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Downtown Fucked

Reflections on the Nashville Explosion

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Retrieved on 2021-12-26 from Ill Will

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The catastrophe is that which reveals, but cannot be revealed.

—Tiqqun, *Theses on the Imaginary Party*

At first glance, the bombing in Nashville seems to be an inexplicable anachronism. What happened was admittedly, rather unusual: a planned explosion that brought down critical infrastructure, designed to kill no one but its detonator, and whose ideological justifications remain frustratingly opaque. While nonmilitary “attacks” such as bombings, shootings, or mass killings are not uncommon in the USA in recent decades, they are generally the exclusive domain of the right-wing. Yet despite recently-uncovered writings from the bomber professing his belief in a few popular conspiracy theories from decades past, there is there is nothing in them that allows us to reconstruct a conclusive motive. There is nothing that aligns them directly with the sort of explicitly fascist conspiracy theories that have motivated the most high-profile attacks of the last decade. The deductive chain linking his notions to his actions is hopelessly broken, leaving spectators to attempt to make sense of an act rendered senseless by the isolated, confused and death-driven context in which it arose.

In fact, it is precisely this fundamental indeterminacy of his actions that explains frantic efforts to cobble together a digestible motive and pin it to the persona of Anthony Quinn Warner. For those clinging to the husk of this world, it is this indeterminacy itself that provokes explanation. From the little big-shots on the Internet to the little Eichmanns in the Federal government, a chorus of enlightened commentators have unanimously concluded that this man was a paranoid conspiracy theorist, or else, a fascist-adjacent lunatic. Some even hoped to find a hint of leftism in his past, the better to smear their political opponents as terrorists at war with white society. Why do so many rush to assign such pat and simple meaning onto such an incredible and shocking gesture? What function does this confirmation bias fulfill in the great parade of

if there is no essential relation of the bombing to the uprising, after all of the crises of the last two years, the countless revelatory events that the system tried to digest are already metabolizing in unexpected, dangerous, and effective ways. Those who still cling to the ruinous progress of this world can only speak of these recombined splinters as lurking threats to their thanatopic narcosis, as a “crime wave,” as “the post-truth era,” as a “Great Resignation.” However, we see them for what they are, namely, as the steady, ongoing emergence of strategies, tactics, forms, and intelligences adapted to a war whose battle lines are drawn on a scattered and unstable basis. If revolution means anything today, its proponents will advance not within the established array of roles and forces, but a wild combination of alliances and actions. Of course, nothing guarantees successes in this fearless experimentation, but the process asserts the necessity of arriving at a more irreversible stage of struggle.

fortuna favet ferae

of the Aspen, Colorado energy grid, which occurred *the very next day*): what did they make possible for people? What avenues of action did they open up? What setbacks or gridlock did they cause for the system? We might conclude, without judgment or condemnation, that the targets of the rebellion were often symbolic, and where they were not, they took place only at the final link in the industrial supply chain, namely, in retail distribution. This certainly makes sense to most people, as deindustrialization has confused broad sections of the public about how the system operates, or even what the nature of our society is. However, a contrast with the specialized attack on the AT&T exchange is instructive here: while the latter is hardly a generalizable act, it could have illuminated a different course of action for militants and others, given how much of the logistical power of the racial state is stored in innocuous buildings in the center of cities or at the edges of town.

The Widening Gyre

To assess why people fight is not so easy today, however. In former times, the ideal of "exporting revolution" and the slogan of "checking the expansion of communism" were calls to action that elicited countless responses. But [...] these calls have lost their effectiveness. The times of clearly drawn sides are over.

– Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*

As we write this, it's been exactly one year since Anthony Quinn Warner plunged a little shard of reality — the same one we are each afforded in our own lives — into the heart of Nashville, only for it to be swallowed up by the course of a world slouching towards uncertain doom. In its inability to truly face and transcend oppositional forces, this world can only attempt to smother them through absorption — and absorption begets recombination. Even

politics today? Their aim seems clear enough: they seek to suppress or distort the simple truth expressed by two leveled downtown blocks and a ruined AT&T exchange. It's the kind of truth that, in its contingency, lends itself to contagion and appropriation by others, the kind of act whose essential simplicity draws into view all the anomie and undoneness of this epoch. One can hardly contemplate it for long without feeling that it implicates each one of us, that it so clearly expresses our time as to be in some essential way our own, that it was intended for us to see, that we recognize our own faces among the ash and ruin.

