

Republicans and riots The Left in death, 1992 and 2020 Chris Cutrone

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“The most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history is the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West. They descended into Hell; and in the third century they arose from the dead, in the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world had ever seen. It was a tragedy that beggared the Greek; it was an upheaval of humanity like the Reformation and the French Revolution. Yet we are blind and led by the blind. We discern in it no part of our labor movement; no part of our industrial triumph; no part of our religious experience. Before the dumb eyes of ten generations of ten million children, it is made mockery of and spit upon; a degradation of the eternal mother; a sneer at human effort; with aspiration and art deliberately and elaborately distorted. And why? Because in a day when the human mind aspired to a science of human action, a history and psychology of the mighty effort of the mightiest century, we fell under the leadership of those who would compromise with truth in the past in order to make peace in the present and guide policy in the future.”

— W.E.B. DuBois

“Life is tragic simply because the Earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death — ought to decide, indeed, to earn one’s death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible for life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return.”

— James Baldwin

“The people can not be all, and always, well informed. The part which is wrong will be discontented in proportion to the importance of the facts they misconceive. If they remain quiet under such misconceptions it is a lethargy, the forerunner of death to the public liberty. . . . And what country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms. The remedy is to set them right as to facts, pardon and pacify them. What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.”

— Thomas Jefferson

I QUIT THE “LEFT” in 1993, after the LA riots, the quint-centenary of Columbus’s Discovery and Bill Clinton’s election in 1992 — in that order. These events told me that there would be no struggle for proletarian socialism, no Marxism, but only Republicans, riots — and Democrats. In 2020, nothing seems to have changed since 1992 — or 1968.

Riots and republicans

Riots are bad for black people, turning them into targets for police and civilian vigilantes. Racism is real, and in the U.S. it targets blacks. There are no “people of color” but only blacks and more-or-less “white” people (the latter including “black” — African and Caribbean — immigrants, who do not readily identify with historically black Americans, and indeed actively do not). During the recent riots, in Chicago’s Little Village, the Latin Kings harassed blacks, pulling them from their cars — they left the white hipsters, “Antifa” or not, alone. During the riots, mostly the police stood by; some people were arrested — and they were disproportionately black. The riots enacted the very anti-black racism against which they protested, ending up confirming it. Does it matter if there are black cops, black police chiefs, black mayors doing it? The glass is swept up (how many [black] workers’ hands will be cut?), streets cleared (how many toxins inhaled by [black] clean-up crews?), and normal life, such as it is, returns. But the bitter after-effects remain (how many stores closed permanently and

their [black] workers cast into unemployment?). What was it all for? If the police are defunded or even abolished, private security will not be — nor will the state; but it might be privatized (further), perhaps with black contractors — or not. Perhaps the riots will have in the end been in vain. — Children, be careful what you wish for!

Republicans point out that the U.S. is not a democracy but a constitutional republic; that it is a nation not of people but of laws — a nation based on an idea or ideas: that all are equal, with rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; and all are equal before the law — if not exactly with respect to each other. Republicans hold to the value of freedom over mere life; that law should prevail and provide the true meaning of life, over mere living; and that, while generations pass, freedom endures. This is the — revolutionary — legacy of the American Revolution to which they adhere. And so should we.

The law is not tyranny. Crime is not revolutionary. Rioting is not the revolution. Trump is not the Tsar; Biden is not Kerensky; the DSA are not the Bolsheviks (nor the Mensheviks); the anarchists are not the anarchists. The Third Precinct is not the Bastille; *Jacobin* is not the Jacobins; CHAZ/CHOP is not the Paris Commune. Raz Simone is not Huey Newton or Robert F. Williams; BLM is not the Jewish Bund; 2020 is not 1917 — or 1968. But it might be 1992.

While 1992 led to the election of the Democrats, in 1968 and 2020 it led and will lead, now as before, to electing Republicans — let there be no doubt. The DNC riots (and George Wallace) led to Nixon’s victory; the Days of Rage and Kent State led to his reelection. In 1992, George H.W. Bush sent in the U.S. military (active duty troops, not National Guard) to “pacify” Los Angeles; and there were dozens of bodies felled in the streets and hundreds more sent to hospitals — thousands to jail. But the riots did not harm Bush’s reelection: Clinton would have lost if Ross Perot had not split the electorate, allowing Clinton to win with a minority of the vote.

