REFLECTIONS ON COUNTER-REPRESSION

Cover image: Tricontinental Institute for Social Research,
“Culture as a Weapon of Struggle: The Medu Art Ensemble and Southern African Liberation”
thetricontinental.org/dossier-71-medu-art-ensemble

Inside image: Ismail Shammout
poster for the Palestinian Liberation Organization, 1970
(note: the white Arabic text in the green background lists the names of villages, towns and cities in Palestine)
www.palestineposterproject.org/poster/overcome

in dialogue with counter-repression proposals from Unity of the Fields and scenes dot noblogs dot org

Typeset in
GARAMOND
CELANDINE

Don't Be Careful, Be Quick!
Reflections on Anti-Repression

Settle your quarrels, come together, understand the reality of our situation, understand that fascism is already here, that people are already dying who could be saved, that generations more will die or live poor butchered half-lives if you fail to act. Do what must be done, discover your humanity and your love in revolution. Pass on the torch. Join us, give up your life for the people.

— George Jackson

So there were only two directions for me to go. One was over the wall... And the other was up against my captors.

— Ed Mead

What prevents us from engaging in action? In moments where revolutionary, transformative, and militant direct action is required—no, demanded—of us by our complicity in genocide, what prevents us from taking the leap from intention into act? What prevents us from joining the struggle where it ought to be waged—in the belly of the beast? The reasons for our apparent helplessness have, of course, material conditions. The possibility for something different—for an end to genocide, an end to imperialism and colonialism, an end to capitalism, and for actions that contribute to the real movement of their abolition—is a concrete possibility, and all the pigs in the world are lined up at the horizon of this world to ensure its closure or enclosure, to limit the possibility for otherwise, to limit the possibility for action.

When we interrogate material conditions that limit possibility, we unravel and reveal the centuries-long history of the defeats of revolutionary movements more determined and equipped than we who inherit the wake of the world that defeated them, which is rushing headlong into imperialist terror and apocalypse. We are faced now, in this moment, with our current lack of organization due to these historical defeats. We are faced with the state's

violent repressive apparatus grown stronger from them. We are faced with the state's recuperative and co-optive mechanisms for rerouting militancy back into the constraints of the possible. We are faced, too, with our subjective internalization of the repression of the possibility for action—the cops in our head.

If we examine these subjective impediments to action we confront the innermost structures of fear, narcissism, and "self"-preservation. Witnessing endless suffering, we witness, too, the marks of our complicity and passivity, which, instead of eliciting an invigorating sympathy that compels us into action, more often induce guilt, shame, evasion—induce a desire to look away. Fear is the edifice of our false consciousness—our wrong life in a wrong world. Deeper than the fear of losing life or limb, the fear of being relegated to the inhuman conditions of jail or prison, or the fear of losing the ephemeral comforts our complicity or passivity may afford, there is at the root of our inaction the fear of surrendering what structures our self and our world:

our separation from and elevation above abject terror, that is, our immunity from the repression of others so long as we fail to act and join them, so long as we confine and restrict ourselves now by fearing future confinement.

Every revolutionary has had to face the constraints of what is possible—the point is to break out of them. We are disorganized, we lack unity, we are unready—at some point, so were they, if they were anyone. We live in a police and prison state, our friends have been to jail, to prison, or are facing charges—they outnumber the stars, our imprisoned comrades of the past. We have a future to lose, careers, families, life plans—what future? These are our vain capitulations to an ongoing terror; our betrayal of those who have no future; our postponement to faraway of facing our shared fate—struggle or nothing; our submission to the prospect of there being no future at all that can be called worthy of life; and, anyways, if we fight, is it not from a deep sense of devotion to the ones we love dispersed to every suffering being, past, present, and future?

By repression we mean anything that limits or contains the possibilities of revolutionary action. This includes the violent repressive arms of the state: police, jails, prisons, courts, etc. This includes the political, economical, and ideological consistency of day-to-day reproduction that subjects us to belonging so long as we do not rebel. But this also includes the recuperative and co-optive forces of the state or that aid the state, or recuperative and co-optive tendencies within them: "progressive" non-profits & NGO's, "yellow" or business unions & union leadership, the dominant right-wing party lines of political organizations like the DSA, PSL, CPUSA, etc. Repression also includes ourselves when we orient our analyses of possible action towards the fear of consequences rather than the effectiveness and expediency of action. Repression also includes ourselves when we fail to act according to what the moment requires of us.

When we limit what is possible for ourselves, this is no different than if our enemies and oppressors do it for us—the outcome is the same . . . action becomes inaction, the present continues in its violent inertia of terror, people are dying who could otherwise have been saved.

