Queers With Guns

A Model For Queering American Gun Culture

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Introduction

There's a lot of discussion nowadays in relation to both the rights of marginalized people and gun reform due to the consistent problem with mass shootings in America and the rest of the world, as well as the many intersecting problems made clearly evident in the shooting of Amir Locke by the police. Many of the victims of mass shootings as well as police shootings, especially by white supremacists, have been those most marginalized within society. Civilian shootings had dropped off almost entirely because of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns. They seem to be coming back in full swing, however the Biden administration is taking a pre-emptive strike against "rising gun violence" in preparation for the rise in gun crimes that is occurring due to the country opening back up. Of course, these actions mean more funding for police. This will undo much of the work that activists have done over the past 2 years to defund the police and put their power closer to being accountable to their communities.

Meanwhile, there is a rising tide of fascism within the United States that has no signs of disintegrating on its own after the ousting of Trump from the presidency by the right-wing Democrat Joe Biden. He has proven to either maintain trump-era policies on the down-low, or openly break what little promises he did make on the campaign trail. There is a rise in hate crimes still happening within the US, with black people and now Asians being the most at risk during this time, among many others. What is there to do with these many crises happening all at once? What should we do in the face of the state establishment flopping on itself in the face of greater autocracy? This essay seeks to partially answer that question, mainly within the purview of guns, violence, police, what could replace said police (along with many other things) and how we might do so from a queer anarchist perspective.

This essay's purpose is to convince the reader, whom may or may not be queer or otherwise marginalized, that we cannot trust the US government (especially the police and military, but not exclusively) to protect us against the rising tide of fascism and vigilante hatred within American society from an intersectional queer perspective. I also seek to supply possible alternative(s) to the current model of community defense that the police fill across this country, so that we as queer people don't just deconstruct the current system, but also build the foundations for something to replace it as we do so.

Batons and Bullets: A Brief History of American Policing

There have been very few LGBT+ activists in America who have actively defended the many racist police murders of black people that have caused the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. Many liberal queer people stood side by side with black activists in holding those officers accountable for what they did. This stance against police brutality, however is not deep enough as to support police abolition within largely liberal LGBT+ circles and groups. This opens them to criticism for believing and mainly pushing for reform of the police rather than complete abolition like many within the black community are still fighting for. This section will catalogue a brief history of the police and the US government's role in the lives of its subjects.

The modern police force came into being in a multitude of ways across the United States, like many institutions in this country. Many of the first constabularies within the American colonies

and then the United States were formed to mainly subjugate indigenous people in the defense of European and American colonialism, as well as slave patrols that sought to capture self-freed slaves and punish them before heading back to their master. Once slavery was reformed through the 13th Amendment, the formations of the modern police force made vagrancy and loitering laws that disproportionately targeted black people who had just gotten out of slavery with no reconciliation. These impoverished and often homeless people were forced to perform slave labor at the hands of the states that owned those bodies as part of their imprisonment. This trend has exploded with the rise of mass incarceration that especially hits the black community.

In the north, state troopers in Philadelphia were actively modeled on the white supremacy and colonialism of the American Constabulary in the Philippines, actively seeking to keep workers (especially immigrants) from organizing within the mines of Philadelphia[1]. We can see that the very origins of modern policing, and policing in general, stem from white supremacy, settler colonialism, imperialism, and enforcing the interests of the owning class over that of collective bargaining by the working class. These institutions are also known for overpolicing working class neighborhoods in general, which disproportionately affect black and other colonized working class people due to things like redlining and banking discrimination. These institutions were never meant to be in the common interest, but mainly serve to protect the interests of those who own property and are at the top of these social hierarchies.

There's even explicit legal admission by the US government that police officers and government offices aren't legally bound to protect others from harm, as court decisions like Warren v. District of Columbia show[2]. More recently the trial of the security officer who blatantly ran away from the Parkland Shooter a few years ago shows how little cops are legally bound to "protect and serve." The court ruled that he had no legal duty to protect the children he was stationed to protect in case of situations exactly like these[3]. This isn't even getting into all of the overt white supremacist, patriarchal, classist, and ableist violence that the police systematically enforce and protect in the modern day that they actually do as a part of their job.

