

Fire On Main Street

Small Cities In The George Floyd Uprising
By Shemon, Arturo and Atticus



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We know that infrastructure is key in sustaining capitalist flows, but what does this infrastructure mean in the context of an insurrection? Blockading infrastructure like airports or highways makes sense at times. But how long can you hold a blockade if your city runs out of food? What happens when you need clean, running water? What happens when you need electricity? Is the goal to blockade power facilities or to take them over? How do we prevent the political and ultimately military isolation of large cities?

This summer's riots have yet to propose an alternative. In this sense they are critiques of racial capitalism and the police, but as soon as the riots become conscious of themselves, they will have to propose an alternative to capitalism. We must do everything in our power so that the coming riots transform into insurrections, so that the flag of the commune-maroon community is raised once again, and where all the questions of geography, of who, where, and what, will be front and center. It is these questions which revolutionaries should be thinking about and trying to answer, not only theoretically, but in terms of praxis. This means expanding our geographic horizon and spending some serious time and energy rooting ourselves in small cities.



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The small city still does not exist on the map of the left as far as revolutionary struggle is concerned. Instead, the revolutionary left in the United States is mostly focused on big cities, resulting in a kind of parochialism where most revolutionaries live in big cities and are more likely to know comrades in other big cities, even overseas in cities like Berlin, Paris or London, but have no relationships with revolutionaries in the small cities and suburbs a few miles outside their city.

In geographic terms, the historical and cultural poles of the far left milieu in the US are Oakland and New York City. Most movement texts and organizational strategy come from these two cities. On one level, this limited geography is a reflection of the class background, cultural status, university education, and coastal biases which map onto the liberalism of left-wing activists since the 2008 crisis. For example, Occupy was also a national movement with camps scattered throughout the country, but the focus still tended to be on New York and Oakland. No matter what the rest of the country did, it was as if those two cities were the only ones that mattered in the imagination of activists.

With the 2014 riots in Ferguson we can now look back and say that this rebellion foreshadowed a wider geography of struggle, although that was not clear at the time. No one had heard of Ferguson before the police murder of Mike Brown and the riots that followed. Suddenly a small St. Louis suburb was the center of national attention. While NYC and Oakland were not necessarily displaced as the extreme poles of the revolutionary left, they were no longer in a dance only with each other, but were

revolutionaries in small cities as we do from revolutionaries in big cities. Fourth, we need to abandon our big city-centric worldview and develop a new praxis that wrestles with the shifting geography of class conflict.

We look to new geographies which do not center finance or real estate capital, the university, or the tiny milieu of the radical left, but instead search for what is required to make revolution a real possibility, and that means seeing the world differently. It has not been any text that has made this perspective possible, but the revolts of the George Floyd uprising. We are merely scribes of the uprising, trying to connect the riots and street fighting to the actual possibility of insurrection and revolution. We do not see the riots as simply riots, but as a process of struggle that opens up the possibility for the overthrow of racial capitalism. This path closes along the current trajectory of the big city-centric left, which is literally the left-wing of capital in its material position. Instead of a left that converges in big cities, we need a left that is rooted in the expansive geography of critical infrastructure and proletarian life.

Our argument is not so far fetched in light of the history of this country. The dynamic relationship between the urban center and the periphery has been a feature of many radical struggles here: the Maroon communities, the Underground Railroad, IWW, CIO, and SNCC. Even today the proletariat has connected some of the dots. It is us, in the far left who are trailing behind them, trying to catch up, and often in the way of their advance. While the proletariat has not completed the map, it has shown us some important paths and directions we must take.

emerged out of the George Floyd uprising. The basis for these possibilities is the generalized crisis which the pandemic, capitalism, and the uprising have generated.

So much of the left gravitates around dense publications, organizational and social networks built in large cities, but as the George Floyd uprising unfolded, these formations revealed themselves to be largely useless. They have been built not for the purposes of engaging in class combat, but for enriching the social capital of middle class people who want to appear radical, who want the cultural trinkets of radicalism, but who have done very little in light of the most intense and massive social unrest in recent US history.

It is the logistics of revolution that should set the basis for how we organize, where we organize, and who we organize with. Only by basing our strategies and horizons in that vantage point does our argument make sense. While big cities will play an important role in this process, accomplishing this goal will require a real presence in the small cities and suburbs which surround the big cities.

Conclusions

There are several interrelated conclusions. First, we believe that some revolutionaries should move to these smaller peripheral cities and connect with proletarian militants in these places, as they are closer to food, manufacturing, logistical, and power infrastructures. Second, even if we do not move to these smaller cities, we still need to develop real political relationships with the militants in these places. Third, we need to learn as much from

circling around a new center of gravity—the small suburban city. But as the fires of Ferguson disappeared, the binary emerged once again between NYC and Oakland.