Most often we are acquainted with "anti-repression" as the framework of activist tools for avoiding repression or dealing with it when it comes. These are the ubiquitous and extremely helpful tools of jail support (bail funds, legal aid, collective defense, etc.), political prisoner support (commissary funds, letter writing, noise demos, etc.), security culture (internet security, interpersonal security like 'vetting' or 'need-to-know', community bulwarks against snitching or collaboration, etc.), and anything that helps to keep us safe when repression comes or helps to limit the exposure to repression when engaging in action. Oftentimes, however, in our experiences in different radical milieus, these frameworks, though containing indispensable means of protecting each other, have obverse effects that contribute to the limiting of possibility and inadvertently repress what action emerges despite it.

The risk calculus we too often use centers individual concerns of "safety," "vulnerability," or "arrestability" as a means of avoiding repression rather than the effectiveness and impact of the action against capitalism, imperialism, etc.,

that is, the means with which to engage in the action with the utmost militancy and get away with it, or of considering if we would be willing to accept what comes if we do not. There is no logic of "safety" or "vulnerability" that will span the chasm between the perceived safety of inaction and the revolutionary's acceptance of the possibility of repression. This is not to glorify sacrifice, just to note that all of us will have to or have already answered for ourselves the question of the importance to us of liberation's possibility. Once again, this is not to glorify sacrifice, just to note that engaging in revolutionary action means that prison or death are real possibilities, but the real alternative to action is less inviting than a fight. This is and is not a moral question, it is more of a question of necessity.

Further, these logics do not keep people safe, let alone the most vulnerable. *We are not safe here and now.* If we think we are safe we are either lying to ourselves or separating ourselves, elevating ourselves above, and passively accepting the day-to-day violence that maintains capitalist imperialism. If we feel safe, that is because we have exempted ourselves from action. By projecting a false sense of safety or security that encourages inaction and de-escalation, these logics of risk endanger everyone—both those who remain inactive and the militant bold. By discouraging autonomy, people who seek escalation are told they're endangering others, while people who are alienated from any risk, instead of staying out of action, hold others back or are caught up non-consensually in repression when it comes. The most militant revolutionaries, anyways, have always been the most vulnerable—because revolutions, if they are revolutions, are revolutions of the oppressed.

When repression is presented both as a possibility that can be avoided by inaction and also as a disastrous or unintended inevitability of action that catches us unprepared, as it quite often is, those who are oriented from fear revert to admonishing those who fight against the constraints of what is possible, indeed to presenting such militant action as undesirable or harmful, or even worse, to unconditionally accepting those same constraints as the only thing that is possible. Our task as potential revolutionaries, potential comrades to the fighting dead and the living fighters, is, contrariwise, to reject any and all constrains to action, to open possibility, to expand conflict, as we fight with the

past for the future. Anti-repression, in this framework, we understand to mean something that can only be accomplished through an active engagement in revolutionary struggle.

The most important thesis for us in this proposal for a militant anti-repression framework is that action, escalation, and the development of militancy keeps us safe, not inaction, fear, capitulation to the constraints of the present, or the repression of ourselves and our possibilities of action on behalf of the state.

Three theses on repression:

1. Repression is inevitable

However we aim to protect ourselves against repression, it is false to think that by de-escalating action or not acting at all, we will be safe from it. Repression is an inevitable part of the revolutionary process; it is, as George Jackson says, "the always-to-be-expected defense-attack reflex of the beleaguered, toothless tiger." Can the state seriously be challenged without a response? The state responds to all threats: with repression, whether in the form of violence, recuperation, or the fear it inflicts upon those it discourages from action or deputizes into the repressive apparatus themselves. Whatever we do, if we are or are not a threat, they will repress us—so let us be a threat!

2. Repression is already here

Whether we argue that fascism is the terror and violence of settler-colonialism and imperialism come home or is the maintenance of internal colonies stratified through racial capitalism and reform—both of which are true—, if we think repression is merely a possibility of action and not a present actuality, then we have not yet joined the oppressed in this country and in this world, who experience the worst of it in their day-to-day lives and in their fight for liberation—in fact we maintain our separation from and elevation above them. Hear George Jackson: "I've lived with repression every moment of my life, a repression so formidable that any movement on my part can only bring relief, the respite of a small victory or the release of death."

