

The Politics of Dead Cops and the Coming Repression

December 25, 2014

There's blood on many hands tonight. Those that incited violence on this street under the guise of protest, that tried to tear down what New York City police officers did everyday. We tried to warn it must not go on, it cannot be tolerated. That blood on the hands starts on the steps of city hall in the office of the mayor.

— Patrick Lynch, President of the police union in NYC (December 20, 2014)

“We have, for the first time in a number of years, become a ‘wartime’ police department. We will act accordingly.”

— Statement widely attributed to the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association

Already a suspect in the shooting of his girlfriend earlier that morning in Baltimore, Ismaaiyl Brinsley ambushed NYC police officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos Saturday afternoon as they sat in their patrol car in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Brinsley had recently posted his plans on Instagram—to kill two police officers as an act of revenge for the killing of Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York and Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Brinsley killed himself after being pursued by responding officers. New York City now stands on the brink of a police mutiny, as the killing of these two police officers has heightened tensions over policing in the city with the largest police force in the country.

Lynch, the NYPD's union chief has consistently challenged Mayor de Blasio's leadership, here holding him and the movement that has arisen in opposition to police violence and unaccountability, responsible for the police deaths. The former mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, also used the recently killed cops to criminalize the movement. Never one to fall short in a hyperbole competition, Giuliani's identification of Brinsley's 'accomplices' aimed even higher than de Blasio, with Giuliani stating, “We've had four months of propaganda—starting with the president—that everybody should hate the police.” New York's former governor George Pataki took to Twitter, which I guess is an accepted Gubernatorial forum for the expression of grief over two dead police, with the following: “Sickened by these barbaric acts, which sadly are a predictable outcome of divisive anti-cop rhetoric of Eric Holder and Mayor de Blasio.”

These 'us versus them' dichotomies and bombastic finger-pointings are not exceptional in this country today, they are standard political maneuvers designed to obscure, intimidate, and silence. A rational person might attempt to add that the sole perpetrator of this crime, the *only* one responsible (in any way whatsoever) for the death of those two officers in Brooklyn, is dead. That is a fact that Giuliani, Lynch, Pataki and others will try to make taboo, unthinkable, unpatriotic, etc., but it is a fact that is hard to refute.

These statements are for political effect, but who is the target? Is it de Blasio? Obama? No. Quite clearly the target of the NYPD's moralistic monologue is the movement as a whole—each and every person who has taken to the streets in the past few months, all across the country, to say no to police killings of unarmed Black men, no to racial profiling, no to the racist drug war, no to all forms of state-sanctioned racism. Whether you were using your body to stop traffic on the highway, or you were holding a sign standing on the sidewalk; whether you seek to abolish the police, or simply want

a criminal trial for Darren Wilson in St. Louis or Daniel Pantaleo in New York—if you see yourself in any way affiliated with the movement that has arisen in the past months to try and put an end to racist police practices, you are the target of this sabre rattling. Moving forward, movement solidarity will be key as the NYPD's talk of "war" starts to materialize into physical repression and various power holders start handing out respectability badges to anyone who will throw more militant or radical protesters under the (armored police) bus.

Which Lives Matter?

"The cops stop you just cause you black, THAT'S WAR!

Run your prints through the system, THAT'S WAR!

When they call my hood a drug zone, THAT'S WAR!

Slum lords charge me for the rent, THAT'S WAR!

Why they so rich and we poor, THAT'S WAR!"

— *Dead Prez* "That's War!"

On December 13th, the NYPD and their supporters gathered at City Hall. A common sight at the rally were t-shirts that read, "I Can Breathe" mocking the dying words of Eric Garner—who died as a result of an NYPD chokehold that was caught on video. The officer responsible for the chokehold, Daniel Pantaleo, did not have to face criminal charges, further igniting demonstrations in NYC and across the country. When your pledge of support for the police revolves around mocking the dying words of a Black man at their hands, your ability to draw a distinction between a) that support and b) celebrating Black death, is negated—if such a distinction could have been drawn in the first place. Authoritarian, childish, and shameless—these expressions of mockery for the dead belie a white chauvinism that has always supported more aggressive or militaristic policing and the unlawful killing of Black people. Those that defer to the type of fear-mongering and moralistic manipulation being flaunted by the likes of Patrick Lynch and Giuliani are the domestic chicken hawks in what has been a one-sided war. The police want a return to business as usual. They are not content with the fact that an officer choked a father of six to death using a banned chokehold, on videotape, who was not physically resisting them, and still did not even need to face a trial. They want people to stop talking about it, stop demonstrating, stop calling for investigations—to stop acting like Eric Garner's life mattered.

Any challenge to the complete autonomy of the police, any effort to hold them accountable will elicit various efforts from the police to preserve their power. De Blasio is getting pressured simply because he isn't actively helping the police criminalize and smash the protest movement. Lynch of course sees de Blasio differently, saying *two days before* the Brooklyn cops were shot: "He is not running the city of New York. He thinks he's running a f—g revolution." Right now it isn't really clear who is running New York City. De Blasio certainly isn't leading any revolution. However, it is certainly becoming clear to more and more people that nothing short of a revolution will destroy white supremacy and the political charades that surround it.

