

Michael Brown and Eric Garner: Peace and Violence in “American Democracy”

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When the grand jury rendered its non-indictment verdict on the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, protesters from the area converged on the local police department headquarters. They were there to express their outrage and demand that justice be done. The whole world witnessed the occupation of Ferguson by the fully militarized and armed police. It looked more like an invading army than anything else. These armed forces were the only barrier between the people and the police station. It is perfectly understandable that people express their anger against the police and judicial system. While the occupying force protected the police station, individuals were free to loot and burn small local businesses under very dubious circumstances: the jury decision was rendered late at night and no protection at all was offered to the local businesses. Was this done on purpose?

The FBI had already sent “an extra 100 FBI agents to [Ferguson just before the grand jury decision.](#)” The true story behind the arbitrary destruction is not known at this time. In any case, it is now history. These conveniently burned-out buildings and civilian vehicles have been easily converted by the media – and by the Obama administration down to the local authorities in Ferguson and other cities – into the stereotype of what is simply labelled as “violent demonstrations” in order to dampen the spirit of principled resistance. The widely propagated scenes of burning, looting and its aftermath instantly became the archetype of what is painted as typical of noble, militant and conscientious resistance. The anarchist scenario completely overshadows all the perfectly legitimate and courageous forms of action taken by the people against the occupying armed forces positioned in the Ferguson area to protect the police headquarters. The Ferguson protests spread to other cities across the U.S, where on many occasions people faced off with local police forces.

The Ferguson case may generate controversial discussion around the looting, destruction and burning. However, one cannot ignore the important question that it raises regarding protest and just resistance by the people in the face of the state’s use of force to deter people from fighting for their dignity and rights. It is not cut and dry. The U.S. state, in the broad sense of the term, from the federal government to its tentacles in the local state and city authorities, is the purveyor of violence in the U.S. Let us therefore place Ferguson in perspective. By so doing, we can keep in mind the most grotesque manifestation of this violence, as seen in Ferguson, in the form of the heavily militarized police. Its deadly military equipment is funnelled into the local areas by the U.S. federal government and the military. The Ferguson violent occupation was revealed for the world to witness, yet the dismantling of the militarization is *not* on Obama’s agenda. The goal, according to the President, is only to “to make sure that [the program is transparent.](#)”

As for the protestors, what actions are they supposed to carry out to demand that justice be done, if not by resisting the forces that protect the local police? In American democracy, the

right to resist is labelled “violent,” while defending the status quo is considered normal and non-violent.

This contradiction was intensified in the aftermath of the grand jury decision to clear police of the murder of Eric Garner. It proved to be the last straw: his murder, captured on film, was even more blatant than Michael Brown’s. The accumulation of injustice was combined with the fact that it took place in New York City – the centre of many, as the media admit, “icons” of U.S. wealth and the establishment. The New York City movement spread to other major cities in the U.S. The main goal was to paralyze and disrupt. The media placed emphasis on just (but relatively defensive) slogans such as “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” or “I Can’t Breathe” to overshadow the slogans “Shut It Down” and “No Justice, No Peace.” Others raised the slogan: “This Is What Democracy Looks Like.” This is an allusion, consciously or not, to the crying need for political power of the people in the face of a false American democracy representing the status quo through elections in a truncated “two-party system.” What was the purpose of blocking important highways and streets and invading icons of big business to disrupt normal commerce? One protester explained it well: “People who don’t already realize what is happening, maybe they will open their minds a little bit, or people that do realize and don’t care will realize that people are angry [and it’s not OK.](#)”

The mainstream media showered the New York police and city authorities with compliments on their “restraint.” Media had a field day with the New York police’s description of their particular tactic: allowing people “to blow off steam.” Do the police and media perhaps not realize how condescending and arrogant this sounds to the people who courageously demonstrate for hours on end in the street? Obama congratulated NYC authorities and police in their handling of the protests, [which he termed peaceful.](#) What was “peaceful” about the protests New York and Chicago? In both these cities, as well as in others, hundreds were arrested. In Chicago, a “standoff” in front of a police station that was protected by a wall of police was reported to be nonetheless “so far peaceful.” What does “so far peaceful” mean? The assertion is that as long as the people do not defy the police, the situation can be qualified as “peaceful.” The police forces, to the contrary, by their very nature are supposedly “peaceful” in protecting the state, abstracting the armed instrument of the state from the actual system it is meant to defend and protect. Any obvious exception to this rule of police acting “peacefully” is treated as merely an “abuse” that can be camouflaged through some superficial reform, such as “police training”, changing some individuals and faces in positions of authority or even remove some “bad apples”, all in an attempt to stem the people’s anger.

In New York City, several hundred people were arrested two nights in a row. Why? While the charges may be minor, what was their “crime”? Why were they carted off in police vans? In most cases, their “crime” was not obeying orders to refrain from marching in the streets and thus blocking the road and traffic. To strive to limit and forcefully contain demonstrations to the sidewalks, as do the police in New York, is in itself an act of violence even though it may go under the guise of keeping the peace. They are preventing those who try to draw the attention of – as stated by the demonstrator quoted above – first, the people who remain indifferent or aloof from the problem, and, second, those who *are* indeed conscious but have not yet physically joined the movement. These street activities are the only means at their disposal at this time: blocking main arteries, converging on the large, commercial monopolies and temporarily disrupting them. It is completely arbitrary to consider this as violent in any way or a violation of the law. This accusation of “violence” is based on

American democracy and similar systems in other countries. It is meant to protect the status quo. Even if people resist arrest and indeed actively confront authority, they are, in my view, entirely justified.

