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# On Camels, Liberal Myths, and Ferguson

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“In a world that really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.”

— Guy Debord *The Society of the Spectacle*

## 1. Background: The Killing of Michael Brown

As far as I know, none of the following facts are disputed. On August 9, 2014, Officer Darren Wilson of the Ferguson City Police Department confronted Michael Brown, 18, and

his acquaintance<sup>1</sup> Dorian Johnson, 22, from his vehicle because they were walking in the middle of a residential street. The officer ordered them to move to the sidewalk. Instead of simply complying, Brown argued with the officer through the window of the police SUV. A scuffle ensued, Brown, who was unarmed, hit Wilson in the face with his hand, and according to Wilson's testimony, made a grab for the officer's firearm. In response, Wilson fired 2 shots at Brown who ran down the street for about 150 feet before turning around to face the officer (some witnesses reported he had turned around in surrender). Meanwhile Wilson had exited his vehicle and pursued on foot, firing at least 10 more times. Less than 90 seconds after initially contacting the jaywalker, Wilson had hit Brown with at least 6 bullets, including a fatal shot to his head.<sup>2</sup>

Johnson later explained that Brown was in the midst of a some sort of mystical crises on the day he died. He had an earlier premonition that his stepmother and grandmother would be delivered from their illnesses through his prayer, and was experiencing what seemed like supernatural phenomena including that he was being protected from cars as he walked in the street. This state of mind may help explain both why Brown was walking in the middle of road and why he made the courageous but suicidal decision to turn and face the officer who was firing at him.<sup>3</sup>

A grand jury was convened after the shooting, and it found the evidence to be insufficient to provide probable cause for bringing criminal charges against officer Wilson. He was never arrested in connection with the killing.

Both the shooting and the grand jury decision have been met with significant [social unrest in Ferguson](#) and in cities around

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<sup>1</sup>Wesley Lowery and Darryl Fears, "[Michael Brown and Dorian Johnson, the friend who witnessed his shooting.](#)" *The Washington Post*, August 31, 2014.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Patrick, "[Darren Wilson's radio calls show fatal encounter was brief.](#)" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 14, 2014.

<sup>3</sup>Wesley Lowery, "[Dorian Johnson, witness to the Ferguson shooting, sticks by his story.](#)" *The Washington Post*, August 9, 2019.

the country including protest marches, riots, looting, and destruction of retail storefront property.

The sentiment behind some of the protesters' demands for "justice for Mike Brown" and the bewildered response of speculating [white] Americans trying to make sense of why the black residents of Ferguson (sometimes just "thugs") would destroy "their own" neighborhoods both reveal something of the mystified nature of capitalism and the myths which sustain it.

## 2. Myths the Size of Camels

Frederich Engels used the term "false consciousness" to describe beliefs about the world which obfuscate its actual workings and mislead people into accepting the current social structures as "natural" or even inevitable. And it was Karl Marx, an often unemployed theorist living under industrial capitalism, who taught us the importance of the economic basis in understanding the nature, ends, and ideologies of the dominate political structures in all times and places. But it was Jesus of Nazareth, a propertyless Jewish peasant subsisting under imperial Rome, who taught us how to see and see through the moral judgments which flow from such false consciousness, a morality which serves to protect and create the exploiting classes.

Among the sayings of Jesus which have been preserved, there are a handful of colorful and memorable quips employing exaggerated contrasts to illustrate the hypocritical judgments made by the dominant political and religious ideologies and leaders of his time. One of the most famous is his rhetorical question to those who fixate on the speck of sawdust in their brother's eye, but don't even notice the log sticking out of

their own eye.<sup>4</sup> Another is, “You blind leaders! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!”<sup>5</sup>

What Jesus' sayings help to reveal, although it is counterintuitive, is that the most successful and stubborn ideas which make up a false consciousness do not operate on subtle misconceptions or minor deceptions. They are always complete reversals resulting in total hypocrisies.