When the George Floyd uprising erupted throughout the US this summer, dozens of riots happened in small cities like Spokane WA, Eugene OR, Fargo ND, Salt Lake City UT, Atlantic City NJ, Lynchburg VA, Columbia SC, Fort Lauderdale FL, etc. The large and midsize cities certainly showed up, with explosive riots in places like Minneapolis, Oakland, Los Angeles, Portland, Chicago, Louisville, New York City, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Miami, etc. While much attention has been given to these larger cities, the riots in the small cities and suburbs have been largely overlooked. The only exception here is Kenosha, which couldn't be ignored after an armed white counter-protester fired his automatic rifle at BLM protesters and killed two of them.

Riots have been growing in small cities and suburbs throughout the country, but this isn't an entirely new phenomenon. The riots of the 1960s had already exposed a wider geography of struggle, although most people do not remember this era this way. Alongside big cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit and Philadelphia, small cities also exploded in places like Rochester NY, York PA, Omaha NE, and even in small towns and suburbs like Wadesboro NC, Saginaw MI, Plainfield NJ, and Cairo IL. In fact, nearly half of the riots during the “long hot summer” of 1967 happened in small cities and towns.

Clearly, it is not urban centers alone that set the stage for riots and uprisings. Given the shifting geography of where proletarians live and work in the US, our wager is that small cities

and suburbs will increasingly play a role in the battles and ruptures that are coming. Therefore, it's crucial that we analyze the particular dynamics of these places and the strategic implications that they pose.

Class Conflict In The Peripheries

The George Floyd uprising, like the Ferguson riots before it, revealed a growing proletarian strata which increasingly lives outside of big cities. As small cities and suburbs continue to grow in population, they have also become home to a more diverse cross section of the proletariat, which is increasingly Latinx and Black. This strata broke through in small cities like San Bernardino CA, De Moines IA, Champaign IL, Lansing MI, Albany NY, Brockton MA, Providence RI, Richmond VA, Birmingham AL, etc.

While poor people are still over-represented in the largest cities, their numbers have been growing in small cities and suburbs for decades now. As the biggest cities get more gentrified and become more expensive to live in, a growing number of proletarians are leaving and finding more affordable housing in the suburbs and small cities that surround the big cities. This trend is also reinforced by the fact that working class jobs continue to shift away from the urban core and into the suburbs and small cities on the peripheries. At the same time, those who already lived in the peripheries have become poorer, especially since the 2008 crisis, which increased the rate of foreclosures in these areas.

Of course, small cities are not homogeneous, and in fact exhibit sharp differences. The small metropolis is very different

fight. From the standpoint of revolutionary strategy, making connections to small cities is a key part of preventing the isolation of big cities, which are entirely dependent on the ecology of their surrounding regions. If the goal is revolution, it is imperative that militants in big cities begin to build trusting relationships with militants in these smaller peripheral cities. Instead of taking a dozen flights to Oakland or NYC, Berlin or Paris, a serious orientation towards revolution in the United States will involve driving hours outside of Oakland or NYC and building political relationships with people in small cities like Vallejo, Manteca, Modesto and Merced, or Allentown, Scranton and Utica.

This will be very difficult to do. For starters, while jobs are increasingly shifting to smaller cities and suburbs, it is still true that the majority of jobs are concentrated in large urban cores, and even revolutionaries need to hold down jobs under capitalism. But there are other intangible limitations that will also make it hard. Small cities are places of isolation, devoid of big museums, famous music venues, and other interesting cultural forms which we enjoy in big cities. And to the extent that we travel to try to meet comrades who are similar to ourselves, we might find no one on the other side of this trip. This creates many problems with no easy solutions. The current demarcations and constitution of the ultra-left makes meeting our other half very difficult. Niche texts and authors only become common knowledge amongst the dense ecology of revolutionaries that live in big cities. In small cities this is much less likely. Instead of beginning from a textual starting point, it makes more sense to start from the tasks, tactics, strategy, and political horizons which have

providing resources, and using these activities as a basis to start new conversations about revolt and insurrection.

At the same time, critiques of mutual aid apply in small cities as well. We do not want to be a radical version of the Salvation Army. Nor do we want to reproduce the same narrow political milieus that exist in big cities but in smaller forms. Our spaces should be places for proletarians to gather, learn, and strategize, and should provide infrastructure which aids in class combat. This requires following and participating in the struggles of the proletariat, which can manifest themselves as workplace militancy, tenant strikes, eviction defense, insurgent fighting formations, etc. There is no recipe for this. It has to be carefully developed from the tactical and strategic needs that are organic to each specific struggle.