Bombtrack

Be still this old heart

Be still this old skin

Drink your last drink

Sin your last sin

Sing your last song

About the beginning

Sing it out loud

So the people can hear, let's go!

– Sleater-Kinney, "Jumpers"

The loudmouths of the Spectacle are not entirely wrong to refer to the event as "suicidal" and "nihilistic." Without a doubt, Warner's gesture was shot through with a searing desperation, loneliness and futility. However, a half-truth is often the most effective lie: for those among us who have been breaking ranks with this world for some time now, we who spend our time searching for trajectories out of this crumbling social edifice, events like this remind us that sad passions also disclose active forces within them. The opacity

of its motives could also be interpreted as a paradoxical form of positivity. Whereas motives presuppose the existent, and even belong to it, since they draw upon possibilities already situated within this world, by refusing to make himself legible, by remaining irreducible to comprehension, recognition, and politicization, Warner's gesture attests to a thoroughgoing rejection, disaffection and dissatisfaction with this world.

It would be a mistake to believe that the song Warner broadcasted from his RV along with evacuation warnings — Petula Clark's hit, "Downtown" — was selected simply as a whimsical means to highlight the location of his target. One look at the lyrics reveals a radically different and direct contact between context and act:

*When you're alone and life is making you lonely
You can always go downtown...*

Loneliness, alienation and estrangement from ourselves and others is at once the most general experience in our time (perhaps even the last general experience possible) as well as its most public secret. From it, all manner of actions remain. What are we to make of Warner's?

Two features of his act are undeniable. First, in his alienation and loneliness, he did not spare himself. Secondly, and more generally, any proportionate response to the rottenness of this society cannot content itself with merely contesting or denouncing its ideas and principles, and thereby taking over the pseudo-debates and "conversations" it has already constructed for us. Rather, a proportionate response must assume the form of a real attack on the actual capacity of such a society to function: it must attack its infrastructure.

There is an intelligence contained in even the most apparently thoughtless events. This is all the more true for an act like Warner's, which appears designed to demonstrate in no uncertain terms that

according to its own internal logic, its own practical and memetic composition. The grammar of its composition, and the consciousness that responded to it, was in no sense universal, even if it sometimes believed itself to be. On a basic level, something is always excluded or overlooked by real struggles. In periods of social crisis, in which doing nothing is impossible, this means that more than one revolt can emerge at a time. Unable to utilize the slogans and discourse constructed by the protagonists of mass movements or rebellions, some groups or forces will develop their own courses of action and sometimes their own framework altogether. We take this for granted whenever we watch reactionaries and the ruling elites develop divergent understandings of events we take part in, as well as their own strategies for responding to them. However, what remains poorly understood are situations like Nashville, in which parallel avenues of struggle emerge that are in no way adversarial to one another, but which are nevertheless unable to inhabit the same tactical space, the same rhetorical area, or the same compositional aggregation. In order to make sense of such moments, subversive movements to come will need to develop a practical consciousness that moves beyond purist and mono-conceptual forms of political or moral critique. Only in this way will they ready themselves to move alongside forces and events that are not adversarial, sympathetic, nor neutral, but simply exist on another register.

For instance, there is every reason to think that millions in the uprising, and the lone wrecker of "Downtown" were spurred on by very different experiences of the intolerable. Although they adopted divergent courses of action, both were animated by a conviction that the present could no longer be endured. In both instances, a clear determination emerged to hit 'em where it hurts, despite significant and crucial differences in their interpretations of what exactly that meant. Similar considerations should be applied to all of the actions of 2020, from the anti-police uprising to the Nashville bombing (or even the completely forgotten Earth First! sabotage

in our culture quickly perished in this desert of incomprehension. As befits a historical moment in which illusion forms the sole currency of reality, the bombing was almost completely forgotten by the end of January. For the time being, many still prefer to discuss the election, the impeachment, and the New Year. But for revolutionaries, to connect the practical means of struggle with a sufficient understanding of the terrain will require more than simple politics, pre-emptive denunciations, or petty tribalistic judgments.

Those who think must act, those who act must think.

Stakes and Lines

In the August 1961 issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, we said that this world would become “at all levels more and more painfully ridiculous until the moment of its complete revolutionary reconstruction.” This process now seems to be well on its way. The new period of proletarian critique will learn that it must no longer shelter from criticism anything that pertains to it, and that every existing ideological comfort represents a shameful defeat. In discovering that it is dispossessed of the false goods of its world of falsehood, it must understand that it is the specific negation of the totality of the global society.