Donald Trump was a supporter of Perot’s Reform Party (out of opposition to Bush and Clinton’s NAFTA) — before he and Jesse Ventura left in protest later against its Right-wing takeover under Pat Buchanan, a true “America first” nationalist and isolationist. As in 2016, the silent majority will speak again; again, it is only a question of how loudly they will do so. Perhaps more loudly than the vocal minority. Prepare to be gobsmacked — again. Even if it’s Biden/Harris in 2020, it could be Trump again in 2024 — do not expect him (of all people) to go gentle into that good night!

Columbus

The other event in 1992 that convinced me of the impossibility of struggle for proletarian socialism was the observation of 500 years of the Columbian Discovery of the New World in 1492 — which the “Left” protested as the beginning of “500 years of racism, sexism and homophobia,” neglecting that all human communities, in all places, ever, for thousands — tens of thousands — of years, have been racially chauvinistic and genocidal, enslaved those they conquered and did not simply kill, were patriarchal, and asserted murderous sexual morality over all their members; and that the transformation of the world and of humanity in our modern bourgeois emancipation, of which the Renaissance Italian Columbus’s voyage was part, was the very first time that the potential for overcoming myriad generations of racism, sexism and homophobia had ever emerged in history.

Genghis Khan was a protagonist of history even greater than Columbus, in both action and atrocity — should the people of Asia (and beyond) mourn who and what he made them? But of course Khan was just a prominent and particularly dramatic example of what humanity has carved in its blood over the course of millennia — or eons. Only since Columbus has slavery been abolished, genocide made a crime, and sexual freedom and gender equality been achieved. The epochal bourgeois revolution, of which Columbus’s Journey of Discovery was part, is the first — and only — successful slave revolt in

history. 1992 marked not 500 years of oppression but five centuries of liberation, for the entire world. It put an end to ancestral guilt and began history anew. This change continues to this day. Its task is not over yet.

In Mexico, Columbus Day is celebrated as the “Day of the Race,” celebrating the marvelous mixture of European and indigenous people, the new modern race of Americans. — Shall we regret them as “illegitimate children” instead? Republican U.S. Congressional Representative Steve King said that all existing human populations are the products at some time or other of rape and incest, but that it is not the children’s fault for the sins of their fathers and mothers. — Shall we prefer that they were aborted?

Slavery

We are told by those such as the Mayor of Minneapolis and the Governor of Minnesota — the Speaker of the House of Representatives and various Senators and other Governors and Mayors — Democrats, all — that today in the U.S. we are living in 400 years of slavery and its effects, of “white supremacy” — really! One wonders whether they are truly ashamed or rather proud to say so; anyway, various Hollywood actors, music and sports celebrities tweet their applause. It must be very kick-ass to be white nowadays. (Remember *The New Jim Crow* and *Orange is the New Black* that everybody was reading and watching: Poussey Washington’s death was protested, however that did not end well.) But isn’t present misery much more specific (and much less sexy): the deindustrialization of the past neoliberal capitalist generation; not 400 years of racism but 40 years of postindustrial poverty, in which not only the black underclass but also the black middle class has grown? The unexpected plot-twist after the achievement of Civil Rights reforms in the 1960s against racism was that the working class as a whole would be thrown onto the scrapheap of neoliberal capitalism. A century earlier, the Robber Baron Jay Gould had declared that he could hire one half of the working class to kill the other. Is this what we have been seeing for the last generation, the “poverty draft” — not only to the military but the police (including prison guards)? Jean-Paul Sartre asked whether there was any

sense to life in a world where there are people whose job is to break our bones. He was right 70 years ago — and is still.

