

THE SPATIALITIES OF DISSENT AND ITS SUPPRESSION: A RESPONSE TO SHILLINGTON AND CLOUGH

Jules Boykoff

I am enormously grateful for the careful attention Laura Shillington and Nathan Clough have given my work and for the opportunity to respond to their commentary in the pages of *Human Geography*. Shillington and Clough have raised numerous thought-provoking, constructive critiques that have helped me deepen my thinking on the socio-spatialities of dissent and its suppression as well as the trade-offs involved in doing research that aims to speak to multiple audiences.

In *Beyond Bullets: The Suppression of Dissent in the United States* I try to ride a line between creating an academic research project and an activist orientation guide. This springs from my desire to live up to the two-pronged challenge Pierre Bourdieu (2002: 3) proposed: establishing integrity within the halls of academia and then springing forth into the realm of real-world politics. He exploded the dichotomy between “the pure intellectual and the engaged intellectual,” and he embedded an outside-the-ivory-tower component in his very definition of an intellectual: someone “who, strengthened by the competence and authority acquired in his field, intervenes in the political arena.”¹ As

¹ I believe Bourdieu (2002: 3-4) places too much emphasis on doing all this to protect academic autonomy at the expense of considering audience-related matters, but I view his overarching suggestion that it is our “duty to sortie from the intellectual universe” as on-point.

straightforward as Bourdieu makes it sound, this venture is riddled with traps. For one, scholarly communities and activist communities function under divergent assumptions, values, codes, and Wittgensteinian language games. (After all, diverse *activist* communities in themselves operate under varying assumptions, values, and codes). This chasm had led to markedly dissimilar responses to *Beyond Bullets*. For instance, one academic critiqued the book because it offers “little specific guidance as to how suppression can be operationalized as an analytic variable” (Varon 2008: 173) whereas, in all the talks I have given with and for activist groups I’ve never been pressed on the abstract methodological terrain of operationalization. On the ideological front, there’s also the possible pitfall of “alienating liberals with too radical an analysis and boring radicals with too liberal a framework,” as Shillington and Clough note. Bridging these divides was on my mind as I wrote *Beyond Bullets*, though I don’t claim to have concocted the secret recipe of success, or that such a one-size-fits-all formula even exists.

And while I did indeed write this book for activists, it’s also aimed toward a general audience who is not only interested in the glossy-sheen version of US history, but open to examining its uglier underbelly. The desire to make this work accessible to a wide audience presents another potential hazard:

discussing aspects of US history readers haven't heard of or that they've been socially conditioned to dismiss may well leave them bereft of an anchor point for centering in the project. This is precisely why I decided to start off the book with a discussion of a case many readers would likely be familiar with: the National Guard's gunning down of thirteen students at Kent State University on 4 May 1970. It's also a situation that I felt might—from the outset of the book—generate reader sympathy for dissident citizenship since the shooting victims were students exercising their First Amendment rights or minding their own business as they strolled to class. From there I introduce other socially acceptable activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. who was persecuted through the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), rather implausibly under the "Black Nationalist Hate Group" rubric. I also try to highlight lesser known aspects of activist programming and positioning that may appeal to a wider audience, such as the Black Panther Party's free breakfast for children program as well as the pro-globalization aspects of the Global Justice Movement (such as globalizing dissent, which they've done quite well. In fact, slapping Global Justice Movement activists with the "anti-globalization" label is like dubbing vegetarians "anti-food"). The point is that I thought a lot about case selection in relation to the audiences with whom I was trying to connect, ultimately choosing historical instances that not only illuminate the typology I present but that also might resonate with the ethically inclined general reader.

This bigger-picture concern also relates to what the reviewers rightly noted as a relative dearth of explicit theory in the book. I have had the good fortune of working through material in this book with a number of activist and student groups, as well as general-community clusters in places like public libraries, and I have more often heard the critique that the opening chapter—in which I lay out the conceptual groundwork I employ in the rest of the book—was relatively onerous. They reported having to fight their way through the abstraction and feeling relieved when finally arriving at some real-world

narratives about boots-to-pavement activists. My goal with this book is not to grapple with and elucidate social theory. Rather, I aim to whittle a welter of historical data into a finite—and thus intellectually manageable—set of actions the state and media carry out to suppress dissent. I try to take the seemingly intractable whirl and swirl of state and media suppression and name it, organize it so that it can be sidestepped strategically. In striving in this direction, it seems to me that historical descriptions—backboned by narratives—are the most compelling route. That issue aside, indeed I could have more deeply engaged Hardt and Negri's (2000: 124, 61, 208) theoretical insights related to their fuzzily defined "multitude" that resists Empire by harnessing its "deterritorializing desire." It's just that many of the activists I discussed in the book concertedly *re-territorialized* their political struggles, foregrounding the production of localized space rather than proliferating the frictionless "deterritorializing power of the multitude" that constructs "a powerful non-place" forged on the anvil of globalization.

