

United States: Fire this Time in Minneapolis - "My son tells me..."

Monday 1 June 2020, by [HYLTON Forrest](#) (Date first published: 1 June 2020).

When my son, who's 19, called from Minneapolis on Saturday night, I was watching the livestream of protesters defying curfew there for the second night in a row, and listening to young people dry heave, like my students in Colombia, from the tear gas. Because he has first-aid training for mountaineering, my son was volunteering in a medical tent clearly identified with a red cross, but the state police fired on them with tear-gas canisters and rubber bullets, and he and his friends hoofed it home. The real medics told him to stay in for the night. It was going to get rough.

He had called me on Friday night, too, before heading out to defy the curfew. The 5th Precinct police station, which protesters surrounded with dumpster fires, is a ten-minute walk from where he lives. He told me white people shouldn't loot because it will be blamed on black people. I told him it will be blamed on them regardless. I was not inciting him to loot. Race reductionism is endemic in his generation, and I try to combat it. It's hard for them to think about race and class together because of the education they received under Bush and Obama.

My son and his friends are openly defying local and national law enforcement, local and national media, and the local political power structure, and they are not afraid or crazy, much less vandals or looters. They know a bit of history. He described the police infiltrators, plastic bullets and stun grenades, and said he knew that baking soda and water is the best palliative for tear gas. He asked me casually if the CIA had subverted the gang truce after the LA riots in 1992, and wanted to know what it was like being fired on with live ammunition. Not fun, I said, since people die.

Speaking on Saturday, Minnesota's Democratic governor, Tim Walz, was panicked and furious. He didn't grasp the scope of the economic pain that people are suffering - the reason they'd stopped and raided trucks the day before. Walz and the local news anchors were talking as if the US wasn't in the worst recession since the Great Depression, which is hitting young people of all races, as well as black and Latinx communities, especially hard.

'What you're witnessing in Minnesota is something that's been a long time coming,' Leslie Redmond, the president of the Minneapolis NAACP, said on Friday. 'I can't tell you how many governors I've sat down with, how many mayors we've sat down with. And we've warned them that if you keep murdering black people, the city will burn. We have stopped the city from burning numerous times, and we are not responsible for it burning now.' But the local government and media do not understand this as an uprising, because they worship private property and the mythology-ideology of small business - especially businesses owned by immigrants and people of colour - as the foundation of the multicultural, neoliberal US. They cannot understand riots as political acts, however inchoate.

The progressive mayors of Minneapolis and St Paul, Jacob Frey and Melvin Carter (one Jewish, the other African-American), have surrendered to governor Walz (also progressive by US standards), since they could not control the flames or protests on 28-29 May. And if the governor can't control them, with at least 1000 additional National Guard troops, the military police will go in, though I doubt it will come to that. In an interview on live TV, a member of the Vice Lords said all the gangs are out and armed.

The combination of militarism and neoliberal policy could be combustible and deadly. The lieutenant governor, Peggy Flanagan, who is Ojibwe, used the language of civil rights to insist on 30 May that the authorities would remove 'outside agitators' from the Minneapolis streets. Everyone native to the city needed to stay inside, she said, so that cops, soldiers or MPs could get those anarchists from out of state (my son falls into that category for them: he is the new enemy). Then everything would be fine and normal again, assuming the murderers of George Floyd were held accountable. Clean up the police and the problem vanishes.

The consensus seems to be that outside agitators are directing the riot. The governor, the lieutenant governor, the mayors of Minneapolis and St Paul, along with the US attorney general, William Barr, agree that anti-fascist anarchists, presumably white, are to blame. Trump yesterday called them 'bad people' and threatened to designate 'antifa' as a terrorist organisation. Never mind that antifa does not exist as a functioning organisation. Depression-level unemployment and a dispossessed generation do not figure into the calculus.

But 'outside agitators' would not explain why most of the dozens of people arrested in Minneapolis on 30 May were residents of the city. And busloads of anarchists coming into Minnesota wouldn't explain why there were uprisings in more than thirty cities around the country that night, and 140 the following night. The petit-bourgeois, small business, middle-class-professional bias of everything on our news screens, even progressive shows I support, is oppressive and occlusive, and it paves the way for the draconian repression of young people, already underway.

I shouldn't be surprised at the half-life of the 'outside agitator', but I am. What about the alleged undercover cop caught on tape vandalising the windows of an AutoZone? The one whose ex-wife apparently identified him? He and his type are as local as they come, and they get a free pass from the media and the authorised community voices that condemn mob violence and looting. What about the cops seen setting fires and retreating to the safety of the 3rd Precinct (before protestors burned it on 28 May)?

There has also so far been minimal mention of the white supremacist Boogaloo boys. Out after curfew, my son's girlfriend was chased down by a carload of them on Saturday evening; she and a friend escaped through a park. Her leg was bleeding from a rubber bullet wound inflicted by the police. Yesterday afternoon on the I-35W freeway bridge, under the watchful eye of local network helicopters, a lone trucker drove his apparently leaking tanker into a crowd of more than ten thousand peaceful demonstrators (he is now in police custody).

These white men of the right fit the bill of outside agitators, or even terrorists of a sort, much more than the alleged network of 'anarchists'. My son tells me there is no leadership and minimal organisation. No one listens to anarchists.

I'm hoping things take a turn in the direction of Chile in 2019, though the political culture in Minnesota, and the US more broadly, is probably not strong enough to support an insurrection for months on end. Not even the Chileans can do it mid-pandemic, but they're waiting, and will be back in 2021, when the time is right. Same here in Colombia. If only Brazil would begin to move. Perhaps the confrontations of fascists and anti-fascists on the Avenida Paulista in São Paulo yesterday are a sign of things to come.

Forrest Hylton

P.S.

- London Review of Books. 1 June 2020:
<https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2020/june/fire-this-time-in-minneapolis>