Building A Bridge Between Small Cities And Big Cities

Revolutionaries in small cities often travel to big cities to take part in demonstrations and support radical organizing, but we are much less likely to see the reverse happen. Rockford, for example, is 90 minutes away from Chicago, but few Chicago based radicals have ever stepped foot in Rockford. Yet proletarians in this small rust-belt city rioted and looted for two nights during the George Floyd uprising this summer. While the revolutionary left from big cities might participate in a rebellion in Kenosha, will their support ever extend beyond that?

This is not a moral argument about breaking out of our bubble, but a direct and immediate problem about how we will survive the capitalist crisis and reproduce our ability to live and

from the suburb or satellite city, not just in terms of size and population but more importantly in terms of political-economy. Whereas small cities like Kenosha or Wauwatosa are suburbs of larger cities like Milwaukee, a small metropolis like Birmingham, Durham, or Albany forms its own economic core and has its own suburbs.

We can further divide the political-economy of small cities into two types. The first type are the left-behinds: these are the small cities which have received little to no capital investment, more commonly known as gentrification. These include small cities like Rockford IL, Chester PA, Forest Park GA, or Kenosha WI. Most of the small rust-belt cities in the Northeast and Midwest fall into this first category, although these small immiserated cities can be found throughout the US.

The second type are those small cities which have seen a significant influx of capital investment, such as Durham NC, Pittsburgh PA, Lancaster PA, or Rochester NY. Here investment is about revitalizing the small city as a tourist destination, and as a hub for white collar jobs in healthcare, technology and education. Of course, this kind of investment does not mean less racism or less poverty for the proletariat, which still finds itself relegated to low-wage jobs with no benefits and no job security.

As some small cities make their downtown areas more attractive to suburbanites and yuppies, the same pattern plays out as in the big cities—proletarians get priced out of the commercialized urban core and pushed into the peripheries of the city where rent is more affordable. Despite the existence of small shopping districts, art, cultural and entertainment centers,

highly concentrated pockets of racialized poverty continue to grow on the edges of these types of small cities, reinforcing the social inequality and racial boundaries that eventually explode into open revolt, as was seen in the Daniel Prude riots in Rochester and in the Ricardo Munoz riot in Lancaster, both in early September.

The Limits Of Big Cities

If we take a city like New York City and broaden its geography to the overall NYC metro area, we will quickly see that the city is completely dependent on its surrounding region for survival. Looking at things from this vantage point means we need to ask the following questions: from where and whom do we get our food? Our electricity? Our water? Fuel and replacement parts for subways and buses? And other essential goods we need to survive?

For example, where does NYC get its power from? 31% comes from nuclear power, 44% from natural gas, and 19% from hydro power. None of this is produced in New York City itself. Each of these power sources are located somewhere else, and electrical transmission lines have to deliver the power to the city. From the standpoint of power infrastructure, the NYC region stretches hundreds if not thousands of miles. To think of NYC in an isolated manner when it comes to power is to fall miserably short in understanding the territory, infrastructure, and relations with small cities, suburbs and towns that make a place like NYC possible.

Furthermore, unlike the police in NYC, LA, or other large cities which regularly train in riot tactics, police departments in small cities are generally inept and ill-trained when it comes to dealing with large hostile crowds. When reacting to riot situations, they are quickly overwhelmed and outmaneuvered in the streets. Rioters and experienced militants can take advantage of this.

Of course, there are also clear disadvantages to insurrection in small cities. Often there are no downtown shopping districts to mobilize around, and when there are, they are very small and easily surrounded. Because there is less concentration of capital in small cities, power is more dispersed and harder to find. Another main disadvantage posed by the small size of these places is that the security state might be more likely to know who key militants are.

Something else that stands out in small cities is the absence of a far left milieu. This was not always the case, but it has been this way for some time now. This is not meant to insult or look down upon revolutionaries in small cities. In fact, the lack of a leftist milieu might be a blessing in disguise, since there are less activists, NGO professionals, and academics to mediate, co-opt, or stop the riot.

Because of their unique conditions, what militant organizing looks like in these places will be different from big cities. Some radical projects have already been taking place in places like Mississippi, Indiana, and upstate New York, where revolutionaries are not necessarily protesting all the time or writing articles for a chic radical publication. Instead, they are building spaces,

Strategic Particularities

The riots in small cities exhibited some of the same characteristics as those in the big cities. Police departments were quickly overwhelmed by multi-racial crowds that came together to attack the police and sabotage property. While counterinsurgency has a smaller base in smaller cities—because of the lack of NGOs, lack of Democratic Party infrastructure, and the lack of a Black middle class—counterinsurgency still happened in these places, as a small layer of activists and local politicians intervened and tried to stop people from rioting and looting.

