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# PHOENIX RISING

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INSURGENCY & COUNTERINSURGENCY  
IN THE VALLEY OF THE SUN



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# PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Like many places across America and the world, Phoenix erupted in the summer of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. Despite being the fifth largest city in the country, however, the scale of the eruption paled in comparison to many other cities, notably Minneapolis itself, Portland, and Atlanta, among others. Nonetheless, in a city that has not been considered a hot bed for radical action in a decade or more, the rupture that occurred in Phoenix was significant. It is with this understanding that I write the following account, not with the intent of creating a comprehensive analysis of the entire uprising in Phoenix, but rather to present the observations of one participant's experiences in the hopes of adding to the discourse surrounding the nationwide uprising and its aftermath.

To begin, a brief contextualization of Phoenix might be helpful. While naturally I'm speaking strictly about the city of Phoenix and its associated metropolitan area, many aspects of this context applies to the broader Southwest region. As mentioned above, Phoenix is the

fifth largest city in the United States with around 1.6 million people in the city's core and close to 5 million in its metropolitan area. Despite this, the urban sprawl common to many Southwestern cities gives Phoenix a population density akin to that of a small town. To illustrate this, Phoenix's population density is about 3,000 per square mile across 517 square miles. Compare this to Minneapolis, whose total population is around 420,000, with a population density of over 8,000 per square mile, across 57 square miles, or compare it to Philadelphia, with a similar population to Phoenix with about 1.57 million, but with a population density of over 11,000 per square mile across about 141 square miles. The reason that I find these dry geographic comparisons important is because it seems to partially explain why Phoenix seems to be a place where radical politics come to die. The vast suburban-style sprawl makes it obnoxiously difficult to coordinate anything at all, much less to break out of your bubble of anarchist friends. Of course, geography isn't the sole problem faced by revolutionaries in the Phoenix area. There are additional obstacles that have to be grappled with, such as the iron grip that the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) has on the city, particularly in regards to immigrant and racial justice; the high degree of de facto racial and class segregation; the heavy presence of several federal policing agencies such as DHS, ICE, and CBP due to the city's proximity to the southern border, and of course, the fact that the city's core was intentionally designed to limit the possibility of popular insurrection. It is this socio-geographic context that the indomitable hearts of Phoenix find themselves up against. It should be no surprise, then, that Phoenix's history of riot and rebellion is, to say the least, lacking and rare with a few notable exceptions. The summer of 2020 was one of those rare exceptions.

The brief overview of Phoenix's participation in the George Floyd Rebellion is that for four nights, the city popped off in a way that I hadn't seen in the near decade that I lived as an anarchist there before being thorough-



ly crushed, coopted, and vacated of any genuine militancy or subversiveness. Prior to the crushing of the rebellion, however, much was learned on the streets through direct conflict with the pigs. The first night began with a massive march through the downtown area, with those first few hours remaining peaceful, but with tension palpable. The police became aggressive after the march converged on the capitol building. It was here that the rupture began – the simple gesture of a skateboard to the rear window of a police cruiser set everything in motion. From that point through the following three nights, the heart of the city remained in direct conflict with the existent order. It was clear on that first night that hardly anyone in the streets knew what to do, but the police didn't know what to do, either. Typically, when it "pops off" in Phoenix, the crowd gets teargassed, pepper-sprayed and shot, causing most of everyone to scatter, leaving behind a small contingent of the more dedicated individuals to pitifully fend for themselves before they, too, either pick up and leave or get arrested. So, when a large crowd didn't immediately disappear in a cloud of tear gas, the police were dumbfounded at first, and then panic set in. The rest of that first night was a back-and-forth skirmish outside the PPD headquarters and up and down 7th Avenue until the earlier hours of the morning. The openings presented on that first night went largely under-utilized. There were some attempts to make a barricade out of garbage and tree branches, some windows were broken, walls were defaced, and certain individuals held up a bus for a while. Overall, the main positive quality I observed was a stubborn desire to show those pigs what's what. PPD evidently ran out of ammunition and ended up having to call for the State Trooper's SWAT team to finally clear us out.

After that first night, it was clear that people were beginning to learn, both through their own creativity and through watching what was happening in other cities around the country and around the world. The second night began similarly to the first and peaked with the smashing



up of windows at major banks and municipal buildings in downtown. The third night was the turning point of the insurrection. In downtown, there was a chaotic mass of people marauding through the city and evading the police, while agents of the NPIC attempted to co-opt the energy and position themselves as the legitimate authority and leadership of the uprising. At one point, some of these clowns attempted to have a contingent of these rebellious hearts sit quietly in the middle of the street and be lectured about non-violence, reform, and how “we can show the world that we can make a statement without destroying our city” (given that Phoenix’s participation in the uprising has been largely overlooked in the discourse surrounding its aftermath, it should go without saying that we should have set fire to much more than we did). Those movement managers were quickly pushed out, allowing the militancy of the crowd to flourish again. Once again there were skirmishes with and evasions of the police until the early hours of the morning in multiple areas of the city. The shoddy half-assed barricades of the first night became admirable barricades made from construction barriers and fences; the confused passivity characteristic of the first night became a confident participation in the combat against the ruling order. While much of the situation still went largely under-utilized (how many parking meters, ATMs, and windows went untouched? How many stores went un-looted?), it was a marked improvement from the two nights prior, and particularly, it was a major improvement from years’ worth of prior mass demonstrations. Incredibly, during this same night, some people had the good sense to loot the Scottsdale Mall. For the unaware, the Scottsdale Mall is the wealthiest mall in the state, featuring cheap and affordable brands such as Hugo Boss, Chanel, and Nieman Marcus. This action was, in no uncertain terms, the magnum opus of the Phoenix uprising. It’s unfortunate that it largely ended there.