Shillington and Clough have generously mentioned how this book—and my other work on the suppression of dissent—can speak to geographers and how it might more deeply engage geographical theory. While it may not be glaringly apparent in the pages of *Beyond Bullets*, the work of radical geographers and spatial theorists has been exceptionally important to my thinking and writing on the topic. I'm with anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992: 8) who discourage the idea that spaces are discrete and disconnected. Instead, they implore us to explore socio-political dynamism "within interconnected spaces" we construct. They write, "The presumption that spaces are autonomous has enabled the power of topography to conceal successfully the topography of power." Thus we can better understand the dialectic of restriction and resistance through a geographical lens where we're "rethinking difference *through* connection." This links laterally to the work of Cindi Katz (2001: 1228) and her methodological "topography" by which she means carrying out meticulous, materialist inquiries at multiple scales

to better comprehend the salience of socio-political similarity and difference as nested within complex relationships. This allows us “to excavate the layers of process that produce particular places and to see their intersections with material social practices at other scales of analysis.”

A key concept from Katz that I view as relevant to *Beyond Bullets* is the “contour line,” a metaphor she (2001: 1229) uses to illuminate relationality, “a multifaceted way of theorizing the connectedness of vastly different places made artifactually discrete by virtue of history and geography but which also reproduce themselves differently amidst the common political-economic and socio-cultural processes they experience.” Such an approach “connects distant places and in so doing enables the inference of connection in uncharted places in between.”

As the reviewers noted, I have tried to pin down a mode of suppression I call bi-level demonization that skates across a Katzian contour line. In this two-track practice, an international foe *du jour* (e.g. communists, anarchists, terrorists) is demonized and thus depicted as deserving of punishment; at the same time domestic activists are linked to the external demon—rightly or wrongly—based on ideology, ethnicity, race, or other characteristics. The connection to the demonized group is proliferated through the mass media, stigmatizing domestic activists and implying they too should be snuffed out. For instance, Theodore Roosevelt engaged in bi-level demonization when he excoriated anarchists on the floor of Congress in 1901, railing:

The anarchist is a criminal whose perverted instincts lead him to prefer confusion and chaos to the most beneficent form of social order... The anarchist is everywhere not merely the enemy of system and of progress, but the deadly foe of liberty. If ever anarchy is triumphant, its triumph will last for but one red moment, to be succeeded for ages by the gloomy night of despotism... Anarchist speeches, writings, and meetings are essentially seditious and

treasonable (Congressional Record 1901: 82).²

The mass media are the discursive linchpin in bi-level demonization, and in this instance, the *New York Times* provided a textbook case of how this works, making explicit the link to international anarchists: “The President urges upon Congress the enactment of laws to keep out Anarchists. There is need of such laws, and the further suggestion that by treaties and the conventions of international law Anarchists be declared enemies of the human race is one that should be heeded. *They cannot all be kept out*, we cannot altogether suppress them or destroy their creed, but we can by rigorous measures make exhibitions of their murderous passions less frequent” (“The President’s Message” 1901, 8, emphasis added).

Such “rigorous measures” were on display ninety years later when, on 12 September 2001, one day after the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, Alaskan Congressman Don Young professed the Global Justice Movement and radical environmentalists might have been responsible for the violence. On the floor of Congress he stated, “If you watched what happened in Genoa, in Italy, and even in Seattle, there’s some expertise in that field. I’m not sure they’re that dedicated, but eco-terrorists—which are really based in Seattle—there’s a strong possibility that could be one of the groups” responsible for the attacks (“State’s Delegation Favors Retaliation,” 2001). There’s a lot that’s laughable about Don Young’s statement, but bi-level demonization is no joke. Just ask Briana Waters, Tre Arrow, Daniel McGowan, and numerous other environmental activists who were scooped up in the Green Scare, re-branded by the federal government as terrorists, dished up excessive sentences, and shelved away in prison. Contour lines—when expounded

² President Roosevelt continued, “Anarchy is a crime against the whole human race; and all mankind should band against the anarchist. His crime should be made an offense against the law of nations, like piracy and that form of manstealing known as the slave trade; for it is of far blacker infamy than either. It should be declared by treaties among all civilized powers. Such treaties would give to the Federal Government the power of dealing with the crime” (Congressional Record 1901: 82).

more robustly than I have sketched out here—can help create connective, relational tethers between spaces of suppression that may otherwise be viewed as discrete.