Jesus' cynicism can be applied generally to see how the hypocrisy is borne out today (and a few specific examples of such reversals from Ferguson will be demonstrated in the next sections). Every stable mode of production has its own obfuscating myths which are accepted by a sufficient number of both the exploiting and exploited classes to maintain widespread complacency. And so in liberalism we can expect to find those myths which hide the horrors of capitalism from the citizens of republics:

Private Property, a ruthless process and legal institution which deprives millions of property, requiring armies of police and soldiers to maintain, is seen as a provider of prosperity and stability. The Rule of Law, which so impartially allows the rich and the starving poor to depend on the purchase of commodities for survival, is seen as an egalitarian force. Above all Progressivism — by which the current social organization is seen to be fundamentally good and always improving through the democratic mechanisms of elections, petition, and scientific enlightenment — condemns as criminal any attempt by the oppressed to assert their dignity or make actual improvements to their conditions.

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<sup>4</sup>[Matthew 7:3](#)

<sup>5</sup>[Matthew 23:24](#). It is sometimes suggested that the saying in Aramaic, the language Jesus probably spoke, would have involved more word play as the Aramaic word for “camel” is *gamla* and the Aramaic for “louse” (which could have been adapted to greek as “konopa” meaning gnat) is *glama*. A louse is smaller than a gnat, making for an even greater contrast in imagery.

### 3. “Justice for Mike Brown”

If the pig who shot Mike Brown ever sees the courtroom  
You’ll have mostly the looters to thank for it

— Pat The Bunny [\*"I Was A Teenage Anarchist"\*](#)

Returning to the death of Michael Brown: arming oneself then confronting, fighting with, pursuing, and finally shooting to death an unarmed young man is behavior which should require significant extenuating circumstances to excuse. Even if Wilson were not a police officer, his actions would likely warrant a criminal trial to determine the facts more fully. But Wilson *is* a police officer who has been entrusted by the public (whom he is ostensibly protecting) with weapons, training, and legal authority. If anything, while acknowledging his work will tend to place him into conflicts, he should be held to a *higher* standard of behavior and legal culpability than an ordinary citizen in handling those confrontations. Instead, in accordance with the law, he has been granted extra leniency and the case against him will not even be examined in open court.

Given all of that, *and not even considering pre-existing systemic injustices or the patterns of police abuse*, it is plain why there is such widespread belief that an injustice was committed against Michael Brown and the Ferguson community. “Justice for Mike Brown” has become a slogan for protests, and is taken as a demand by journalists looking to provide a motive for protesters. But what would such “justice” look like? All too often the slogan is simply a demand that Darren Wilson be more fully subjected to the same criminal justice system which produced him. In such cases it is actually a demand of “justice for Darren Wilson”.

It’s a demand that reveals two divergent but both conservative reactions. The first, the “peaceful protesters,” believe the

justice system provides its own adequate channels of reform and view protest, insofar as it is legal or at least peaceful, as legitimate democratic petition of the government. The second, sharing the logic of a lynch mob, believes itself to be an extralegal corrective to a justice system gone so far astray that its own means of reform are no longer effective. Both accept at face value the necessity of the justice system as it promises to function.

On one of the riotous nights following the grand jury decision, CNN described a crowd of protesters who overturned and burned a police cruiser and then chanted across the street toward the lines of riot police and national guardsmen, "We are not your enemy. We just want justice."<sup>6</sup> The demand for justice, referring to criminal justice, shows how fully even some of the vandalizing protesters in Ferguson have internalized the liberal myths which legitimate capitalism and its political superstructures. Except to the grieving friends and family of Michael Brown who can't be blamed for seeking whatever peace and closure they can find from a legal system which purports to provide it, the question of justice in the case of Darren Wilson is a symptom, a speck of dust, a gnat. Yet the Ferguson community leaders and many protesters strain at him while swallowing the murderous political system they believe can bring them justice.

Vandalism, even in the cause of liberalism, is clearly seen as a threat to the authorities and the image of control they'd like to maintain (hence the frenzied calls for peace among political leaders at all levels). But the split between the strictly peaceful and the extra-legal protesters also provides an opportunity to control the scope of debate during times of social unrest. For example, note what the highest ranking office of liberalism in the world has to say about rioting. During the 1992 LA Riots, President Bush acknowledged that while Americans have reason to be frustrated with the law, they should not actually unleash those frustrations on the legal system itself:

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<sup>6</sup>Moni Basu and Faith Karimi, "[Protesters torch police car in another tense night in Ferguson.](#)" *CNN*, November 25, 2014.

