

America Turned Inside Out: Insurrections and the Theatrics of Unmasking

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In a 1787 letter to William Smith (the son-in-law of John Adams), Thomas Jefferson made this disquieting statement about the trials and tribulations of the 11-year-old United States and its destiny:

[W]hat country can preserve it's [sic] liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms... What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is it's [sic] natural manure.

What makes Jefferson's letter so disturbing is not only its apparent callousness towards the "few lives" needed for sacrifice so that the nation can be renewed, but his assertion that Liberty itself is nurtured ritualistically by "the blood of [both] patriots and tyrants." This conception of Liberty directs us towards a veiled, yet no less profound, contradiction emanating from the idea of freedom and democracy in the United States: that in order for Liberty to even exist and flourish, it must be linked together with its direct opposite—tyranny and oppression. For us in the 21st century, we can sigh in relief that the political system of the United States isn't governed by Jefferson's preferred method of near-constant violent revolution, but is ruled by an orderly democracy where the president is elected through the collective ritual of voting, which is then further filtered by the Electoral

College. However, when faced with the inflow of "dark money" from anonymous donors to political campaigns, and the dwindling participation of American citizens in the democratic process (which only slightly increased during the uniquely rancorous 2020 presidential elections), perhaps the ritual of voting and the counterintuitive system of the Electoral College contains a hidden semblance of democracy's eternal foe. The ritual of voting, rather than a pragmatic, objective system where the will of a unified and cohesive people is genuinely expressed, paradoxically covers up the radical fragmentation, ambivalence, and oppression that permeates in American democracy. In the aftermath of a contested election that led to rioting and violence at the Capitol on January 6th, and racial protests against police brutality that swept the nation in 2020, we must recognize how the ceremonies of democracy are in fact sustained by a force of violence lurking underneath. In the 20th and 21st centuries, American insurrectionary groups have contested the core assumptions of the state not only through flashes of collective violence, but when they enact a "theatrics of unmasking" which reflects the contradictory and incoherent rituals of American democracy. From the Black Panthers, the Chicago Seven Trial, and the January 6th storming of the Capitol, these insurrections "unmask" the established order by appropriating its theatrical elements, collapsing the gap between idle audience

members and active participants in the internal and irreducible conflicts of American democracy.

The contestation of political space is one of the most prevalent and effective means for insurrectionary groups to enact a theatrics of unmasking, with the Black Panther Party performing their radical politics both on the street and on the state's seat of power. One instance was on May 2nd, 1967, when California's State Capitol was temporarily taken over by thirty armed Black Panthers. On the Capitol's steps, Panther Chairman Bobby Seale delivered a speech written by Minister of Defense Huey Newton condemning the "racist California Legislature" for the upcoming signing of the Mulford Gun Bill, which was to keep, in Seale and Newton's words, "the Black people disarmed and powerless at the very same time that racist police agencies throughout the country are intensifying the terror, brutality, murder, and repression on Black people." According to Patrick Charles, this demonstration only hastened the signing of the Mulford Bill, which saw the Oakland Police Department, Democrats, Republicans, and the even the NRA come together and rally support for its signing. Here, we can see how the Black Panther's "invasion" of California's Capitol was not only theatrical in their show of force, but how the demonstration caused the ideological division between Republicans and Democrats to momentarily evaporate, revealing their true solidarity with one another when confronted with the Black Panther's revolutionary presence and rhetoric. The Mulford Bill was notoriously a response to the Black Panthers' institutionalized practice in predominately Black ghettos and communities known as "cop watching," where they evoked the self-defense rhetoric inscribed in the Constitution's Second Amendment to defend themselves against "racist police oppression and brutality" (Foner 3). Essentially, "cop watching"

was the reversal of the theatrics underpinning the activities of the local police departments: a public "unmasking" which was used to not only defend Black communities from the racist violence perpetuated by local police departments, but most significantly, constituted this community and the Black Panther identity through this performance and reversal of force. In evoking the language and rhetoric of the Constitution in their self-defense programs and in the "Ten Point Program," the Panthers were able to appropriate the foundational elements of American democracy and highlight the hypocrisy of racism and violence underpinning the California legislature to pass the Mulford Gun Bill into state law.

