Republicans and riots: The Left in death, 1992 and 2020

Chris Cutrone

Platypus Review 128 | July 2020

“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 all be, 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 (or 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 acrity — 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
Shall we prefer that they were aborted?

Can there be any meaning to their life? For more than mere life! What will our meaning of black life? What will our meaning be — free. Can they bring meaning to life, or only to death? Are the living today only 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?

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

The Platypus Affiliated Society platypus1917.org