3. Repression exposes

In the concrete stage that we find ourselves in now, where underground attacks are proliferating and a growing contingent of the above-ground mass movements are toeing the line against legality and their recuperative and co-optive leadership, we cannot let the militants who breach the constraints of possibility into a horizon of liberation be isolated. In the opening stages of revolutionary activity when the disorganized left postpones conflict because it deems itself or the "masses" unready (neither will ever be ready), it ignores the fact that revolutionary conditions do not make revolutions, revolutionaries make revolutionary conditions, and the conditions have never ceased to be present. There will always be those who seek to do what the historical moment requires of them. Let us not repress them or ourselves, and instead, as George Jackson says, "draw violence from the beast . . . demonstrating for the world to examine just exactly what terms their rule is predicated on—their power to organize violence, our acquiescence."

Three theses on anti-repression

1. Militancy keeps us safe

Whatever we do, we will face repression. Here and now, the oppressed in the internal and external colonies, along with militants and freedom fighters from both, are facing repression. Repression exposes the violence capitalist imperialism / settler-colonialism is founded upon and that maintain it. As long as we exist in a state of class peace, where this violence is postponed (we're not ready to face it), displaced (it's not for us, but for them), or suppressed (they deserved it, it's justified), that violence will expand and intensify to annihilate any revolutionary threat as a warning to all who may consider resistance.

Class war, class conflict—it is our task to intensify conflict, to develop the terrain of conflictuality, and to expand and intensify it as a call to all who may resist that resistance is possible. We cannot wait for a vanguard party, for a general strike, for a spontaneous insurrection—we have to attack now with whatever weapons we have in hand, whether individually or in clandestine

cadre, or in whatever mass action that can sabotage the imperialist war machine, disrupt its economic foundations, and fight back against the pigs that will try to stop us. Nothing is more radicalizing than the revelation of the concealed class war behind the apparent class peace.

We will be safe, collectively, because the possibility for liberation is only kept open as a concrete possibility in the development of active conflict. We will be safe, collectively, because we will not accept repression, we will fight it—in the streets, in the factories, in the courts, in jail, and in prison. Anti-repression only works when there is an ongoing and expanding militant revolutionary movement to back it up. If there is not one, then militants will be isolated, political prisoners will be abandoned, and repression will be directed solely to the few who dared to struggle, while those who condemned the militants in order to protect themselves will wilt into the background. The only way forward is through.

2. Don't be careful, be quick!

When evaluating action, we must be attuned towards three considerations: first, what will do the most impact with the limited ammo that we have; second, are we willing to accept the worst consequences that might arise; third, what will increase our chances of getting away with it. Frameworks of risk, safety, or vulnerability are grossly inadequate for assessing any of these considerations; know your rights workshops can only go so far. In anti-repression more emphasis should be directed towards ways that we can take meaningful risks together! These ways should be oriented towards mass and individual actions to expand their effectiveness and impact, to avoid getting caught, and to develop a culture of escalating action when repression comes in solidarity with those behind bars. Repression will come, surely, but it will only work if it stops us.

Disseminating information about counter-counter-intelligence in a secure way for individual actions: how to remove fingerprints, avoid DNA contamination, plan get-aways, etc.; and for mass actions: how to fight back against police or fascist terror, de-arrest, avoid surveillance, etc.—is more crucial for anti-

repression than concerns before action that limit ourselves in advance. There is also need to create more infrastructure for distributing communiqués broadly and securely, for publicizing militant direct action outside of state media, for researching and casing targets, and for discussing and learning from previous actions. Such infrastructure will help us move away from inaction and from symbolic actions and arrests towards meaningful and impactful disruptions and sabotage of the capitalist-imperialist war machine.

Most anti-repression organizing is usually distanced from militancy by a degree of legal separation. That is, in much of the infrastructure of jail support, bail funds, and legal aid that facilitate the anti-repression frameworks we are most familiar with, a language of legality and "rights" prevail over consideration of material impact. Orienting action from a framework of legal "rights", as much of the tame history of "non-violent direct action" shows us, confines us in advance within the constraints of the state's repressive apparatus with actions that are constructed to be legible to the state and to the courts. If we instead orient our milieus towards effectiveness, impact, and infrastructures of cover and clandestinity, we will be much better equipped to continue to engage in and to expand the struggle.

3. Militants together keep us safe

There is a further consideration in the evaluation of action that we must introduce: community. When militants are enmeshed with relationships of care and accountability within a wider community engaged in radical struggle, we are more likely to weather the repression that comes and fight more boldly against the police and the prisons for the freedom of our imprisoned comrades in the wider fight for liberation. When we are accountable to each other in struggle, repression will not break us but will force us to forge even stronger connections and even deeper capacities to attack.