The Black Panthers were quite successful in cultivating this sense of group identity through theatrical performance, where they utilized Marxist-Leninist theory to emphasize how the "vanguard party" of the Panthers is used to educate the masses: "the party must engage in activities that will teach the people... to awaken the people and to teach them the strategic method of resisting the power structure" (Foner 42). Vanguardism for the Panthers was a strategy of visibility which bridged their insurrectionary activity to the public audience, which was for them, a process of education. One their programs of educating the public was the Breakfast for Children program, which performed the Panther's radical politics within the space of the public itself. As Fred Hampton mentions, the "people came and took our program, saw it in a socialist fashion without even knowing it was socialism" (Foner 139). In Steve McCutchen's *Panther Diary*, this same strategy of bridging group solidarity through embedding the Party into the public space is seen when McCutchen's Panther chapter, after suffering from harassment and arrests by police officers, is directed to "establish Black Community Information Centers (BCIC) in houses

that are at the heart of the Black community, surrounded by the masses” (Foner 123). Not only does this strategy of visibility put the Black Panthers within the space of their target audience, but doing so also offers them protection from police harassment since their actions would also be visible to public: “Pigs won’t be so trigger happy to vamp on our facilities if there is a chance of others being privy to their military-style murderous attacks on our buildings and programs” (123). Public space is a profoundly ambivalent source of power for insurrectionary activity, becoming a stage of conflict between the theatrics of the Panthers and the state police force. Visibility, performance, and public submergence were integral strategies of the Black Panthers to expand their influence to the audience of the masses, where they were also able to expose the hypocrisy, poverty, and racist violence festering within the cracks of American democracy in the 1960s and 70s.

The Trial of the Chicago Seven in many ways was a microcosm of the social and political contradictions permeating the United States in the same period as the Black Panthers: the Vietnam War, systemic poverty, racial oppression, and the state ceremonies and rituals which attempted to cover-up these incongruences. The political and legal space of the courtroom, which is especially apparent in the Chicago Seven Trial, is always underpinned by a certain element of double-edged ambivalence: to “perform” the transparency of the legal process where defendants can show evidence and arguments for their innocence which are then judged fairly and impartially, or to fall into a “show trial” where the defendants are already presumed to be guilty by the state, but are still put on display as *if* the legal process is still acting as fair, transparent, and impartial. The Chicago Seven Trial falls under the latter category of courtroom theatrics under the

authority of Judge Julius Hoffman, who issued and upheld an onslaught of contempt of court citations and objections towards the seven defendants and their attorneys. The seven defendants, Rennie Davis, David Dellinger, John Froines, Tom Hayden, Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and Lee Weiner, were notably charged with conspiracy and crossing state lines to incite a riot at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, who were there protesting against the lack of public representation in the convention and the continuation of the Vietnam War which ended in a violent clash with the police force. Although Judge Hoffman ruled the court room with impunity against the defendants and their attorneys, the ambivalence of the courtroom also open for the Chicago Seven to assert themselves and reclaim the ideals of American liberty and democracy.

This ambivalence is apparent during a scene in the trial where the defense attorney, William Kunstler, motioned for recess so that the defendants could participate in Moratorium Day, one of the nation’s largest peace demonstrations against the Vietnam War. Here, Kunstler argues that “the refusal to give permits to marches of protest is probably one of the main reasons why we are all before you this moment,” bridging the demonstrations and political activity occurring across the nation into the legal space of the courtroom, which implicitly illuminates the partisan, undemocratic dimension of the prosecution’s case (43). Kunstler then offers a populist argument for the motion to recess to Judge Hoffman, stating that Moratorium Day was “not declared by the President but declared by the supreme holder of all power in the country, the people” (44). Following this thread, Kunstler argues that Moratorium Day is on par with the recess recognizing the death of General Eisenhower ordered by President Nixon, claiming that the court “ought to close for the deaths of