This warranted intransigence in the face of police arbitrariness was highlighted through an incident in New York on the night of December 4 that was not at all covered by the mainstream media. According to alternative news source AlterNet, about 100 protesters in Manhattan were on the streets at 1 a.m. The police ordered them to disperse, as they were supposedly disrupting “vehicular traffic.” A journalist reported that the demonstrators refused and instead threw glass bottles at the police, resulting in several violent arrests. The police responded by using a Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD) to disperse the demonstrators.

“One person who was present at the scene, Moth Dust, a photographer, said people became aggravated after the LRAD was used and began throwing trash and rocks in the direction of police. She said she was affected by the sound waves.

‘I thought I was fine until I realized I was getting dizzy and migraine was spreading to all over my face,’ she said.

LRADs were used in the first days of unrest in Ferguson Missouri, and have been used by police at protests throughout the world. They were developed by the US military after an insurgent attack on the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000, and were used by the NYPD [New York Police Department] against Occupy Wall Street protesters.

According to Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, ‘The LRAD can reach decibel levels as high as 162. For comparison, a normal conversation is usually 60 decibels, while a lawn mower can reach to 90 decibels. A level of 130 decibels is typically considered the average pain threshold for most humans.’

Furthermore, Informed Health Online [IHO] notes that a jet engine registers at about 140 decibels. Anything at or above this range, IHO explains, ‘is called acoustic trauma. Depending on how long the ears are exposed to the sound and how intense it is, it may damage the eardrum, the middle ear and/or the inner ear. Damage like this is usually temporary, but some hearing loss may remain.’

The head investor and media relations for the LRAD Corporation in San Diego, California, told Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty that the weapon is so precise that those ‘standing behind or next to’ the device can hardly hear it. However, the YouTube footage shows dozens of people scurrying away from the sound blasts, which [can be heard clearly on film.](#)”

In another episode, on the night of December 6–7, this one in Berkeley, California, a violent confrontation took place. The media in a chorus headlined that the demonstration by mainly University of California Berkeley campus students “turned violent.” What happened? A wall of armed police was deployed to confront the demonstrators protesting directly against the Berkeley police headquarters. The demonstrators on the street were blocked. The so-called peaceful police tried to disperse the crowd that resisted. This is one account, by an intern minister at the First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco, published in a local newspaper:

“The police began walking forward and in 2-3 seconds were pressed up against us with their batons held parallel between them and us. I shouted ‘Be calm, be calm, we’re peaceful!’ And they kept walking forward. I looked to the left and a police officer had begun jabbing a protester with the end of his baton. I turned around to retreat and passed a woman who had fallen and was being trampled. I bent down to pick her up under one armpit while another woman grabbed her other arm. As we were lifting her backwards I saw an officer raise his baton over my shoulder and was struck on the back of the head as I was bent forward. My vision momentarily blacked out and I saw stars. I put my hand to the back of my head and started running. I felt a welt rise immediately and blood ran down [my neck and covered my hand.](#)”

The situation and the reports from Berkeley are still ongoing at the time of writing. According to the established logic, the “turning violence” buzzwords are only applied when the people resist orders to disperse, but is not suitable for the *orders to disperse* backed by the *armed police*. In the same report quoted above, the slogans rhythmically chanted by the protesters consisted of, among others, “Whose streets? Our streets!” and “Hey cops, you can’t hide, [we charge you with genocide.](#)” In comments posted on the newspaper’s blog, some people raise the possibility that the looting that took place that night in Berkeley by a splinter anarchist group could well have been organized by the state’s infiltrators to discredit the demonstration.

Based on the New York and Berkeley reports, it may seem difficult at first glance to distinguish between peace and violence: who are the perpetrators of violence and who stands and acts in favour of peace? However, these articles accompanied by photos and videos bring to the fore two points.

The first is that the right, and indeed the obligation, to oppose injustice is an inalienable right that goes beyond the niceties of the superfluous trappings of democracy considered in the abstract. One either recognizes this or does not.

Second, behind the veneer of American democracy lies the real nature of a state that is based on extreme militarism and aggression. While the struggle to counter the injustices committed against Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and in favour of dignity for the people, was being played out in the streets of America, Obama swore in the new Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter, on December 5, 2014. Obama said on that occasion that the U.S. military is “the greatest fighting force in the history of the world.” Ashton returned the compliment by saying that he will serve the [“greatest fighting force the world has ever known.”](#) This military is increasingly known on the world scale as an aggressive force leaving death, destruction and torture in the wake of its attempt to impose American democracy on a global scale. The military efforts of the U.S. abroad are an extension of the violence that pervades U.S. society domestically, from the widespread use of guns to the murder of blacks and suppression of demonstrators by police forces, as the New York and Berkeley examples above indicates.

Were these incidents in New York and Berkeley exceptions? As long as the resistance continues, people can expect more of the same. Thus, there is the need to deepen and extend defiance, while ensuring not to fall prey to the mainstream media misinformation and political pressures regarding peace and violence in American democracy.

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Cuba's neighbours under consideration are the U.S., Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. Arnold can be followed on Twitter [@Arnold_August](#).

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