The reason why queer people should care about what cops do to working class people, especially the homeless with vagrancy and loitering laws is because queer people (and especially queer people of color) are already disproportionately likely to be working class and homeless due to non-supportive family members or guardians[4]. Another important intersection that should be considered by queer people in regards to their relationship to the police is that of sex workers. Plenty of sex workers, especially queer sex workers experience the humiliating, patronizing violence and regulation put up against them for the sake of their "protection" at the hands of cops and the rulers who set those laws that cops enforce. There is already a deeper queer analysis of sex work by C. B. Daring in the collection of essays called "Queering Anarchism"[5].

Why should we as queer people rely on such a rampantly authoritarian system of social control to protect us, especially those within our communities that are facing direct violence and harm from these supposed "protectors?" Who would those people with badges and a gun at their

[1] https://plsonline.eku.edu/sites/plsonline.eku.edu/files/the-history-of-policing-in-us.pdf

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warren_v._District_of_Columbia

[3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2018/12/21/us-judge-says-law-enforcement-officers-had-no-legal-duty-protect-parkland-students-during-mass-shooting/

[4] https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/lgbt-homelessness-us/

[5] http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/c-b-daring-j-rogue-deric-shannon-and-abbey-volcano-queering-anarchism#toc65

hip really be protecting? The answer would be cisheteronormative white and able-bodied queer people, especially those of which who are already economically privileged and can access upper class mobility that many working class and otherwise marginalized queer people cannot. None of us are free until all of us are free, we cannot leave parts of our communities behind for the sake of maintaining the ”normalcy” that is police.

Many people have posited to defund the police and replace them with mostly ”non-lethal” EMT workers who deal with calls that don't deal with weapons. This is a step in the right direction, but still doesn't address the underlying problem with the monopoly on the use of force held by the government and the white supremacist history of policing in general. The case of Elijah McClain is a clear example that you don't need a gun or even a police officer to kill a black man who is inherently seen as a threat using the authority of the state. It wasn't a bullet that ended his life and extinguished his soul, but a deadly injection by these so-called ”less lethal” EMT workers as he was begging for his life and apologizing as he was being killed. Eric Garner was choked to death for selling loose cigarettes, he wasn't shot. George Floyd was knelt upon for 9 minutes, he wasn't shot. It's not the use of guns itself that is the problem, it's the fact that they're police or act like police and can determine what the law is at any given moment and enforce that law upon you with violence. If they actually misapply the law they were citing, you will then have to go through years of court charades and thousands upon thousands of dollars to prove that they were in the wrong. And even if that's proven, the government can STILL give the cop little to no consequence for their actions through qualified immunity, even though they are the ones who can determine how the laws are enacted and enforced while on the job. This is all done without any direct oversight from the communities that they enforce their laws upon, with only bureaucratic husks in local and city councils sleepily reacting to the people's demand for justice with perhaps one of the committing officers getting a jail sentence at best, but nothing to actually prevent this kind of behavior from happening within the system of policing in the future.

This is because the system isn't broken and in need of fixing, it's working exactly how it's intended to work. It's not a bug or a glitch, but a feature. This system needs to be abolished entirely in order to make a better path of justice, one that is actively drawn by and for the community itself. But how would we go about that?

Queer Critiques of Gun Culture

With all of this said, one might ask, ”Is this lady going to unironically parrot the Good Guy with a Gun narrative like many conservatives and libertarians do? Is she just going to tell everyone to get guns and think the problem is solved?” To put it simply, no. I don't have anywhere close to the same views as people like the Pink Pistols or some queer conservatives. I don't reductively implore everyone to just get a gun individually and think it will apply to everyone or think that's the solution to fighting such a massively intrenched system of violence and domination. There is a lot that is deeply wrong with the way Americans use this hyper-individualist line of thinking in their gun culture.

To start with the most obvious problems, many gun groups both online and in person center around the views and opinions of very reactionary conservative men, or one of their marginalized tokens who parrot the same talking points. Many people within these communities use their

guns as a symbol of power and yearning to dominate others. I see so many people online, especially conservative gun owners, talk about how much they would love to have a burglar come into their house so they can shoot them with an array of weapons at their disposal. This was especially bad during the racial uprisings that happened almost 2 years ago, where many of these conservatives fearmongered about these people who were grieving the loss of their loved ones and tired of playing within the system that keeps killing them. They talked about how they would gladly shoot any "rioter" that came to their hometown and tried to "destroy property" or "steal." These ways of viewing their weapons perpetuate a very deep level of white supremacist and patriarchal social domination, from this deep need to show their supposed strength and capacity for disproportionate violence at a moment's notice that just so happens to be targeted at black people fighting for justice. This is the definition of white supremacist machismo culture, and it isn't exclusive to the right wing and fascists. Such patriarchal yearning to dominate others or to use these weapons as symbols of their capacity to kill can be seen throughout armed leftist spaces as well.