“In this highly controversial court case, a verdict was handed down by a California jury. To Americans of all races who were shocked by the verdict, let me say this: You must understand that our system of justice provides for the peaceful, orderly means of addressing this frustration. We must respect the process of law whether or not we agree with the outcome. There’s a difference between frustration with the law and direct assaults upon our legal system.”<sup>7</sup>

— George Bush

Similarly, president Obama in his address to the nation after the Ferguson grand jury decision pleaded for frustrations to be channeled “constructively”:

“First and foremost, we are a nation built on the rule of law. And so we need to accept that this decision was the grand jury’s to make. [...] But what is also true is that there are still problems and communities of color aren’t just making these problems up. [...] What we need to do is to understand them and figure out how do we make more progress. [...] That won’t be done by throwing bottles. That won’t be done by smashing car windows. [...] So, to those in Ferguson, there are ways of channeling your concerns constructively and there are ways of channeling your concerns destructively.”<sup>8</sup>

— Barack Obama

Riots provide several benefits for the working class at the expense of the owning class. As such, there is an ideological benefit in dissuading those who can be persuaded by liberal-

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<sup>7</sup>[“Address to the Nation on the Civil Disturbances in Los Angeles, California,”](#) May 1, 1992.

<sup>8</sup>[“Remarks by the President After Announcement of the Decision by the Grand Jury in Ferguson, Missouri,”](#) November 24, 2014

ism from rioting. The liberal kit outlined by Obama — foundation on a Rule of Law, Progress, the sanctity of Property, and proper Democratic channels — is so ingrained in the minds of Americans that such appeals may work at an almost instinctive level. But even if they are ineffective in that, appeals to the law serve at least two important roles in maintaining order:

1. By constantly making a distinction between lawful and non-lawful protest, the debate becomes centered on the morality and efficacy of extralegal reform. This has the effect of pushing radical change to the periphery, and completely out of view of most protesters and spectators.
2. By creating a sense of urgency in maintaining peaceful protests, politicians can induce protesters to police each other.

A darker theoretical speculation can be drawn about the role of murderous policing itself, including the double-standard seen in the indictment process. By deviating so obviously from the promise of justice the system purports, prosecutors and police have succeeded in prompting people to take to the streets in *support* of the criminal justice system.

## **4. Why Are They Looting Their Own Neighborhoods?**

Meanwhile, much of the American populace suffers from a similar but different aspect of the liberal mystification. They read the reports of looting and see the pictures on TV of shops on fire, and they just can't seem to figure out why those black people would destroy "their own" neighborhoods. As if the shopping centers in any American neighborhood, much less a

black neighborhood, are collectively-owned cooperatives or in any way belong to the community rather than to petite bourgeois owners.

These Americans are so ensconced in liberal mythology that they are utterly unable to make sense of the world that confronts them on their cable news programs every night. It seems perfectly natural to think of people — especially the dark skinned and uneducated — as automatons who should spend their lives working and obeying (or begging and obeying), but any disruption of peace and order is a startling transgression. “Peace and order” is paramount; it implies the ability to peaceably and orderly employ, tax, fine, and blame the poor... in Ferguson and everywhere.

As it is with gnats and camels, so it is with looting and capital. Businesses have stolen more from the working class — and most extensively from the black working class — than any practical amount of looting could ever recover. Yet the political leaders, news journalists, and the average American worker will strain all of their moral indignation at the tiny acts of re-appropriation like when a looter makes off with food or a television, but will swallow without question the entire impoverishing, alienating system of wage work which leaves so many with so little.

The wealth of the United States of America, from a British colony to an imperialist superpower, is the result of over four centuries of indentured servitude, chattel slavery, genocide, debt peonage, subjugation of women, plundering wars, and a system of wage labour which has no end in sight, all legally sanctioned and enforced by the established police forces. And what Americans cannot understand, the thing that is beyond acceptance, is when a liquor store is looted.