A State of War: de Blasio Grudgingly Puts on the Uniform

On Monday, de Blasio gave a statement which clearly conceded to the NYPD pressure:

"It's time for everyone to put aside political debates, put aside protests, put aside all of the things that we will talk about in due time. That can be for another day."

De Blasio's paternalistic dismissal of the movement's concerns, as if people have been protesting in

the freezing cold because they have nothing better to do, shows how quick a liberal Mayor will be to betray those standing for social justice when the police dogs start barking into microphones. De Blasio's effort to get the NYPD off his back, shifting that weight fully onto the shoulders of the movement and the Black community, illustrates a central reason why a young black man is killed by police every 28 hours. When push comes to shove, and it rarely does, the police go to great lengths to ward off the formation of any type of systematic accountability for police misconduct.

The police are not going to regulate themselves; and like any bureaucratic organization, will constantly try to command as much power and resources as they can while insulating themselves from accountability to anyone outside the organization. As recent events have clearly illustrated, state prosecutors, who are not fully independent of the police, cannot be counted on to enforce the law against cops who kill or maim. Politicians, even someone like de Blasio that has been openly critical of the Chief Bratton's "broken windows" style of policing, find themselves quickly isolated politically when the police as an institution start throwing their weight around. People have been protesting because of two clear miscarriages of justice, but also how frequent these injustices take place all over the country, and the whole set of institutional arrangements that produce and reproduce stories like Mike Brown's and Eric Garner's. De Blasio's softer criminalization of the movement—his patronizing 'why don't you all just stay home'—is infuriating and puts demonstrators at further risk, but is ultimately not surprising. Whether he was bullied into making the above statement or not, he has made clear where he stands. The movement doesn't have time to wait, or to get in line behind de Blasio or any other simple-minded person swayed by disingenuous whining from the likes of Giuliani or the police union. This isn't a game, or a 'political debate.' Cops aren't getting killed every day, but young black men are. There is a war going on. There has been a war going on for a very long time. All de Blasio's statements elucidate is that it takes some people longer to fall in line than others.

The Smear Campaign: To Criminalize & Divide the Movement

The extent to which de Blasio chooses to let the NYPD use the death of these two officers as a pretext to politically run the city and militarily 'wage war' in Brooklyn and elsewhere remains to be seen. However, any social movement that lets the police or the mayor determine what their politics and tactics will be is doomed to failure.

Because they know he's good for apologizing on behalf of the 'black community' for things that aren't even real let alone their collective fault, the Right got Al Sharpton to make a statement that validates their delusional fantasies about the dead police officers being a product of the ongoing racial justice movement. Sharpton said:

"We have stressed at every rally and march that anyone engaged in any violence is an enemy to the pursuit of justice for Eric Garner and Michael Brown. We have been criticized at National Action Network for not allowing rhetoric or chanting of violence and would abruptly denounce it at all of our gatherings."

This type of validation of a baseless smear against the movement, and effort to stifle dissent is egregious enough in itself. It is positions like this (as well as other things) that have gotten Sharpton so squarely rejected by many in this movement. However, in a moment and a place where two cops were just killed, the head of the police union is declaring war, and several New York protesters, including members of the Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee are facing charges for alleged assault on undercover police officers, this divisiveness goes far beyond a standard level of simple treachery. The police will gladly use whatever political capital they can muster from these killings to repress and intimidate the movement, possibly starting with those they have in custody and those with pending charges. Principled people not only have an obligation not to feed into this, but to

ready themselves for attacks on the street or in the courts, and to defend those that end up getting targeted by the state. All mass social movements are comprised of people with different politics deploying sometimes different tactics, but towards a general common end. Solidarity may not be sufficient for success, but it is necessary. Movements should never be browbeaten into ineffectiveness to show loyalty to their enemies, who would use violent acts that have no connection to the movement as a pretense for the movement to destroy itself.

This movement has persisted because of the personal risks prominent movement members have taken to keep the movement going, the collective courage of demonstrators to withstand assaults from police for simply marching in the street, and the boldness of demonstrators all over the country who have tirelessly occupied highways and government buildings. Ferguson Action released a statement hours after the shooting in Brooklyn that condemned the murders but called this political maneuvering on the part of the police for what it is: "Today's events are a tragedy in their own right. To conflate them with the brave activism of millions of people across the country is nothing short of cheap political punditry." A demonstration has been called for this coming Tuesday in New York City to shut down 5th Avenue and will surely be of added importance given this tumultuous political situation. The hubris of the police, exploiting their own tragedy to avoid accountability and to thwart peoples' right to protest, may end up driving wedges in the movement, or it may just further mobilize a city tired of being patronized and bullied.

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