

# Social Uprising in the US: Anti-Racism and Nonviolent Civil Resistance

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## 1. An “Original Social Struggle Event”

When a social body shouts “Enough!” massively and with “permanent firmness”, thus publicly and openly defining its “moral and material frontier” we cannot escape a feeling of extreme emotion! It is not only an issue of dignity, but consciousness of the outer limits of inhumanity we are willing to tolerate. This happened in Ecuador in October 2019 and not long after in Chile too. In Mexico, similar references could be pointed to the moral and materially radical nature of the social response in January 1994 to stop the war in Chiapas, and in October 2014, the reaction against the disappearance of 43 education students from Ayotzinapa, in the state of Guerrero. This type of social uprisings aim to build a “disobedient peace”, because they emerge from an indispensable “disobedience to any inhuman order” (Juan.C.Marin) and inevitably begs the great question, fundamental for the construction of our own moral identity: Which is our moral frontier? Which inhuman order can provoke in us such moral indignation that we can achieve such a high level of individual and collective response?

A central issue in the building of autonomous thinking is the capacity to perceive original social events, in their specific details, in the new concepts which must be learned, not normalized, neither generalized nor interpreted mechanically according to past categories. There are problems of racism and protests in many parts of the world, but what is happening now all over the United States are not simply protests –nor mechanical reiterations of other mobilizations- but rather, if we look at certain characteristics, the latent possibility of going beyond a social explosion, achieve the status of a “social uprising” in the sense of an “awakening” and a real “deeper change” in some central aspect of social life, and not, as we often interpret these phenomena in Latin America, in the sense of a “revolution”. In the words of Spike Lee, “I had never seen demos of such diversity since I was a boy (citing the social movements of the sixties with Martin Luther King)” (*La Jornada*, 2-6-20).

An uprising must be examined within the framework of “social struggle”, which is precisely where the current mobilizations are taking place in the U.S., whereas the very valuable mobilizations in other parts of the world take place in the field of “solidarity”, very important and necessary, but not the same, because in social struggle there are concrete adversaries which must

be faced and against whom specific actions must be directed. The attempt here is to analyze this key aspect, to enable us to try to understand what is happening and in what direction it might be headed. Type of objectives chosen and the type of nonviolent actions implemented, speak clearly about the adversaries and the necessary proportionality between these actions and the sort of violence they aim to overcome.

We believe modestly, from a considerable distance and without the necessary knowledge of the country, that it could be a possible “turn of the screw” in U.S. social policy, in terms of racism, police violence and the notion of public safety. The effects of this uprising (continuous, growing, covering a considerable part of the national territory, multi-racial and encompassing all ages and social identities, supported by many sectors of the national moral reserve, each day more massive and firm in its nonviolent radicalism) are also growing day by day in terms of projects for legislative, political, budgetary, institutional and police strategies, the use of public force etc., which must be followed closely to determine in what measure they are carried out. Naturally, at the present stage all is shrouded in questions, hypotheses, hope and a long learning process.

## **2. Violence results from a linking process of actions and complicities**

Asphyxiate somebody for a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill? Notwithstanding his powerful physique, his total lack of resistance, and that his only words were “Mother, I can’t breathe!” in the middle of an avenue, in broad daylight, with four policemen humiliating him, flat on the ground, for almost nine minutes? Why so much cruelty, excess of violence and degradation, if there is never the smallest attempt to interrogate him on his alleged felony? Where is the proportion between the end and the means?

Evidently, there is much more behind this act of “direct violence” in terms of “cultural and structural violence”, something much deeper: racism, social inequality, brutality of authority (beginning with the Police and the Military) in the repression or opening fire on African Americans and immigrants of any nationality, militarism and governmental authoritarianism, the impunity of the murderers in the courts, manipulation by the media against the most defenseless... as has been correctly reported by the Black Lives Matter movement.

To go deeper in the search of these “unobserved social facts” which are essential for understanding what really happened, it is also important to listen

to Derek Chauvin and the other three policemen (Thomas Lane, Alexander Kueng and Tou Thao) who were with him and participated directly in this murder, in different ways, concerning what “orders they were obeying blindly”. The latter three officers were also accomplices, as they were incapable of “disobeying the inhuman order” of their colleague, being carried out in front of their eyes. A brutal punishment, to serve as an example, without even the minimum of humanity and practical intelligence of hearing the entreaties of the dying victim. What proportion between misdeed and punishment exists in throttling someone and paying with a counterfeit twenty dollar bill (assuming this was true)? I wonder if the commander of Derek’s police unit, and the Police chiefs of Minneapolis and Minnesota have resigned? Do they believe that they are not directly responsible, or are they bereft of personal dignity, or do they agree with what happened?

