

not have to suffer, it may be necessary to interrupt, by militant and confrontational means, the injustices perpetrated by police officers. It can be empowering for those who have spent their lives under the heel of oppression to contemplate finally settling the score with their oppressors; however, a real liberation struggle does not focus on exacting revenge, but rather on solving problems so that all might have better lives. Therefore, while it may even sometimes be necessary to set police on fire, this should not be done out of a spirit of vengeful self-righteousness, but from a place of careful thought and compassion—if not for the police themselves, then for all those who would otherwise suffer at their hands.

One could make the argument that encouraging people to struggle against the police does more to publicize disapproval of them than to cause actual assaults. One could even argue that it thereby does a service not only for those who suffer police oppression, but also for the families of police officers and even for the officers themselves—for not only do police officers have a disproportionately high rate of domestic violence and child abuse, they also get killed, commit suicide, and become addicts with disproportionate frequency. Anything that demoralizes police officers and delegitimizes their authority, thus encouraging them to quit their posts, is in their best interest as well as the interest of their loved ones and society at large.

[1] Some people are thrilled when the Zapatistas or others far away in space, time, and culture confront and defeat their oppressors, and gladly use the photographs from those engagements to illustrate their publications, but oppose doing anything of the sort here in the heart of the beast, where the powers that would destroy the Zapatistas and others are most deeply rooted.

[2] Just as there is a sort of person who would rather physically fight external enemies than acknowledge their own shortcomings, there is another sort who prefers the comparatively safe project of critiquing their comrades to the risky business of confronting the armed enforcers of social inequality.

Why We Oppose the Police



Criticism of opposition to the police usually falls into one of five categories. The first common argument is that the police, as our fellow workers, are also exploited members of the proletariat, and should therefore be our allies. Unfortunately, there is a vast gap between “should” and “is.” The police exist to enforce the will of the powerful; anyone who has not had a bad experience with them is likely either privileged or submissive. Today’s police officers, at least in North America, know exactly what they’re getting into when they join the force; people in uniform don’t just get cats out of trees in this country. Yes, most take the job because of what they feel to be economic necessity, but needing a paycheck is no excuse for obeying orders to evict families, harass young men of color, or pepper spray demonstrators; those whose consciences can be bought are everyone else’s enemies, not potential allies.



This argument could be more persuasive if it was couched in strategic terms, rather than Marxist abstractions: for example, “Every revolution succeeds at the moment the armed forces refuse to make war on their fellows; therefore we should focus on seducing the police to our side of the barricades.” But again, the police are not just any workers; they are the ones who have most deliberately chosen to base their livelihoods and value systems upon the prevailing order, and thus are the least likely to be sympathetic to those who struggle against hierarchy. This being the case, it makes sense to focus on opposing the police as such, not on seeking solidarity with them. So long as they serve their masters, they cannot be our allies; by publicly deriding the police as an institution, we encourage individual police officers to seek other employment, so we can find a common cause with them.

The second argument is that the police can win any confrontation, so we shouldn’t invest ourselves in strategies that involve confronting them [1]. It may seem that, with all their guns and armor and equipment, the police are invincible, but this is an illusion. They are limited by all sorts of invisible constraints—bureaucracy, public opinion, their own need to avoid inconvenient escalation. This is why a motley crowd armed only with the tear gas canisters shot at them can hold off a larger, more organized, better equipped force; contests between social unrest and military might are not played out according to the rules of military engagement.

Those who have studied the police, who can predict what they are prepared for and what they can and cannot do, can usually outsmart and outmaneuver them. Such small victories can be inspiring for those who chafe under the heel of police repression, as well as instrumental in accomplishing concrete goals. In the collective unconscious of our society, the police are the ultimate bastion of reality, the force that ensures that things stay the way they are; to fight them and win, however temporarily, is to show that reality is negotiable.

The third argument is that the police are a mere distraction from the real enemy, not worth our wrath or attention. Alas, state power is not just the politicians; they would be powerless without the millions who do their bidding. When we contest their control, we are also contesting the submission of their flunkies, and we are sure sooner or later to come up against those of the latter who insist on submitting. That being said, it’s true that the police are no more integral to hierarchy than the oppressive dynamics in our own communities; they are simply the external manifestation, on a larger scale, of the same phenomena. If we are to contest hierarchy everywhere, rather than specializing in combating certain forms of it while leaving others unchallenged, we have to be prepared to take it on both in

the streets and in our own bedrooms; we can’t expect to win on one front without fighting on the other. We shouldn’t fetishize confrontations with uniformed foes, we shouldn’t forget the power imbalances in our own ranks—but neither should we be content merely to manage the details of our own oppression in a non-hierarchical manner [2].

The fourth and most despicable argument is that we need police. According to this line of thinking, even if we can aspire to live in a society without police in the distant future, we need them today, for people are not ready to live with each other in peace without armed enforcers. As if the social imbalances and submissiveness maintained by the violence of the police are peace! Opponents of the police need not even answer this charge, however. It’s not as if a police-free society is suddenly going to appear overnight, for good or for ill, just because someone spraypaints “Fuck the Police” on a wall—if only it was so easy! The protracted struggle it is going to take to free our communities of police repression will probably go on as long as it takes us to learn to coexist peacefully; indeed, no community incapable of sorting out its own conflicts can expect to triumph against a more powerful occupying force. In the meantime, anti-police sentiments should be seen as objections to one of the most advanced and egregious forms of conflict between human beings, not arguments that without police there would be no conflict at all; and those who argue that the police sometimes do good things bear the burden of proving that those same good things could not be accomplished at least as well by other means.

The final and most nuanced objection to militant resistance against police oppression is the pacifist critique of violence itself. According to this account, violence is inherently a form of domination, and thus inconsistent with opposition to domination; those who engage in violence play the same game as their oppressors, thereby losing from the outset. Others hold that violence enforces unequal power dynamics in some cases, while in other cases it contests them—that is to say, there is such a thing as self-defense. For those whose value system is still descended from Christianity, keeping one’s hands clean of immoral behavior is the top priority, at whatever cost; for the rest of us, who desire to be free of superstitious prohibitions, the most important thing is what will work, in a given context, to make the world a better place. Sometimes—to name an obvious example, in the struggle against Nazi Germany—this may include violence.

To make this clear: yes, cops are people too, and deserve the same respect due all living things. The point is not that they deserve to suffer, or that we have to bring them to justice—that’s Christian morality again, dealing in currencies of superstition and resentment. The point is that, in purely pragmatic terms, in order that others