finally grant Black people their right to exist, Black death remained enshrined in law with updated language to fit the era.

The government passed countless Civil Rights Acts over the next century, each with its own caveats. The big one at the end of the 1960s, hastily signed into law during a period

of nationwide rioting following MLK's assassination, outlawed housing discrimination while expanding the criminalization of Black political speech: first and foremost, inciting to riot. After the George Floyd uprising, federal prosecutors charged scores of people using the anti-riot laws written into the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the crowning achievement of the nonviolent civil rights movement.

Maybe nothing ever lasts and the police didn't get defunded and the whole thing was destined to fail, but at least we tried, and at least we failed better than we did the last time. In the end, a new, small generation of militant anti-authoritarians was probably born, maybe. The aftereffects in our small corner could be like those of Occupy Wall Street or the anti-globalization movement, but less white, more neighborhood-oriented, and this time squarely aimed at police and the carceral state, not nebulous corporations and bureaucratic free trade agreements.

After all, the laws that gave rise to those corporations and the policies written into those trade agreements are enforced under the threat of violence, economic or otherwise. Injustice is by definition written into law, so effective resistance to injustice will always appear in the form of lawbreaking. Politicians and corporations might be the ones writing the laws, but the laws are ultimately always protected and enforced here, in the streets, by the police.

Capitalism is killing you, the criminal justice system is killing you, the misery of everyday life is killing you, something outside of you is killing you, and whatever it is, the police are its first line of defense. That other world you think is possible, the truth you want to believe is out there, it's located somewhere in the darkness just beyond the cops. For those with nothing left to lose, for those who barely even want to be here, now is your best chance to get out before you give up, and the only way out is always through them.

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A History of the Rise and Fall of the 2020 New York Riots
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