## 5. The Virtue of Rioting

Of course not all events that occur during times of rebellion are necessarily good. There is nothing useful or dignifying in opportunistic violence against individuals or theft of personal property committed under cover of social unrest, and such acts are properly crimes. It is also important to recognize that spontaneous uprisings like Ferguson are not organized revolutions in which targets are prioritized, goods are seized and distributed according to need, and capital is taken over to be run collectively — or whatever revolution might look like.

As much as some of us may wish to see such activity, and while some spontaneous rebellions have historically lead to more directed revolutionary efforts, it is not even possible without more preparations than currently exist. The national guard in Missouri is happy to guard only the highest value centers of capital during a couple of nights of light looting of consumer goods. But if any protesters had attempted to actually take control of and operate their own workplaces, it would have been SWAT raids, live rounds, and whatever carnage was deemed necessary to return property to its lawfully exploiting owners.

But why loot and riot at all? Earlier in this essay I claimed that riots provide benefits to the working class. What are they? Most obvious is the material benefits inherent in the act of looting. In addition to material gain, looting brings a flavour of what a post-capitalist economy will feel like. On every other day of their life, a looter's needs rule over them in the form of money and commodities. For a few brief days during a riot, commodities are subordinated to the form of mere goods which satisfy needs.

Secondly, riots win political concessions. They signal to the ruling class that it is squeezing a tad tightly and needs to let up in order to keep its grip. The unrest in Ferguson has directly prompted the federal government to begin investigating the Ferguson Police Department for possible civil rights

abuses,<sup>9</sup> and President Obama has asked congress for \$75 million to fund 50,000 body cameras to help reduce murder and other abuse by America's police officers.<sup>10</sup> Other reforms may follow, none of which would have happened if protesters in Ferguson and elsewhere had not forced the issue.

But most importantly, riots and the reactions to riots reveal the hypocrisy Jesus saw so clearly. The public judgment of rioters lays bare the false morality of the dominate ideology. Covert domination — including economic exploitation and racism — can be swallowed and transmitted to new generations without being noticed. But overt domination is noticed and generates its own resistance. It is when domination is exposed and individuals are freed of their false consciousness that Jesus' "kingdom of heaven," the Wobblies' "new world in the shell of the old," and the Marxist's "withering away" of classes is possible. There are Christians who don't understand a word of what Jesus said, but who nevertheless believe with all of their strength that his words have the power to save their souls. I don't think they are wrong.

## 6. Further Reading

Roughly in order of relevance:

["No War But The Class Apocalypse!: Further Reflections on Rioting"](#) - some of my further thoughts on riots.

["In Defense of Looting"](#) by Willie Osterweil is an eloquent defense of looting in the context of the Ferguson riots.

["The Nature of Police, the Role of the Left"](#) and ["Learning From Ferguson"](#) by Peter Gelderloos look at the liberal mech-

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<sup>9</sup>Sari Horwitz, Carol D. Leonnig and Kimberly Kindy, ["Justice Dept. to probe Ferguson police force,"](#) *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2014.

<sup>10</sup>Nolan Feeney, ["Obama Requests Funds for Police Body Cameras to Address 'Simmering Distrust' After Ferguson,"](#) *TIME*, December 1, 2014.

anisms (including the narrative that “non-violence works”) used to relegate the efforts following police violence to superficial reforms.

[“The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy”](#) by Guy Debord is an insightful analysis of the Watts Rebellion of 1965.

“False Consciousness or Laying it on Thick?” is the fourth chapter of James C. Scott’s [\*Domination and the Arts of Resistance\*](#) which, like much of his work, explores the operation of hegemonic ideology and the degree to which it is accepted or merely tolerated by subordinate groups.

[“You Are Not The Target Audience”](#) by William Gillis is an apology for the black bloc tactic of smashing windows.

[“From Gulf War to Class War: We All Hate the Cops”](#) by Max Anger is an optimistic (probably overly so) summary of the 1992 LA Riots.

[“Ferguson, Missouri: Rioting is a Virtue”](#) by Zak Brown is commentary on Ferguson by an American Maoist.