Many people would object to my characterization of American gun communities, saying that there's a level of feminism in having women protect themselves from predatory men by giving them "the great equalizer." This can be a very liberatory and empowering thing to encourage women to do on paper. The problem with this is that many gun groups and communities think that this is the best and only way to solve such broad issues, and never address the more implicit, systemic problems of patriarchy in society. They only focus on the most obvious, violent, and overt impositions of power by men over women and don't seem to critically analyze the roots of where that mindset and therefore action come from. It seeks to individualize the problem of patriarchy by just telling women to get a gun in order to stop any attacker, when not every woman can get a gun, and the threats women face aren't always the man following her to her car at night.

This problem doesn't just apply to patriarchy within these communities, but to people who are victims of systemic violence in general. The answer to the problem within most American gun communities isn't to advocate for or build a better system to replace the one currently victimizing them, but instead to just get a gun and shoot at anyone who might want to hurt them. As with women and patriarchy, it individualizes the problem many marginalized groups face, or even just people in general under the current economic system of capitalism. Without this critical analysis of the world and the social interactions they participate in, they instead externalize it to being solved by "getting a gun." These gun communities are bound to keep reproducing the capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist, cisheteronormative, and ableist structures that keep all of us down within society if they maintain to have that lens within their popular structures. As journalist Sam Levin[6] points out in a piece talking about his interview with the President of the Pink Pistols:

"As Nicki demonstrated how she would have stopped the Orlando shooter if she was armed at Pulse, I understood the painfully depressing truth of the Pink Pistols' message. They accept gun violence as normal, promote a grotesque culture of firearms, and blame LGBT people for showing up to nightclubs unarmed. And if I learned anything from my trip to Target Masters, it's that there's nothing empowering about loading a gun and firing back."

[6] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/23/lgbt-gun-rights-orlando-shooting-pink-pistols

This isn't a problem that gun communities have alone within America, many social institutions suffer from this exact same lack of awareness of all of these systems, this is just my criticism within the context of how most gun communities operate, including some left leaning, explicitly radical or even revolutionary organizations.

Telling anyone who experiences marginalization and violence for being a member of a certain social group to simply get a gun and shoot at whatever seemingly threatens them also alienates a wide range of people who are at their core sympathetic to armed self-defense. There are many people who simply don't want to or cannot use firearms to defend themselves. Whether it be due to a physical disability, mental health issues, previous trauma in regard to gun violence in their lives, or they simply don't feel comfortable with firearms as a way to defend themselves, people have valid reasons to be uncomfortable with using firearms or be uncomfortable around people who have firearms. It's up to those who have those weapons to respect the boundaries that others have and work with them if they ever wish to have those same people respect their boundaries. Respect is a two-way street. Having firearms is just as much about the safety and comfort of the people around them as it is the safety and comfort of the person who has the firearm. Calling people who aren't comfortable having firearms or being around firearms "snowflakes" and calling any criticisms by them "liberal nonsense" is exactly why there is a growing movement away from firearm ownership, and even to start banning certain types of firearms that are coveted and fetishized for their capacity to kill people (*cough* AR-15 *cough*).

Queering Gun Culture

Now that we have those criticisms in mind and the assurance that I am not seeking to individualize the problems of marginalized people by just telling people to "get guns," let's discuss how we can change American gun culture (or to use queer theorist terms, "queer" it) to help suit not only marginalized people in the here and now, but also build the foundations for a better society in the future.

So, how does one go about queering American gun culture? One way in which American gun culture should be queered is by de-emphasizing individualist and ultimately harmful ways of viewing armed self-defense and putting it towards free association and community self-defense, especially by and for those most affected by such violence. It can be done in a much more traditional way as in having open militias and organizations in the same vein as the Black Panthers and other radical liberation groups and providing spaces for queer lives while also actively and openly defending ourselves against queerphobic violence both by vigilantes and also by the police. These organizations can for example provide services for queer youth who get estranged by their family or guardians for being queer, like safe houses or free health clinics, especially during a massive pandemic that is disproportionately affecting working class people. We can give legal or other professional services for disabled queer people who are often left out to dry within the queer liberation struggle. We could be giving security for protests in regards to not just queer issues, but also to intersectional issues as a whole like the black panthers famously did. This can be used to help allow the queer community to become less reliant on the systems of police and military violence to maintain peace and solve problems within their communities. Through this, we can look to stand in solidarity with the most marginalized both within and without through direct action. It is important, however, that these organizations aren't controlled by a centralized

