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<http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/12/15/white-terror-matters/print/>

White Terror Matters

By Mike King
December 15, 2015



As the media and state response to the recent attacks in San Bernardino have illustrated, premeditated political violence in the U.S. today only gets labelled and responded to as ‘terrorism’ if the alleged perpetrators are Muslims. White, far-Right political violence is however persistent and intensifying despite consistent efforts to downplay, ignore or depoliticize it. The intensification of anti-Muslim violence that has followed the San Bernardino attacks further illustrates this wave of violence, as the leading Republican candidate calls for an outright ban on all Muslims entering the country.

This recent spate of anti-Muslim terrorism – armed vigilantes stalking mosques, random attacks on Muslim women on the street, the fire-bombing of businesses by Neo-Nazis – are part of an unending chain of white terrorism which is much deeper and broader. Radicalized white

resentment has been the biggest terror threat in the U.S. in the last decade, emboldened and intensifying through the state's failure to contain it, while the underlying backlash politics fueling this violence has been mainstreamed – from the Tea Party to the cartoonish candidacy of Donald Trump. The outward violence of the disintegrating American empire is presently being matched by the internal political violence launched by a variety of militias, white nationalists, and an assortment of lone wolves wound up to the breaking point by Fox News, Republican politicians, and the demonstration effect of a litany of heavily-armed, self-conceived white victims putting rhetoric in to action and ‘taking back their country.’

The murder of three people and the shooting of nine others at a Planned Parenthood in Colorado Springs Saturday November 28th, by a man reciting Republican talking points about “no more body parts” following the shooting of five Black Lives Matter protesters in Minneapolis five days prior by white nationalists, are the violent actualization of a white, Christian fundamentalist politics that has become increasingly mainstreamed since the onset of the Tea Party movement in 2009. From Dylan Roof's murderous attack on Black parishioners this past summer, the subsequent Ku Klux Klan efforts to save South Carolina's slave flag, and the spate of arsons targeting Black churches throughout the South in recent months, the similarities to white vigilantism in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement are both stark and foreboding. The racial epithets and crystal-clear meaning behind the shouts that “All Lives Matter!” which were blurted between kicks to Mercurio Southall's chest on the floor of a Donald Trump rally a week before the Colorado mass shooting, and Trump's subsequent comments that he “deserved to be roughed up” should perhaps be read as a harbinger to the bullets put in five unarmed black bodies on November 23rd in Minneapolis at a demonstration responding to the police killing of Jamar Clark, an unarmed Black man. The vigilante attack on the Black Lives Matter protest last Monday night, for which four men are now facing merely second degree assault and/or rioting charges, was followed by the snide jeering of the police at the scene that night who told the protesters that ‘this is what you asked for’ as they reportedly maced those who remained.

A core political figure in the recent political attacks on Planned Parenthood, Carly Fiorina, has been quick to label any efforts to trace the Planned Parenthood massacre to the lengthy demonization of the organization in the second Republican Presidential Debate in September as “Left-Wing Tactics” – despite the fact that the shooter, Robert Dear, was reported to have said “no more baby parts” as he was taken into police custody, referencing the misleading video which sparked the recent surge in political attacks against Planned Parenthood. Not to be outdone, Republican Presidential candidate Ted Cruz' avoidance of the obvious link between his and Fiorina's rhetoric and Saturday's violence was peppered with a healthy dose of transphobia – claiming that Dear was a “transgendered leftist activist.” These violent vigilante actions – explicitly targeting both a vibrant, persistent, and long overdue social movement effort to forge racial equality and a longstanding bastion of women's reproductive rights and health – need to be seen and treated as what they are, as acts of terrorism.

The Police Executive Research Forum, a non-profit policing think tank, surveyed almost 400 police departments who reported Right-wing extremists as almost twice as much of a terrorist threat as “Al Qaeda or like-minded terrorist organizations.” The New York Times reported in June that “[R]ight-wing extremists averaged 337 attacks per year in the decade after 9/11, causing a total of 254 fatalities, according to a study by Arie Perliger, a professor at the United

States Military Academy's Combating Terrorism Center. The toll has increased since the study was released in 2012.” A telling vignette in relation to law enforcement and right wing terrorism is that of a leaked 2009 Homeland Security report detailing the real and increasing threat of far-Right domestic terrorism. The leaking of the report created a political controversy through which the domestic terrorism unit within Homeland Security was attacked by leading Republicans. This attack led to the scuttling of the report and to that Homeland Security unit being disbanded, leaving one domestic terrorism expert remaining at HLS, according to Daryl Johnson, a former Homeland Security official and co-author of the 2009 report. In contrast to the perpetual surveillance, infiltration and entrapment schemes that mark the state's standard response to movements like Occupy or the Anti-War movement, the far-Right is consistently treated with kid gloves.