thousands and millions of innocent people whose lives have been corrupted and rotted and perverted by this utter horror that goes on in your name and my name” (45). This populist rhetoric in the motion for recess provokes Judge Hoffman into retorting, “Not in my name” (45). The subsequent bickering between Hoffman and Kunstler illuminates one of the fundamental issues of the trial: under whose authority is the trial based on, the will of the people or an elite individual (such as the president or the judge)? This confrontation then is based on the legitimacy of the trial itself and for whom the trial really serves (the “people” or just a select few?), which makes Hoffman rather uncomfortable, since he is caught between conceding to Kunstler that the United States government is indeed acting “in your name and my name,” which would put both persons on an equal playing field, or to argue that this is in actuality not true. Perhaps Hoffman is only resistant to Kunstler’s argument because he only despises his personal character, but the cut off that Hoffman issues, “That will be all, sir. I shall hear you no further,” points to a radical political animosity permeating the whole trial, which is rooted in the ambivalence of the courtroom and the Constitution itself (45). This scene between Hoffman and Kunstler is not just an argument over a recess, but a confrontation between two radically conflicting interpretations of American democracy taking place within the courtroom: the right-wing elitism of Post-War America (through Hoffman and the Nixon administration) and the populist fervor of the Yippies, Panthers, and the other New Left movements protesting against this establishment (the Chicago Seven and their attorneys). Under this light, the space of the courtroom is thoroughly fragmented through its embeddedness within the totality of social dynamics, theatrics, and conflicts occurring in the cultural revolutions of the 60s and 70s.

Although the world of Yippies and Black

Panthers is long gone, the January 6th Capitol riot has shown not only how theatrics remain an integral component of contemporary insurrections, but how these theatrics harness their power from the ritual of “unmasking” which reveals the contradictions of the dominant political order. As one Trump supporter noted on his way towards the “Stop the Steal” rally, the insurrectionists weren’t just demonstrating against Trump’s loss in the 2020 election, but they genuinely felt they were fighting for “the American” way of life which is becoming increasingly eroded and erased within our mass media channels and established pathways for political representation (*The New York Times*). But this way of life, like American democracy itself even, is radically fragmented and incoherent. First, there is the vast disarray of flags, costumes, outfits, and militias which appeared to be after the same thing, to “Stop the Steal” and reestablish Trump as president, but failed to actually converge around a concrete political program of what do *after* the revolution. The Confederate flags, “Don’t Tread On Me” flags, and various militia groups and insignias reveal, in all of their contradictions, that there wasn’t enough coherence to supplement another worldview and political structure which could have replaced our democracy. However, this incoherence and fragmentation paradoxically remains the insurrections greatest strength: by remaining decentralized and vague around the figure of the Trump, the “Stop the Steal” movement was able to subsume every sect of right-wing extremism, from the Proud Boys to the QAnon conspiracy. The insurrection ultimately failed due to these contradictions, but these contradictions point towards a more disconcerting aspect of the political system they were insurrecting against. Like the confrontation between Judge Hoffman and Kunstler, the insurrection highlights the problem of authority underlying the ceremony of the Electoral College. The Electoral College is really political

theater, which through its ceremonies and rituals, captures and dictates the “will of people” rather than a vehicle which expresses this will.

Each of these American insurrections have performed what I’ve called a “theatrics of unmasking.” Through appropriating language, rituals, and theatrical spaces of the dominant political order, they “unmask” the hidden inconsistencies and contradictions emanating from within American democracy. What we see then also is a process of fragmentation of not only American ideology, but of political space, where each group marches and momentarily takes over a seat of power, such as California’s State Capitol, the 1969 Democratic National Convention, and the Chicago Seven’s courtroom. The January 6th Capitol riot would seem to fit right in to this lineage of theatrical unmaskings, yet we are uneasy to do so. Perhaps this is due to the fact that January 6th remains a fresh and open wound on our political conscious: we have not yet fully grasped the consequences of this right-

wing insurrection onto our fragile democracy and its future. As cultural philosopher Slavoj Žižek claims in his article, “First as a Farce, Then as a Tragedy?”, the Capitol insurrection was a total farce, but in the same way Chris Hayes called the riot “goofy and terrifying at the same time,” the insurrection has reminded us how easily our democracy could fall if the insurrectionists were more competent and disciplined. A tragic downfall of our imperfect democracy seems closer to reality than distant fantasy after January 6th. But this downfall is not determined by any means; rather than falling into fatalistic despair, or even worse, empty platitudes about moderation and “unity” when the far-right is more invigorated than ever to take power, we should continue to confront, reflect, and unmask the undemocratic underside of our political system in its false theatrics to really continue the American project of liberation.

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