bureaucracy or vanguard party like the Black Panthers. There should be no separation between those that are being protected and those that are protecting them within these communities, and the protectors should have direct democratic oversight from those that are being protected. This factor ultimately led to the downfall and splintering of the BPP under the pressures of Counter-intelligence Programs under the weight of their very centralized and lack of direct control by the people. We must learn from the lessons taught by black anarchic radicals like Lorenzo Ervin, Ashanti Alston, and Kuwasi Balagoon among others who came from the Black Panther Party and take what worked and what didn't into this new context of organization for this better world to be possible.

One might ask about the vast majority of gun owners in America, those that are perpetuating this social system. How can we help change things within those communities? This is where a decentralized, democratic, and community-centered organization comes into play again. We should have organizations that are led by and help support marginalized people and even using firearms to do so when necessary, but we should also have those organizations directly involved with the communities around them and have directly democratic council structures that will control these organizations. When those who have such privileges see these organizations that not only help the marginalized and the oppressed, but also the community at large, it can help confront the deeply embedded biases that they have been taught their whole lives living within the current gun culture. It's different to talk to someone individually as a marginalized person about these issues. They can easily dismiss you as the caricature that they've always given to those who don't fall in line with the gun culture status quo: a liberal snowflake who wants to take everyone's guns away. But it's much harder to ignore and dismiss entire organizations led by those oppressed people and helping their local community, and potentially being part of a larger movement that ultimately helps that person out and show them that a better world is possible. Action as well as revolutionary education is what can help turn these people who were once willing participants in the current gun culture into accomplices in the larger struggle for liberation. There is a great set of writings that talks about how one can help construct such a directly democratic system that I highly recommend by Daniel Baryon[7][8].

Conclusion

I want to be clear on certain things before folks start making criticisms of this work. These recommendations and points are not going to fit every political context, especially outside of the United States. The point of anarchist political philosophy and practice is to incentivize experimentation and to find what works within your local context. I hope this work at least started to answer some questions about queer liberation and helped you understand where queer radicals like me are coming from.

We cannot sit idly by and watch the capitalist state structure tear up our communities and watch those most affected by it continue to be brutalized by thugs in badges that occupy where we live. We need to be building a better world, not just for queer people but for everyone who is oppressed under this system. We cannot, like many LGBT moderates that are going into politics, have queerness shaped and co-opted into the capitalist state structure and be used to oppress

[7] https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anark-constructing-the-revolution#toc1]
[8] https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/daniel-baryon-after-the-revolution]

other marginalized groups with the likes of Pete Buttigieg or conservative LGBT politicians. They are essentially political tokens to the right wing on most issues and use their queerness as a bludgeon against any claims that the organizations they participate in are systemically oppressive and fundamentally wrong.

It is clear that the proliferation of such rulers will not lead to the liberation of queer people, just as much as "black faces in high places"[9] helped liberate black or other colonized people, nor has neoliberal or "girlboss" feminism liberated women from these patriarchal social structures[10]. As Kuwasi Balagoon[11] puts it:

"When a gay group protests lack of police protection by making an alliance with police to form a gay task force, they ain't making a stand against the system, they are joining it. Putting more power in the hands of those who attack them for being what they are in the first place. Those women's organizations with members with underpaid Black, Puerto Rican, and Mexican maids who decided to vote differently when the Equal Rights Amendment was defeated can't be called left, just as Blacks mobilizing to field a presidential candidate ain't left. Left is the land and means of production in the hands of the masses, and right is land and the means of production in the hands of a few pigs."

We need to be working towards a much more radical vision of the future if we want to make fundamental changes that impact peoples' lives for the better. If we continue on the path of queer folks imbedding themselves deeper and deeper into the web of these systems that keep all of us under its thumb, we will only have a worse world ahead of us and freedom will ultimately become all but impossible. The only realm of escape would be dreams of becoming the dominator as we grind ourselves into dust under the pressure of this death machine. As we take our last breaths we will still think, "Just one more, just keep working and you'll make it someday."

[9] https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/lorenzo-kom-boa-ervin-anarchism-and-the-black-revolution

[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzAyLV5XpCQ

[11] https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/kuwasi-balagoon-a-soldier-s-story

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