Despite the fact that these recent attacks fit the textbook definition of terrorism, and that the perpetrators have substantive connections to networks of armed paramilitary groupings, constituting a, if not *the*, main source of future domestic terrorist attacks according to local and federal police agencies, they are not treated as terrorists. This is not a matter of terminology or political hyperbole. It speaks to very real acts of violence connected to far-Right anti-government vigilante groups, whose insulation from the persistent repression frequented upon social justice movements is illustrative. It highlights not only a longstanding double standard in relation to political violence in this country, but a set of political relationship which need to be publicly scrutinized and materially challenged at every level – from confronting vigilante extremists in the street, to potentially building a radical/progressive base to pressure the state to take action against armed vigilantes who have gained a growing degree of popular legitimacy, which is reflected in its plainest form in the face of the presidential candidates being put forward by the Republican Party.

The attack on the Black Lives Matter movement in Minneapolis on November 23rd was a violent vigilante attempt to maintain the fragmented, truncated version of white democracy that has been challenged for centuries but not yet fundamentally transformed. As the late Joel Olson succinctly put it in *The Abolition of White Democracy*, “Racial oppression makes full democracy impossible, but it has also made American democracy possible. Conversely, American democracy has made racial oppression possible, for neither slavery nor segregation nor any other forms of racial domination could have survived without the tacit or explicit consent of the white majority” (2004, xv). Contemporary white vigilante terrorism is not “an attack on our democratic values and the American way of life” – it is an attempt to maintain the existing racial order, it is an attack on *the possibility* of constructing a truly democratic social fabric in this society. It is a targeted act of violence against the very people trying to bring that genuine democracy into existence. White terror is neither new nor an aberration, it is the persistent application of violence against vulnerable targets to pursue the political objectives of maintaining white political and economic dominance in American society. Efforts to see this violence as anything less than domestic terrorism is analogous to seeing the lynchings of one hundred years ago as simply depoliticized criminality and isolated incidents.

Identity, Moral Culpability, and Terror: From France to Minneapolis & Colorado Springs

The attack on Planned Parenthood in Colorado, like the attack on the Black Lives Matter movement earlier that week, along with the murder of nine people in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina this past June, and the spate of arsons from North Carolina, Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, Ohio, and Tennessee to Saint Louis in recent months, was an act of terror – a violent act against a civilian target with the intent of political intimidation and manipulation. Not unlike the recent attacks in Paris, the objective is to inflict violence to make a political statement and to use that violence as a calculated tool towards a political end – a tactic embedded in a broader strategy. Within hours of the Paris attacks the likes of CNN were demanding apologies and mandatory disavowals from Muslims writ large. CNN anchors berated Yasser Louati, a spokesperson from the Collective Against Islamophobia, with a bevy of veiled accusations, asking, “Why is it that no one within the Muslim community there in France knew what these guys were up to?” Even though armed masked men were documented making threats towards the Black Lives Matter protestors in Minneapolis three days before a group of men showed up and opened fire – CNN would never fathom badgering random white residents with similar questions, or demanding answers from the Minneapolis police as to why these threats were not taken seriously. This speaks volumes about the deeply entrenched white supremacy in the American media in regards to pressing political issues both foreign and domestic.

Why does a terroristic act by a group of people who are (only nominally) Muslim produce an almost automatic, reflexive moral complicity throughout an entire generalized subaltern group while domestic white terrorism in the U.S. is neither considered terror, nor even placed within any broader political context of systemic racial inequality, material deprivation and cultural dehumanization? Why and how can these attacks continue to be seen as isolated, decontextualized tragedies rather than as public acts of war against Black people or against the fundamental human rights of women to have access to reproductive healthcare? White supremacist violence and Christian fundamentalist terror are performed with an explicit and direct political intent that is rarely treated as domestic terrorism within dominant political or media discourse, let alone subject to the type of counter-insurgency tactics to which even entirely non-violent social justice movements are routinely subjected. The broader white public from which these terrorists emerge (and find safe refuge, etc.) is never examined, let alone imagined to be morally and politically culpable. How does the onslaught of cheers and admiration expressed via social media for Robert Dear’s attack from the good Christians of our fine nation not prompt a long media discussion about the widespread support for terrorism in the U.S.? This avoidance of collective culpability coincides with the absence of the obligatory affective manipulation which is thrust in the face of every racialized group when the perpetrator has dark skin and the victims are white. There has been a systematic politico-discursive blockage in regards to white domestic terrorism, in spite of its often clear connections to white anti-government militias and its verbatim reiterations of the talking points of racist, violence-inciting reactionary media pundits.