In the forward-thinking spirit of Shillington and Clough's review, I'd like to conclude by responding to some of their questions and offering some suggestions for where we, as students of suppression, can collectively proceed. They noted the tendency among scholars to view the state as monolithic whereas in reality the institutions that make up the state are quite variegated and flecked with divergent suppressive predilections. I agree, and recent work I have done with Martha Gies (2010) has considered how local state officials and media outlets (which also shouldn't be viewed monolithically) attempted to squelch the local chapter of the Black Panther Party (which, as we show, should not be viewed as a monolithic dissident group either—the Portland chapter differed from the Oakland headquarters in important ways). I hope scholars will continue to pursue this avenue of research.

Speaking of the media, I believe we need to more intensely interrogate discursive space and how such space is constructed to both the detriment and advantage of social movements. We'd do well to more deeply explore the ever-unfolding relationship between activists and the media. Also, we need an in depth, systematic analysis of the suppression of dissent under the administration of Barack Obama. Tracking state repression became a cottage industry during George W. Bush's presidency, but the suppression of dissent is a full-throttle bi-partisan process and Obama has made this crystal-clear with his extension of the state secrets privilege, his efforts to stifle debate on the renewal of the USA PATRIOT Act, his opposition to protecting journalists from being forced to disclose sources in national-security cases, and his recent willingness to persecute anti-war activists in Chicago and Minneapolis, with the FBI and Joint Terrorism Task Force carrying out high-profile raids. And all this from someone who taught constitutional law.

Shillington and Clough mused as to whether cataloguing suppression might inadvertently disempower movements. I stand with forest activist Kim Marks, who told me as I wrote *Beyond Bullets* that "Awareness is two steps ahead. Paranoia is two steps behind." Part of gaining awareness and circumventing paranoia is knowing what the actions the state and media take to undermine dissent. Yet, we would also benefit from a systematic, history-drenched assessment of successful fightback. What have savvy activists done to undermine the underminers, all the while forging ahead with principled vim and durable solidarity? The United States is litigation nation. How have activist lawyers—such as Lauren Regan of the Civil Liberties Defense Center who has worked with numerous Green Scare activists—helped movements survive and resist?

As we move forward I hope we can collectively create what Katz (2001: 1230) calls "counter-topographies" that "link different places analytically and thereby enhance struggles in the name of common interests." I hope we can work together to shift the scale of dissent, engaging in the social multiplication of focused, principled, and increasingly effective resistance. As we do this, let's ask how we can, as Paul Chatterton (2008: 426) puts it, "galvanize dissent, normalize critique, and make radical alternatives seem like real possibilities for our times."

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2002. "The Role of Intellectuals Today," *Theoria* 49 (99): 1-6.
- Boykoff, Jules and Martha Gies. 2010. "'We're Going to Defend Ourselves': The Portland Chapter of the Black Panther Party and the Local Media Response," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 111, No. 3: 278-311.
- Chatterton, Paul. 2008. "Demand the Possible: Journeys in Changing our World as a Public Activist-Scholar," *Antipode* 40 (3): 421-427.

Congressional Record—Senate. 1901. Vol. 35, Part 1, 57th Congress, 1st session, December 3.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*, London: Harvard University Press.

Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson. 1992. “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1): 6-23.

Katz, Cindi. 2001. “On the Grounds of Globalization: A Topography for Feminist Political Engagement,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26(4): 1213-1234.

“State’s Delegation Favors Retaliation,” *Associated Press*, 12 September 2001.

“The President’s Message,” *New York Times*, 4 December 1901, p. 8.

Varon, Jeremy. 2008. Review of *Beyond Bullets: The Suppression of Dissent in the United States*, *Left History* 13 (2): 171-174.



