

No War But The Class
Apocalypse!
Further Reflections on Rioting

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The Anarchists are right in everything; in the negation of the existing order and in the assertion that, without Authority there could not be worse violence than that of Authority under existing conditions.

— Leo Tolstoy, "[On Anarchy](#)"

The English word *apocalypse* is derived from a Greek word ([ποκαλύπτω](#)) meaning to “uncover” as in a disclosure of knowledge: a revelation. In my commentary on the social unrest in Ferguson, MO, (“[On Camels, Liberal Myths, and Ferguson](#)”) I suggested that the activities of riots were apocalyptic in their ability to shatter (like a storefront window) the illusion of legitimacy with which authority masks itself. I’d like to explore the limits of a few of those ideas including a clarification on the meaning of “false consciousness,” the question of pacifism, and a generalization of the virtues of riots to disruptive peace.

You Sheeple Are Workers and You Don't Even Know It!

First, the clarification. In my commentary “On Camels...” I used a term originally introduced by Frederick Engels, “false consciousness,” which comes with some historical baggage. It has sometimes been used to suggest that workers in capitalist countries don't know what their own self-interests are (or what their “true” interests are), a usage which completely displaces subjectivity with a simple class analysis. Such a usage of the term is especially problematic, since in wealthy capitalist countries (like America) most workers share in the plunder of global exploitation, their complicity providing them with social stability, high real wages, and all the goods and comforts capitalism has to offer. Sustaining capitalism for as long as possible *is* in the material interest of a great portion of American workers.

But that is not my intended usage. By “false consciousness” I mean only the beliefs that capitalism (or any dominant form of exploitation) is “natural,” or that it is the only or most practical and/or ethical way to feed the world.

Riots and Non-Resistance to Evil by Force

When “peace and order” are the watchwords of the ruling classes, any ‘peaceful protest’ is seen merely as a natural part of a system that “works” and so is stripped of much of its

revelatory power. An insistence on “nonviolence” tends to reinforce the illusion that the existing organization of society is natural or peaceful while all criticism becomes aimed at the comparatively microscopic transgressions such as disobeying a police officer or looting.

But what about more thoroughgoing pacifist doctrines such as the “non-resistance to evil by force” as popularized in recent times by the likes of Leo Tolstoy? Is such a principle compatible with rioting? If not, does it provide a better alternative than the riot? I am personally undecided, but I do not, at least, think a strong Tolstoyan case can be made *against* rioting.

Even granting its correctness, there are two important aspects of Tolstoy’s non-resistance to keep in mind when considering it in the context of revolt against oppression. The first is that non-resistance is an invective *against* the use of force by the state (and against the very existence of the state). The entire hope upon which the principle of non-resistance rests is that it will result in a world in which there are no police or soldiers or property owners for them to protect. To invoke non-resistance in *defense* of police enforcing the law to keep the poor in their place is entirely self-defeating.

Secondly, unlike the teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ghandi, Tolstoy’s non-resistance is not posited as a political tactic; and unlike my defense of riots, it is not presented as an epistemological trick or a way to reveal truth. It is instead an individual’s lifestyle choice and a duty aimed at creating a peaceful society *now*, in whatever degree possible, regardless of the ongoing existence of societies structured by police and soldiers. But the choice to embrace non-resistance to evil is unlikely to be made until the existing, violent structure of

society is recognized.

In the final chapter of *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, Tolstoy describes the conditions of Czarist Russia to illustrate the violence of that system. In particular he describes the plight of peasants who resisted enclosure and other abuses by landlords (through riots and otherwise) and the soldiers who unquestioningly carried out the execution and torture of those rebel peasants.

An aspect of what I call “false consciousness” is described by Tolstoy in that chapter as “that constant, stubborn tendency of men to increase their well-being, which guides the men of our time, to become convinced that the prerogatives of the rich over the poor could not and cannot be maintained in any other way.” He describes the emergence from such false consciousness in rather mystical terms (“It is not necessary for anything new to enter into the consciousness of men, but only for the mist to disappear, which conceals from men the true meaning of some acts of violence”), but if the riots and acts of rebellion by the peasants didn’t open Tolstoy’s eyes, they are at least the best images he found with which to communicate his own awareness of the nature of feudal Russia.

What if the Russian peasants were Tolstoyan in their actions and had accepted their lot and submitted to their hunger and subjection without causing their governors any grief? Tolstoy would have been left without illustration to reveal the meaning of violence. The very insight which makes Tolstoy’s non-resistance possible itself depends on subordinate groups’ assertion of their own dignity—which is almost never a peaceful affair.

The Russian peasants' belligerence allowed Tolstoy to give us a glimpse through the mist, and anticipating Howard Zinn, he shows us that which the dominant hypocrisy always strives to hide: "We need, however, only think of history, not the history of the successes of various dynasties of rulers, but real history, the history of the oppression of the majority by a small number of men, to see that the bases of all the prerogatives of the rich over the poor have originated from nothing but switches, prisons, hard labor, murders."

The Limits of Riots as Revelatory Events

I restricted my comments on Ferguson to the context of a liberal republic, and specifically to the United States of America. That context represents a very thin slice along the range of human experience. Conditions in which violence is the status quo — places characterized by warfare — are sustained by very different myths than the "law and order" rhetoric of liberalism.

The myths which sustain war are often built on nationalism including ethnic pride, religious pride, and other contrived perversions of camaraderie. And some riots devolve into (or never rise beyond) little wars in which subordinate groups, instead of uniting against their oppressors, turn on each other. Such riots and tribal wars, rather than revealing the hypocrisy of the dominant ideology, work to further obscure class consciousness in the shroud of ethnic antagonism. [1: For an explanation of how wage labour directly causes such antagonism, see Edna Bonacich's "[A theory of ethnic antagonism: The split labor market](#)," *American sociological*

review (1972): 547-559.]

If some riots have the power to expose the myths of stable modes of production, like the capital of liberalism, in what way can the myths sustaining unstable societies be revealed? How can a disruption like war be disrupted? One striking example can be found almost exactly 100 years ago during the [Christmas Truce of 1914](#) in which 10,000 British and German soldiers decided, without permission, to stop killing each other and to instead leave their trenches, socialize, sing carols, and play football with each other in no-man's land.

It was the general spirit of noncooperation which existed among many soldiers during WWI that made the Christmas Truce and other impromptu truces possible. Riots and truces have similar apocalyptic properties, and they suggest a general strategy for rebellion: when the authorities want peace and order, give them chaos; when they want war, give them peace.