Beyond any consideration of the extent to which there may be some sort generalizable white or conservative Christian complicity in these terrorist acts (i.e. white social indifference to, or tacit support for, white supremacist terror; persistent politico-legal insulation from criminal profiling and state surveillance of armed white militias and similar groupings) the perpetrators of this violence are themselves not even held fully accountable. Their terroristic attacks are never represented as anything but decontextualized and individualized discrete crimes – isolated

apolitical actions. Social responsibility never transcends the level of individual culpability, while these actions are typically even further rationalized and depoliticized as a product of mental illness, or are (re)politicized towards conversations about gun control, rather than towards controlling white-on-black violence or Christian fundamentalists who conceive themselves to be the violent hand of God. As Syrian refugees face blanket criminalization for Paris attacks committed exclusively by European nationals, how does white America continue to avoid demands for allegiance to racial justice and disavowal of white terrorism within the standardized Manichean “us versus them” political framework which is presented to each and every Muslim when something like the Paris attacks occurs?

The Privileges of White Terrorism

At the level of political violence white terrorism is not materially different from any other form of terrorism, but within existing American social, political and historical contexts there are substantive differences. White terrorism seeks to maintain existing social relations rather than pursue a different political order. White terrorism is not only domestic, it is an expression of racial dominance within a political culture that continuously contorts reality to posit a post-racial social order while ignoring or erasing material inequalities rooted in longstanding racial structures. White terrorism is not only as old as the American racial structure itself, it is an intrinsic part of that evolving but persistent pattern of social relationships. White terrorism is culturally, socially, institutionally, discursively, and legally insulated from being seen and treated as terrorism, or even being seen as intrinsically white, by the very political, ideological and social control structures of white supremacy that it seeks to uphold and strengthen.

The American political discursive field has had no trouble in the past two years hyping up imagined black criminality – whether it is giving a platform to police unions to prattle on about an imaginary “war on police” (Minneapolis police made such claims in early November) or spending a full week entertaining the phantasmagoric rantings of white supremacists and the fake black-on-white crime epidemics they promulgated in regards to the knockout game. But when it comes to clear acts of terror directed at a popular and visible social movement we find ideological obfuscation and a range of pertinent questions unasked and unanswered. It is still an open question as to whether the Justice Department and FBI will heed the call of the Black Lives Matter movement or Planned Parenthood to treat these as acts of terrorism (which may include degrees of police collusion in Minnesota) half as seriously as they treat planned gatherings of the Insane Clown Posse. If history is any indication, white terror will once again find safe refuge within official structures which tacitly or actively nurture and foster it in various ways.

Donald Trump, White Terror and the Silent (White) Majority Today

Recent trends in white identity politics – with a majority of whites feeling that they are racially oppressed – would be simply laughable if they did not have an intimate connection with persistent white vigilante violence. A Public Religion Research Institute poll found that 44% of all Americans and 61% of Tea Party supporters in 2010 thought that discrimination against whites was just as great as discrimination against racial minorities. A Pew Research poll taken in August 2014, two weeks after the killing of Mike Brown in Ferguson, MO revealed that, “About seven-in-ten whites (71%) expressed a great deal or fair amount of confidence in local police to

treat blacks and whites equally, compared with just 36% of blacks.” A September 2015 PBS poll revealed that, when asked about the Black Lives Matter movement, “59 percent of whites think it distracts attention from real issues.”

The level of white resentment and backlash finds no clearer political manifestation, aside from the recent spate of anti-black violence, than in the caricatured vulgar bigotry of Donald Trump. From immigrant bashing to promoting false statistics about black-on-white crime, Trump has been brazenly and successfully riding this wave of white resentment and backlash politics towards the Republican nomination. In spite of his obvious limitations as a viable presidential candidate – epitomized by his reality-show, bully persona and vacant, eye-brow-shrugging braggadocio – Trump is the historical walking/talking embodiment of modern white resentment. All the better if his claims about immigrant rapists or Black crime are clearly fabricated, so long as he does not waver from that bad faith bigotry in his clear and simple pursuit of reinforcing the existing racial order.

