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Conflict in Oakland

—or— there vs here

Many people have been heartened by the December events in Greece, which, along with France, seems like one of the few remaining places where passion has not died in the hearts of resisters, where people will still back up their outrage with fire and bricks. Anarchists around the country responded variously but positively, some going far enough out of their way to add their name to an open letter or a blog entry, while others took to the streets in support.

So imagine the shock, then, when a mere two weeks after anarchists had warmed themselves with pictures of fires in Greece, that there are such very different responses to a riot in Oakland, California.

In the early hours of January 1st, a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police officer lethally shot 22 year old Oscar Grant once in the back while he was being detained on the platform of the Fruitvale BART station in Oakland. Witnesses report that Grant was “lying on his stomach with his hands out in a non-threatening position when he was shot.”

On the afternoon of Grant’s funeral a week later, a protest was held at the Fruitvale station to draw attention to the event. Protesters marched to downtown Oakland, where the demonstration turned into a riot in which a police car was totaled, and things were broken. Things broken included the windows of some small businesses and windshields of cars (three went up in flames) that were owned by residents of Oakland rather than by megacorporations.

The commentaries on sites like SF Indymedia, infoshop.org, and anarchistnews in response to the news of this smashing has been about 50/50 between people who are celebrating this riot and people complaining because the riot was not the planned, strategic sortie that they apparently think the Left should provide for them. The complaints are worth paying some attention to, since they are indicative of continuing, ugly trends:

1. The accusation that white anarchists are to blame for inappropriate property destruction (despite the images, videos, and participants expressing that it was mostly people of color – some of whom were reportedly anarchists – who were smashing so-called inappropriate things).
2. The accusation that the non-activists didn’t abide by the Marquess of Queensberry Rules of Proper Riot Procedure, because bystander businesses and cars were smashed.
3. The accusation that state instigation (through the use of provocateurs) duped the anarchists/rioters into rioting, which alienates the Normals.
4. The accusation faulting those who called the protest for not controlling the situation so that the riot couldn’t happen. One commenter posted: “If real anarchists are mixing with people destroying small businesses they become them for all intents and purposes. They could have walked away or tried to

“speak out to those who would listen and educate them on the relevance of the targets.”

5. The accusation that the protestors, by rioting, are instigating more repression from the state.
6. The introduction of the concept of innocence — in this case, the innocent bystanders who had their stuff smashed.
7. The bestowal of moral authority on an individual (especially when that individual just happens to agree with the commenter). An outstanding example: “among many reasons not to engage in trashing African Bead shops (!!!???) and Chinese restaurants is that the family of Oscar Grant has denounced it and called clearly for it not to be repeated.”

These comments are merely the latest iterations of some classic Leftist canards — property destruction equals violence; only white activists want to smash things; the mystification of racial issues under the cloak of language about “normal,” “innocent,” “working class,” “community,” “neighborhood,” etc; our actions can (or do!?) control the actions of the state; there is such a thing as innocence; activists are responsible for controlling people’s rage; events are significant to the extent that they satisfy or influence non-participants (especially through the interface of corporate media).

Once these premises are made explicit, their falsity is obvious. People of color are no more alienated by property destruction than white people are. Non-anarchists do not need anarchists to show them the way to (or the satisfaction in) property destruction. Property destruction is different in several significant ways from violence that damages living beings. The state has its own agenda and whims, and our activities may sometimes be used as excuses, but are for the most part barely noticed. Activists — to the extent that they seek to manage people’s anger — are part of the problem, not part of a solution. Riots and similar events are significant (to the extent that they are) because they allow the participants to have some life-changing experiences, far more than because of any message that might get out to spectators. Innocence is a code word for a whole host of assumptions that have nothing to do with life in the US. Some of the smarter commentators alluded to two seemingly conflicting points: a) riots are about rage; the point is that rioters are uncontrolled; b) the fact that is people attack targets that don’t seem to be connected to the issue at hand probably means that they perceive the problem differently.

No doubt there is something to learn from that different perspective.

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