Between the three days of unprecedented unrest in the city core and the looting of the wealthiest mall in

the wealthiest city of the Phoenix metropolitan area, the governor declared a state of emergency and an 8pm curfew. As such, the fourth and final day of the Phoenix uprising ended in tragedy. Our feeble, spirited rebellion broke under the weight of every metropolitan police agency and every federal law enforcement agency available in these 500 square miles of asphalt hell. It didn't need to end there, but unfortunately, we weren't ready for it, and so hundreds were brutalized and arrested on that final night. The weeks that followed were characterized by a stifled militancy, corralled by those all-too-familiar agents of the NPIC, and a strict obedience to the 8pm curfew.

It is here that I will highlight the strengths and weaknesses as I saw them during those memorable nights. Again, this is not meant to be a comprehensive analysis with associated solutions, but instead my suggestions of relevant points of departure for further discussion and experimentation. To begin, the strengths:

1. Stubbornness – Perhaps the common feature throughout those four nights was an uncharacteristic stubbornness in the face of police repression. As mentioned before, the historic trend was for most everyone to scatter when the teargas, pepper-spray and rubber bullets came, but the summer of 2020 was a much different scenario. Unfortunately, stubbornness alone is not enough to fend off the full power of the state.
2. Be Water – The slogan of the Hong Kong uprising just prior to the George Floyd uprising was taken to heart by many insurgents in cities across the country, and Phoenix was no different. Amongst the chaos, the slogan was shouted through the crowd and seemingly intuitively understood. The crowd flowed through the streets, responding to the police at times like a river, and at others like a tsunami. To demonstrate

how effective this was, the number of arrests prior to the final curfew crackdown were minimal despite the height of militancy each night.

3. The Scottsdale Mall – Again, the magnum opus of those four days. Causing millions in damages to a wealthy mall in a wealthy city known for its racism and its history as a sundown town was unequivocally one of the best things I’ve ever seen happen in this place.

And to end, the weaknesses. While there are innumerable areas of improvement that could be identified, I’ll attempt to highlight the ones that I find to be most critical:

1. Geography – The socio-geographic challenges of Phoenix must be overcome if it is ever to go beyond the mediocrity that plagues it currently. I do not have any comprehensive answers to point to here, but what I will say is that I have seen enough radical projects live and die in Phoenix to say that anarchists need to go beyond the tactics they have tried and tried again here and to go beyond the tactics that seem to work just about everywhere else, because Phoenix and the larger Southwest are not like everywhere else. We need to find new tactics that address the unique socio-geographic realities that we face.

2. Networks – The anarchist networks in Phoenix are weak and there’s no two ways about that. This point is related to the prior point in many ways. Anarchists in Phoenix need to find ways to strengthen their networks with one another, build more trust and affinity, and most importantly: they need to build more offensive capacity. Some networks popped up in the midst of the uprising, which was beautiful to see, but had they existed prior and had their offensive capacities been developed before rather than during the upris-

ing, then perhaps there would not have been nearly as much under-utilized capacity in the streets.

3. The Curfew – Again, related to the above point, the aftermath of the curfew was clearly the biggest disappointment. It didn't need to end the way that it did and it could have been defied, but unfortunately, the networks that would have supported the continuation of revolt didn't exist prior, and the ones that popped up during it all were too brittle to withstand what came. Curfews were similarly called in other cities and were as brutally repressed, but it did not result in the death of the revolt. Militants in the Phoenix area should analyze the resiliency of these other places.

4. The NPIC, Peace Police, and Livestreamers – The movement managers of the non-profit industrial complex and their associated peace police should have been dealt with more swiftly and more aggressively. While they had certainly lost control of the situation, it was clear that they had not been effectively dealt with in two ways. Firstly, there were still individual peace police within the crowd attempting to quell genuine expressions of revolt at every corner. They should have been handled the same way every other type of cop and snitch is dealt with. Similarly, there was no shortage of livestreamers snitching to the world about the activities of those nights, and they should have been shown the same hostility as the aforementioned peace officers. Secondly, after the repression on the night of the curfew, power was firmly back in the hands of these movement managers, indicating that not enough was done to subvert their grip. Those who wish to control and domesticate the energy and anger of revolt should be opposed and confronted as early as possible.

5. Infrastructure and Logistics – Logistics is power, as the Tiqqunistas are wont to say. The Phoenix radical milieu that I have experienced has a tendency to focus on spectacled actions that have the veneer of militancy but lack substance – in other words, symbolic mass street demos that focus on vacant symbols of power, such as the state capitol building, and subsequently don't attack or even challenge the ruling order. I would encourage instead to focus on the infrastructural and logistical mediums that allow this world that we despise so much to exist in the first place. Power does not lie within these vacant symbols (as has been demonstrated many times before), but instead in the continued flow of capital. As such, I would encourage the Phoenix milieu to consider how this flow can be substantively disrupted and to consider these possibilities during this space between insurrections that we currently occupy.

In the intervening months since the initial uprising, I've seen suggestions that new affinities have been developed in the Valley of the Sun, particularly amongst the youth, that ever-reliable avant-garde of rebellion. There have been a number of small but spirited autonomous actions that have occurred in the city since that fateful month of May, most of which have been encouraging. I give those kids my respect and I encourage them to continue to be brave, to continue to learn, and to never let go of their desire for freedom. We don't hold these beliefs because they offer us easy answers or safety, but because we wish more for ourselves and the people we love than the non-life that is offered to us. I hope these words can be of use to those that share our belief in the beautiful idea.

*In solidarity with Loren Reed, the so-called ACAB gang, and all of the beautiful, defiant, indomitable hearts of these Southwestern deserts. No act of revolt is futile.*





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