The Obama years have featured a litany of contrived far-Right attacks on everyone from ACORN to U.S. Department of Agriculture official Shirley Sherrod – concocted media frenzies which got recruited up from the Breitbart News’ minor league into the Fox News starting lineup, to then dominate national headlines in more respectable media outlets. As with the moral panic which surrounded a similar far-Right propaganda video two years ago which brought ‘the knockout game’ to great prominence, the Planned Parenthood video is decontextualized and fundamentally premised on a false claim, as was the attack on ACORN and Sherrod before that. Just as there had been no significant spike in random black-on-white knockout attacks two years ago, Planned Parenthood was not selling fetuses for profit, but donating tissue for research. Carly Fiorina responded to any effort to connect Saturday’s mass shooting at Planned Parenthood to the very public and inciting condemnations featured in the September Republican Debate: “This is so typical of the left to immediately begin demonizing a messenger because they don’t agree with the message.” The message delivered out of Robert Dean’s rifle this past Saturday was simply an extension of the distorted anti-choice message Fiorina helped launder into mainstream political discussion two months ago. When Colin Flaherty, the author of *White Girl Bleed a Lot*, where the ‘knockout game’ story originated, was asked about the impetus for his fake expose of “black mob violence,” according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, he told the host of the Neo-Nazi radio show on which he was interviewed: “‘I’m just a guy that likes to write... I just have my eyes open. My attitude is, I’m going to tell you what’s happening now, and if you want to freak out about it, I really don’t care.’” It’s too bad Carly Fiorina, Trump, and company don’t share the same political integrity as Colin Flaherty. Maybe he should make a run for President.

There has been growing discussion, including among other leading Republicans at this point, as to whether Trump or his campaign, with its overt mobilization of white resentment and use of racialized scapegoats to explain deep, widespread economic strain, potentially constitutes a slide into fascism. Despite some glaring similarities between Trump and a historical figure like Mussolini, not to mention Trump’s own infatuation with Adolf Hitler, I share Chip Berlet’s assessment that to argue that Trump is an American fascist is grossly ahistorical. This “slide into fascism” argument glosses the stark politico-legal and well as socio-economic formations of racial inequality that have persisted throughout this country’s history, with upsurges in demands

for racial justice being countered by jingoist nativism that bolsters corporate power and white supremacy *within and through* existing political structures. In reality Trump is more akin to a vulgar modern incarnation of Richard Nixon, remobilizing a white working class base into a corporatist political block that is already well established. White nativism and the conscious and unconscious protection of white structural dominance and privilege has consistently defined American democracy, while reproducing structures of white supremacy. As Joel Olson has put it, “Whiteness, then, does not simply exclude some persons from enjoying democratic rights. It does much more: it produces a particular conception of democracy that not only denies active participation and social equality but cannot even imagine them” (2004, 63). We ignore our history and imperil our own future by substituting amorphous, alarmist claims of ‘fascism’ for an honest assessment of the founding contradiction of American society as it pertains to race and democracy.

Black Protest, White Terror and the Battle for American Democracy

While it is always difficult to appreciate the true historical significance of the present tense, we clearly sit within a period of heightened political contestation and possibility. The formation of a coherent national movement opposing racialized police violence and fighting for true racial equality and full social democracy has finally emerged in the past two years, after several fits and starts over the previous decades. The material gains the movement has already fostered are evident, if still in flux. In the past two months the bipartisan U.S. Sentencing Commission decided to release 50,000 Federal drug war prisoners early, as Congress moves to (at least somewhat) roll-back draconian drug laws, following a call by over 130 major police chiefs, sheriffs and city prosecutors, many of whom made their careers in large part off of that War on Drugs, arguing that we need to move away from using mass-incarceration as a mechanism for warehousing poor Blacks and Latinos. Efforts to coopt the movement into the Democratic Party or existing Non-Profit structures have thus far failed, as direct actions, popular mobilization, campus activism, and widespread grassroots activity persist and expand. History consistently shows that those who cannot be coopted and incorporated are usually violent attacked, by vigilant forces, the state, or in the case of the shootings in Minneapolis on November 23rd, perhaps both.

The primary objective of terrorism is to heighten political conflicts while simultaneously drawing a line between two political opponents – and foreclosing upon any middle ground. The objective of white vigilante violence and Christian fundamentalist terror is to intimidate and to manipulate the response of its targets. Aside from whatever steps the Black Lives Matter movement or Planned Parenthood will take to defend and sustain themselves in the face of terrorism, political ground cannot be ceded to masked gunmen who seek to increase the stakes of protest while potentially narrowing and manipulating its terms. The Minneapolis police response on the night of the vigilante shooting – attacking the gunshot wounded crowd with chemical agents rather than immediately moving to arrest the armed gunmen – illuminates the inherent contradictions of pursuing social change in a society whose ‘legitimate institutions’ are wholly complicit with the material grievances demonstrators are seeking to reconcile.

Terrorism inherently draws a line in the sand and forces people to choose a side. Whether white terrorism is or is not publicly labelled as terror, it is not an isolated incident, nor simply the work

of a few misguided white extremists, or explained by some political cop-out diagnosis of mental illness. The millions of white Americans who were so quick to “Stand with France” and plaster a French flag over their Facebook profile, and the millions of Christian Conservatives that support an agenda that seeks to turn the U.S. into a reactionary theocratic state, need to be forced to recognize their own persistent failure to condemn the vigilante and state violence that systematically targets Black Americans and women for what it is – material support for terrorism.