At the same time, it's important to distinguish what is different about the riots in small cities. The specific environment of these places gives rise to particular forms of struggle: the decentralization of the physical terrain and the centrality of cars allows for greater mobility. In this sense, small cities are fundamentally different from big cities in that they were not designed for the prevention and suppression of riots.

Unlike the rigid grid structure of large cities, there is a unique, highly diffuse spatial organization in small cities and towns in which townhouses, apartment buildings, housing complexes and trailer parks are situated in between roads and highways, lawns and estate grounds, patches of woods and parking lots, golf courses and baseball fields, strip malls and shopping centers, all of which make it much more difficult for police to create choke points to corral people and make mass arrests. Thus, there's much more strategic depth available to the movement of the crowd in small cities.

Our point is not to argue that struggles in big cities are useless or anything like that. The radical histories and milieus that exist in larger cities can have a big impact on the political development of revolutionaries in smaller cities, and that cross-pollination is important. However, our argument is that if we are serious about revolution, big cities alone are not enough. Just like socialism in one country was impossible, so is revolution in one big city. This is because big cities are not isolated islands, but exist in tight relations with their surrounding regions and geography, which includes small cities, suburbs, towns and rural areas. Accepting rigid boundaries between these geographies falls into a type of ignorance that cannot recognize the inputs that go into big cities, that make them what they are.

It is worth remembering the experience of the Paris Commune. Here geography was inseparable from the defeat of the revolution. One of the reasons for its defeat was its isolation from the rest of France. Paris went hungry because the siege of the bourgeoisie effectively blockaded the city from the food producing regions of France. Paris is not exceptional, but a pattern that has kept repeating itself in revolutionary movements throughout the decades, in Barcelona, Shanghai, Athens, and Aleppo. Major cities are not self-sufficient. Even with a narrow focus on food in mind, it should be clear that there is no serious possibility of revolution if we cannot find solidarity outside of big cities. Any road to revolution will have to tackle this problem politically and logistically. Otherwise our fate will be that of the communards: hunger and isolation.

Invoking the Paris commune sets our analysis within the framework of insurrection, even though this would emerge out of capitalist geographies. This tension is inescapable, but one we must grapple with in light of the George Floyd uprising. It is obvious that the uprising did not generalize. The riots did not leap into an insurrection and ultimately a new form of life. However, the riots have opened up new pragmatic questions that were mere fantasy only a year ago.

In an era where cities produced massive amounts of industrial goods, James Boggs wrote *The City is the Black Man's Land*, pointing to the unique position of Black proletarians in core industrial cities in the North. Capturing cities like Baltimore, Newark, or Detroit in the 1960s was not only symbolic, but a real node of material power that could be connected to the Black Revolution. The Republic of New Afrika pointed out a flaw in Boggs's thinking, arguing that Northern cities were surrounded by a sea of white racists. In contrast, it was Southern Black cities, nestled in an ecology of Black rural areas, which could provide the dynamic exchange of resources we have discussed. However, a revolutionary commune of the sorts that Paris had in 1871 was not built in the 20th century in the US. Perhaps the closest analogy could be the rise of Black political elites in many major cities, but this is a crass analogy. None of these mayors did anything radical, but they quickly ran into the same geographic limits of being surrounded by hostile metro and regional areas. They were starved of capital investment and a tax base and these cities became highly immiserated. If this is what

capital can do in these reformist circumstances, imagine what capital will do if cities go all out in an anti-capitalist insurrection!

Our focus on small cities, therefore, is not moralistic, but strategic. Small cities are often important nodes which bridge into rural areas. Unlike midsize and large cities, small cities tend to be surrounded not only by suburbs, but also by exurbs and the countryside, places where agriculture, energy production, and extractive industries are more concentrated. We have not talked about urban economies in terms of metropolitan regions, but small cities and suburbs also increasingly constitute a growing portion of the metropolitan economy. While manufacturing has largely left the big cities, it has often migrated to suburbs a few miles away. Small cities and suburbs are also a crucial part of the logistical backbone of the US, playing an essential function in the production, distribution, transportation, and storage of commodities. Amazon and Walmart distribution centers are often found in these places.

For some the lesson of the riots this summer is that we must fight the police. While this is certainly true, this lesson only makes sense as part of a larger plan that develops forms of coordination between small cities and big cities. Fighting the police is not an end, but a means to an end, and if we are not careful, it can be a dead end. For us, the crucial lesson of the 2020 uprising concerns the questions of infrastructure, territory, power, and revolution. How does the riot generalize into an insurrection and from there a revolution? We believe that small cities and suburbs are an essential part of how this happens.