The early official media and political construction and narrative were conceived to ensure the greatest possible impunity, by permanently centering attention on only one perpetrator—Derek Chauvin—but this was rapidly disproved by the exhibition of a video which shows that two of the other policemen were kneeling on George Floyd’s back, which explains why he was unable to move or make the smallest gesture of resistance. The fourth officer was standing inches away from Derek “contemplating” the action, and we don’t know if he was saying something to him. This fourth officer looks very much like many of us, when we witness an unjust situation, yet we say nothing, and with our silent presence we endorse it.

At bottom, what is behind all this issue is how to understand and approach reflection on acts of social violence: do we examine their “peripheral point” of the last element which triggers the final action? Or do we view it as a process which includes many bodies that are building the conditions for that “final action” to take place? In this latter case, within the culture of peace, there are many responsibilities and consequences which must be met to encourage truth, justice, non-repetition and reparation. Thus, acts of violence are viewed as the end result of the construction of a social process in which different actions and moral levels are entwined and interlinked in many different and complex forms, leading especially to logics of thought and action: Derek—in other situations in the past—put his knee on the backs of detainees, before he has been standing behind the principal perpetrator without saying anything, before he filmed a scene of violence in a public place but never published it on social networks or denounced it, before he had a cellphone but never used it to film a scene of violence...For this reason, the construction of a “disobedient peace” includes the awareness—without

guilt—of where my body is in any social process of violence which involves my identity, and to begin as soon as possible to de-process it by means of “disobedience to those inhuman orders”.

Also, let us pause for a moment to examine the times in which this social event took place, which kicked-off with the brutal murder of Mr. George Floyd on May 25

(<http://blogs.bbk.ac.uk/bbkcomments/2020/06/12/how-long-do-we-need-to-wait-to-acknowledge-that-black-people-are-no-longer-our-slaves/>): on the next day, the four police officers involved are fired; four days later (May 29!) the most direct perpetrator (Derek Chauvin) is arrested and charged with third degree murder; nine days later (June 3!) the other three officers were also arrested (It seems unbelievable to allege that Derek alone was responsible) and the charges against Derek are increased to second degree murder.

### 3. **Nonviolent struggle as Social Uprising**

Why is this escalation of charges, although much too slow given the gravity of the murder, so important for the history of justice against U.S. police forces in cases of violence against African American populations? No doubt, in considerable part, it is due to the enormous and exemplary massive social mobilizations all over the country.

The first nonviolent action, which was crucial for frustrating the impunity and triggering the social uprising, was that of a passerby who, with great bravery, filmed the event and posted it on social networks. This person, in the first place, had a weapon, a cellular phone; but, in the second, and principally, she had the courage to use it at the scene of crime and in front of the Police; and finally, with even greater courage, she posted her video on the net. These are three different actions which demand an increasing degree of bravery and moral determination. She did not wish to be an accomplice by means of her silence, “looking the other way, as if nothing had happened”, normalizing this murder in the middle of a street. This action is totally opposite –in both its logic and its form—to that of the fourth policeman, who “observed” (thus conniving) without doing anything while the other three perpetrated the aggression. Which of these two actors will the construction of our own social identity take as an example to follow?

Personally, I felt a powerful emotion when I saw the pictures of massive waves of people, with multiple identities in many U.S. cities, armed with an enormous moral determination, fraternity, solidarity with the Floyd family

and African Americans in general, indignation against racism and police violence, carrying out mostly nonviolent acts in the quest for basic change now! I was also deeply moved by two photos which showed a police station in Minneapolis and a burning squad car. In these photos we see all the force of nonviolent struggle in this social uprising, with the burning of one of the symbols of the identity of the four perpetrators: a squad car and the station in which the inhuman orders are issued. It is not the officers who are burning, but a symbol, in an action that might be seen as a violent “direct attack” on a material object of public power, but which—in the logic of “construction of real justice and peace” is in effect the destruction of an instrument which has just been used to commit a crime of atrocious inhumanity. Therefore, the interpretation of the act must not be centered on the “fetishism” of the weapons used (Molotov cocktails), thus shrouding the true meaning of the action: destroy what killed Mr. George. It is an action that could in part fit in the definition of “sabotage”, acts which are on the borderline between violence and nonviolence, because they do not attack people, but the objects these people use to oppress or to accumulate more power. For actions of this type, Nelson Mandela was in prison for 27 years (1962-1990).