—Situationist International, “The Explosion Point of Ideology in China”

If the George Floyd rebellion and the Nashville bombing share a certain common disposition, it lies in their attempt to negate a social totality by means of uncompromising acts of extreme determination. In no way, however, does this commonality imply a simple, ultimate unity or sameness. The anti-racist revolt of 2020 advanced

the world system, in all its appearances of omnipotence, nonetheless remains vulnerable in concrete ways. Let’s recall that Warner worked for decades in the Information Technology industry, and had an intimate knowledge of the function and importance of telecom exchanges. With a little ingenuity and a dash of confidence, he profaned the knowledge accompanying the position he held, transforming it from the mere technical details of his debasement into the means of his final refusal.

Mystifications

In a time of involution, when even the smallest reforms seem impossible, all that remains are desperate measures. The media pretends to be baffled, and the state, of course, remains silent.

—Chuang, “Bombing the Headquarters: Desperate Measures in a Time of Involution”

It would certainly be convenient to interpret the Christmas Day blast as an isolated occurrence, a purely ahistorical container, a total aberration. Unfortunately, it is impossible to ever truly separate events from the historical forces that attend and incite them. Everything that transpired throughout the whole of 2020 compels a more expansive understanding. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant State-enforced isolation and distancing protocols deepened widespread alienation and affective disorders common to commodity-based society. But what about the George Floyd rebellion? Are the uprising and the Nashville bombing totally separate events?

Immediately following the event, a slew of commentators emerged from the swamp of online chatter and media punditry to weigh in on the matter, offering everything from the occasional snide remarks to outright narrative arcs about the bombing and

its “obvious” political meaning. Of these, three main genres of political commentary were deployed:

1. The right, if it remembers Nashville at all, generally offered little more than surface-level comparisons between the bombing and the rebellion. Grifters and YouTubers dug deep for any hints that Warner might have had sympathies for Black Lives Matter or anti-fascism, hoping to bask in some measure of Schadenfreude, as their thousands of thick-headed subscribers and patrons commented in agreement, nodding along from behind their phones and iPads: “I knew it,” they said, “Antifa terrorists are at war with Christmas.” Regardless, this smear operation led nowhere, as it was completely baseless.
2. Generally speaking, centrists are motivated by a commitment to preserving the reigning social order, but without the inefficiencies and excesses connected to the seemingly irrational violence and racism of their right-wing co-managers. They are therefore compelled to erase the occurrence of the George Floyd rebellion wholesale, while fabricating an absurd link between the bombing and the January 6th riot at the US Capitol. This allows them to set a blank slate for the new administration (who represent the broadest possible cross-section of industrial interests and global trade) by foisting the responsibilities and costs of opposition onto their political adversaries in the Republican Party. After four years of half-hearted support and embarrassing lip-service to protest movements and anti-Trump activism, the Center is ready to rule again.
3. Leftists, finally, are incapable of recognizing that radical change will upend the world in its social totality. Their ideas of social change seek to rescue society (as they conceive of it) from capitalism while refusing to acknowledge all the

ways in which it has been structured, from its very inception as a concept, as both the object and subject of bourgeois history. In part, this incapacity is the result of an idealist, Lego-like conception of revolution: they imagine that a revolution will simply cut out the things they do not like about the world, while leaving the rest. Consequently, they feel compelled to purge the rebellion of any vital, anti-social gestures. Since total, semi-unconditional, refusal appears as utterly incoherent or otherwise unintelligible, the bombing can only be interpreted as reactionary, since it could not be immediately ignored outright.

These tendencies converge in their common inability to imagine a scenario in which the mass character of the rebellion combines with the precision and skillfulness of the bombing.

Such denials are rooted in a widespread practical dyslexia that affects political consciousness today. Actions should speak louder than words. But few today think in a language of concrete acts, preferring abstract ideologies and positions. In the wild course of events, the gulf between the real protagonists and the commentators grows wider with each new wave of unrest. While this might simply condemn the analysts to irrelevance, the trouble is that among those who act, few possess the ability or the patience to express themselves in words, instead leaving the interpretation of their deeds to those who are constitutionally unable to understand them. The result is unsurprising: the meaning of decisive action tends to be misattributed and mutilated. This, in turn, influences the contours of struggles for years at a time, as the true lessons of struggle are warped by the disturbed mythologies of the spectators.

Nashville is a case in point. The obvious intelligence that would lead someone to bomb a telecommunications company and a block of federal government buildings on the morning of the most sacred festival of consumption and pseudo-spiritualism