The “white” underclass has also grown since the 1970s — has been decimated (starved, sickened, bastardized, drug-addicted, criminalized — lumpenized) — as well: has this been the “white genocide” that the actual “white-supremacists” (or “-nationalists”) bemoan? Shall we look forward to a “race war” to settle the issue; shall we prove the old white racist fears of black revenge true; or are we beckoned by another future? Frantz Fanon declared that slavery was long overcome, and said that there is no black mission and no white burden — that he had no desire to crystallize guilt in hearts, and wanted to move into a future in which children would not scrutinize their color. Fanon said that excessive consciousness of the body is destructive of our humanity, psychologically and spiritually: it is not only mortifying but morbid, succumbing to morbidity. Fanon called on us to reject the destructive impulse of Thanatos, the Death Drive, and instead to embrace Eros, “to build the world of the You;” and prayed, “O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” He was right 70 years ago — and is still.

Slavery is not the remarkable fact of American history, but its abolition is. The abolition of slavery in the U.S. was the attempt to prevent, for the whole world, it ever coming back. It is the extremely brief century and a half of the ban on slavery that is the exception to history, the difference from countless ages of slavery across the eternity of time — it is in fact what makes the U.S. exceptional and indeed the leader of the freedom of the entire world, to this day. The U.S. is the land of the free and home of the brave — the U.S. banishing slavery has been an act of unprecedented bravery and freedom, and still is.

But the guilty liberals’ 1619 Project last year, claiming indelible blackness and the permanent effects of the past visible in our bodies, will be taught in schools instead. Democrats don kente cloth this year and take a knee for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. — “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” — A

true mortification of the flesh, but without any sort of spiritual redemption.

Thomas Jefferson said that the world belongs to the living and not the dead. But in tearing down a statue of Jefferson we might not claim the world that actually belongs to us, the world of not mere life but of living — in freedom — but only the world of the dead. Shall we let the dead’s claims dominate us? Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty or give me death!” was not a mere phrase. “Live free or die” does not mean literally dying but not really living. Are we actually living, or is our life rather a living death? Are the living today only the evidence of past death; are we only living monuments to the dead?

Pathology of freedom, or death

When looking up at a statue of Columbus today, the rage we feel is the frustration and confusion of our liberation. We hate Columbus for his role in making our freedom inescapable. We blame the herald and harbinger and seek to kill the messenger for the bad news that, as Rousseau said, society has forced us to be free. Christopher Columbus the man is long since dead; but his image haunts us with all the terror — what Fanon called the “pathology” — of freedom. This is the fear and hatred of the revolution — our hatred and fear of freedom. We feel freedom itself as an oppression. Of course it has been and continues to be traumatic. But no destruction of symbols, no matter how furious, can cure our ills. As Freud observed, what is painful can nonetheless be true. The truth is that we are — painfully — free.

The painful truth is that we are not living through a revolution in the riots, or even a prelude to revolution; but the riots are only the expression of pain at the actual revolution in capitalism, a “cry of protest before accommodation” to the new post-neoliberal reality, the change at the political Center that is being led by Trump. We look at Trump and see the effect of Columbus. We look at Columbus and see Trump. But while we decapitate Columbus, Trump keeps his head — and we brain

ourselves. — Children, don’t let statues fall on your head!

Like Sally’s brother James Hemings, freed by Jefferson, we might become lost, and drink ourselves to death, after our manumission. That is our liberty. But the world goes on — and we cannot, or at least ought not to, hate others for living.

They will live and they will die but they will be free. Free to suffer and free to die, to find their own paths to death — which is the only possible meaning of life. Can our lives (our deaths) find their true meaning in freedom? Or will we be freed only from “this mortal coil” and not from our mere mortality? The riots were provoked by the death of George Floyd and memorialized him: were they a true celebration of his life? Floyd’s family says they were not. The protests called for convicting the police who killed Floyd, to hold their lives responsible for his death. The righteous police will hold the wrongful police to account, and they in life along with Floyd in death will be sacrificed to redeem our collective guilt, the living deaths of our own lives, in memory of his dying. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor called the riots a “festival of the oppressed” — but can they be anything beyond what Rosa Luxemburg called the “dance of bloody shadows without number”? Can they bring meaning to life, or only to death?

Is the dying of the oppressed the only meaning of our life — is death the only meaning of black life? What will our meaning be — can there be any meaning to us — in history? Beyond riots and Republicans, law and order, and, for now — today and tomorrow — Trump? Will we look only at ourselves, with morbid fascination and rage, and not look beyond ourselves to “the open door of every consciousness”? — Children, I hope that you hope for more than death — for more than mere life! | P

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