When community is absent and the fear that some among "us" have of repression brings them to condemn militants who break out of legality out of a misplaced and selfish desire to avoid repression themselves, snitching and state collaboration, or else inaction and de-escalation, prevail. In the context of the

WE SHALL OVERCOME
WE SHALL OVERCOME
WE SHALL OVERCOME

WE SHALL OVERCOME
WE SHALL OVERCOME
WE SHALL OVERCOME

Green Scare, a CIA-sponsored counter-insurgency initiative against eco-saboteurs in the Pacific Northwest, where a majority of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) defendants collaborated with the state against their erstwhile comrades, an absence of community accountability in struggle, a prioritization of petit-bourgeois personal lives above a struggle that most had previously left behind, and a lack of personal commitment to liberation can explain the inordinate betrayal that left a radical community fractured for generations in its wake.

Taking genuine care of and with one another is a primary means of resisting repression—developing in the cracks of this burning world some fledgling form of what we desire and which we can defend at all costs. Developing trust, accountability, and daring is something that can only developed together but is also something that can only be developed in struggle—together! We must resist the urge to isolate ourselves and stay in the struggle, demonstrating to ourselves and to others that resistance is possible! Isolation from a community in struggle is inaction. As George Jackson says, "Discovering ways of meeting and overcoming resistance, demonstrating to ourselves that 'we can,' is a fundamental antecedent to the growth of revolutionary consciousness because we'll be under attack every step of the way." And certainly we will attack every step of the way.

Loving learning laboring with a few comrades oh won't you harbor me?
...
We are cozy, cuddly, armed and dangerous,
and we will raze the fucking prisons to the ground.

PNW, June 2024

* George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye.* "The only effective challenge to power is one that is broad enough to make isolation impossible, and intensive enough to cause repression to affect the normal life style of as many members of the society as possible. By compromising and playing at class war, we lose. If some effective means of threatening to wield power is not used in the opening stages of revolutionary activity, repression will concentrate itself on the vanguard elements only, when the ideal situation is for the people to feel the raw essence of power. Nothing can bend consciousness more effectively than a false arrest, a no-knock invasion, careless, panic-stricken gunfire. These will frighten some, anger others. Common sense alone tells me whom the people will turn their anger against. Perhaps for a short time they will be angry at us, but since the pig is a pig, it won't be long before this anger is channeled in the right direction."

* George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye.* "Born to a premature death, a menial, subsistence-wage worker, odd- job man, the cleaner, the caught, the man under hatches, without bail—that's me, the colonial victim. Anyone who can pass the civil service examination today can kill me tomorrow. Anyone who passed the civil service examination yesterday can kill me today with complete immunity. I've lived with repression every moment of my life, a repression so formidable that any movement on my part can only bring relief, the respite of a small victory or the release of death. In every sense of the term, in every sense that's real, I'm a slave to, and of, property."

* George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye.* "Have you grasped the significance of the backlash? It has stung the fascist. The people are in foment, all of them, of all persuasion. They don't dig midnight or dawn raiding parties, bullets with steel jackets, cowardly pigs perched upon their roofs, the same gases manufactured for use against the Vietnamese Liberators blowing back into their faces: Repression. Do you see the effect it has on the uncommitted? Comrade, Repression exposes. By drawing violence from the beast, the vanguard party is demonstrating for the world to examine just exactly what terms their rule is predicated on— their power to organize violence, our acquiescence."

* from a poem in which a bullet was enclosed authenticating a communiqué from the George Jackson Brigade on International Women's Day, March, 1976 announcing their successful jailbreak of a comrade from police custody. cf. *Creating a Movement with Teeth: A Documentary History of the George Jackson Brigade*

There are many different forms of direct action, some more effective than others at different points in history, but in conjunction with other forms of protest, direct action can make the movement for change more effective by opening avenues of resistance that are not easily co-opted or controlled by the state. Unfortunately, people within the movement weaken their own actions by failing to understand and support the diverse tactics available. Instead of forming a united front, some activists see the sabotage of destructive property by protestors as being on the same level as the violence of the state and corporations. This equation is no more accurate than saying that the peace of a concentration camp is the same kind of peace that one finds in a healthy society. If we accept that all violence is the same, then we have agreed to limit our resistance to whatever the state and corporations find acceptable. We have become pacified. Remaining passive in the face of today's global human and environmental destruction will create deeper scars than those resulting from the mistakes we will inevitably make by taking action.

— *Ann Hansen*

"Settle your quarrels, come together, understand the reality of our situation, understand that fascism is already here, that people are already dying who could be saved, that generations more will die or live poor butchered half-lives if you fail to act. Do what must be done, discover your humanity and your love in revolution. Pass on the torch. Join us, give up your life for the people."

— George Jackson