Simultaneously, something that also surfaced rapidly in these massive protests was the history and culture which exists in the American people, and especially in the African American people, concerning Martin Luther King and many other nonviolent leaders who espoused nonviolent mobilizations and particularly civil disobedience, a real engine for the advancement of humanity and not a factor of social chaos, as those who wish to further the *status quo* proclaim. It is an historical experience, which is installed in many social and cultural identities, and which can be called upon when it is necessary. What we are seeing, with emotion and total solidarity, in that part of the American population which has risen up against this brutal injustice, is a great anger, rage and moral and material indignation. Good! Life within the culture and construction of peace with justice demands that we constantly be on the alert against the inhuman situations which envelop us—at close quarters or in the distance—and ready to react against them being “disobedient” to avoid being direct or indirect accomplices. This is the “road to humanizing ourselves”; sometimes we tread it individually, others collectively, and sometimes massively, like the present reaction in the U.S. In other words, quoting the Zapatistas, Hannah Arendt and Stephan Hessel, the construction, promotion and activation of “worthy anger” and “indignation”. The population of many cities from all parts of the United States, followed by many more in the world, placed their moral indignation,

justice and rejection of racism above their fear of dying from Coronavirus infection, and took to the streets –to occupy them and never let them go, even in this pandemic confinement—placing their bodies massively and in total contact to protest with great determination, in the precise places associated with the perpetrators and the authorities who support them –starting with the president—to demand complete truth, justice and basic change.

A very beautiful and exemplary action was that, in many cities, the people remained in the streets protesting, even when their towns were under curfew (which was declared in more than forty cities!), confronting mass arrests with total aplomb and power. Martin Luther King said it very well: “While we are not able to fill the jails, we are not worthy of victory”. It is well known that, at a certain level of legitimacy and mass protests, jailing demonstrators rapidly reverts against the authorities, it becomes symbolic and immoral, to the extent that it must be cancelled. Similarly, the permanence of the watch in front of the White House, notwithstanding Trump’s grand threats and repression, has been significant. Also, the refusal of Minneapolis carriers to transport demonstrators arrested by the Police, in a clear demonstration of non-cooperation, was also intensely symbolic. At the same time, the growing, decided and clear participation of large sectors of the American “moral reserve” (relevant figures from the arts, cinema, science, culture, politics, religion, unions, sports), demonstrating openly, nonviolently, radically and in proportion with the act of extreme violence they reject, will become increasingly crucial.

On the other hand, it is an historical experience that an adversary like Trump achieves his greatest potential inciting to violence (in a tweet which Trump withdrew immediately after the protests started, he said: “If looting begins, shooting begins”) thus contributing to the spiral of hatred (accusing antifascists of being terrorists), and presenting himself in messianic tones as a savior (photo holding a Bible at Saint John’s church). He needs to justify his repression at all levels showing and provoking the violence of his adversaries. As a result, the nonviolent social movement knows from past experiences that the moral and material strength of their protests loses much of its effectiveness if there are violent attacks against persons or installations with no direct link to the perpetrators of the atrocity. This practice immediately alienates one of the principal instruments of this type of struggle - the massive sum of bodies - as fear inhibits many people from joining the demonstration on the streets. We thought it was a great strategic move that groups of activists blocked the accesses to stores to prevent looting by protest groups using different violent tactics.

Thus, the nonviolent character of the uprising has been increasingly stated and believed, causing even some sectors of authority to break formation and express their refusal to repress demos, suggesting that some of the more urgent demands should be met.

#### **4. Strategic issues on which to continue reflecting and acting**

A social event of this originality and radical direct action, both culturally and structurally, challenges us with many questions and “observable social facts”. These are central to our achieving the necessary awareness in our own lives and in the social order in which we live while questioning the best ways to struggle for humanization. I would like to share, with no pretension of having complete answers, a few questions/reflections axes, from the point of view of the culture of strategic peace and nonviolence.

- Which elements came together and created an “intellectual, epistemic and/or moral rupture” in millions of people –the great majority of them were multi-racial, no social activists or human rights advocates—so intense that it compelled them to take to the streets in the middle of a pandemic, in the country with more infections and deaths in the world, putting their moral conscience before their own life?
- Why did the Police take four days to arrest Derek Chauvin, and nine days to arrest the other three police officers who were with him, in the face of such mobilizations?
- How far does the mental, moral, cultural and physical construction of social order reach in its mission of permeating, educating, and disciplining all of us, from the beginning of our lives, in “anticipated obedience to any punishment order that authority gives” (Jan Carlos Marin)? Is this obedience so deep, ignorant and infantilizing that we follow it even in the face of a dying stranger who is shouting at us “Mother, I can’t breathe!”, while a camera is filming him, under the pretext of a supposedly forged 20 dollar bill, that wasn’t even his?
- What might have been achieved, in terms of truth, justice, non- repetition and reparation without all the mobilizations of this social uprising? To what extent can social protests which follow the strategy of active nonviolence dovetail with those of insurrectional anarchism, on the strict basis of their respective accumulation keys in the struggle

(moral force and material violence), independently from moral prejudices? What concrete effects and results have both strategies produced in the face of the strategy of the “hatred spiral” advocated by Trump and the extreme right?

To conclude, just a simple question about the “reality principle” of the social order in which we live, just to avoid being trapped by illusions, even though we can indulge in a certain hope now:

If Derek Chauvin had been an African American, can we imagine the media and politico-social hatred campaign, accusing him of being inhuman, sadist? And might he not even be on his way to the electric chair right now?

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