

A Critical Analysis of the Demand to Defund the Police

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Pan-African Community Action

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The intensity and span of the mass rebellion that has gripped the U.S. and expanded internationally since the recent spate of state sponsored murder of Black people has shaken global white supremacists, capitalist, patriarchy to its knees. The people have tasted a real sense of their own power and as a result some very unexpected developments have emerged and the opportunity for real social transformation and the shifting of power into the hands of working class Black people, particularly women and LGBTQ folks, is as strong as it has been since prior to the military defeat of the Black Panther Party.

Among the unexpected developments is the rapid emergence of movement demands, particularly one getting much traction, to “defund the police,” which is covered by the mainstream media and even being acknowledged by some lawmakers in a few jurisdictions. To be clear, this is a momentous development for the movement not only because of the speed with which the demand is being delivered, but because of the radical nature of the demand, particularly in comparison with the demands leveled during the 2014 round of urban rebellion, which were essentially a demand to allow police to monitor the public at all times (body worn cameras) and a demand to repeat a slogan.

The urban rebellions of 2014 and 2020 are raising consciousness and compelling people to come to grips with the concept of social transformation. As expected, there are competing ideas on what the objectives of this emerging movement should be. This is a normal and healthy process and we are excited it is occurring and are eager to participate.

While the demand to defund the police is a vast improvement over previous iterations because it attacks the armed wing of the state, we believe the demand itself remains flawed. As such, we humbly offer this critical analysis of the ‘Defund the Police’ demand.

PACA

Pan-African Community Action (PACA) was founded in 2015 following the murder of Alonzo Smith by Washington, DC Special Police. Special Police are private police hired by individual employers. Special Police have all of the rights of regular police officers, however, because they are not employed by the state, Special Police are subject to far fewer responsibilities.

For example, Special Police exist in some form in over 30 states. And while government employed police must undergo weeks or even months of training, in order to secure a license to arrest people, Special Police in DC, Maryland and Virginia require zero hours and zero minutes of training. Employers are also not required to reveal the names of their Special Police employees that are accused of certain crimes, including murder. Virginia has several ‘Police Departments’ that are literally run out of the homes of private individuals who do not work for a government and do not have any oversight, but make traffic stops, issue tickets and detain and arrest people. These details inform our analysis.

PACA is organized under a set of Principles and Tools of Analysis that enable us to evaluate events and social phenomena. Two of the most relevant Tools of Analysis, at least for these purposes are:

- **Black communities are a domestic colony.** We are a colonized people inside of the United States and the police serve as the occupying army to enforce that colonial relationship.
- **The core issue is POWER, not racism.** We cannot change our reality by ending ‘racism,’ or the attitudes and opinions others hold of us. Our conditions will only change when we shift power into our own hands and exercise self-determination, thereby rendering the opinions of racists irrelevant.

PACA is intentional about the need to build campaigns rooted in the objective of shifting power to the Black working class masses, with a particular emphasis on empowering women and queer folk as a counterbalance to

patriarchy. We define power as "The ability to implement or enact an idea, belief, will, opinion, plan or decision and the capacity to protect the outcome."

Applying these tools of analysis to the particular case of Alonzo Smith, and so many more before and since, PACA's position became clear: we are not fighting to increase training for the police (presumably impacting their racist attitudes) or have them wear body cameras so we can see them brutalize us before going unpunished, we are fighting for POWER over the forces that impact our lives, including the police.

As such, PACA started our own **Community Control Over Police** campaign. The campaign is rooted in the history of the Black Panther Party, which called for and secured elections for the same in Berkeley, CA and Milwaukee, WI. The campaign is also part of the lived experience of our members fighting for Black self-determination and even for Community Control Over Police in Miami in the late 1990s. In 2019 we travelled to Chicago to participate in the founding meeting of the National Alliance Against Racists & Political Repression (NAARPR.org), which has launched a national campaign for Community Control Over Police.

We assert that Community Control Over Police must be the central demand of this moment, even as we embrace the possibility that this demand could give way to a comprehensive and genuine revolutionary movement.

The Power and Correctness of Defund the Police

Advocates of Defunding the Police correctly cite statistical evidence of police brutality, disproportionate arrest rates and a monopoly of funding by local police departments to the harm of social programs, healthcare, housing, education and more.

It is simply undeniable that policing in the US is out of control and outrageously overfunded. Since 1977, crime has continued to fall, but police budgets have almost tripled to a staggering \$115 billion per year¹. Not surprisingly, the US is home to less than 5% of the world's population and 25% of the world's prisoners.

While organized popular culture continues to crank out television shows and movies that fictionalize out of control high arrest rates in socialist or socialist leaning countries, in reality the 'land of the free' has the highest incarceration rate in the world. The objective truth is that cutting police budgets by 50% across the board is not a radical idea, as it would still allow the US to maintain its status as one of the leading prison countries in the world.

In addition to citing statistical evidence, supporters of Defunding the Police generally advance two arguments in support of the effort: first, defunding is a necessary step towards the ultimate goal of abolishing the police altogether. And second, defunding will deny the classist, white supremacist and patriarchal power structure the ability to target and incarcerate Black and brown people.

Both of these arguments are understood, and even appreciated, for their clarity and intent. However, we humbly assert these positions, however well intentioned, are short sighted.

Defunding does not lead to abolition

On the merits, however, defunding the police today would not lead to the abolition of police tomorrow. While we spend far more time detailing the history and theory of this position in our upcoming book on Community Control Over Police, here we can summarize that while the primary daily task of modern day police is to protect private property and wealth, private property and wealth does not exist because of the police, the police exist as an absolute necessity anytime there is private property and wealth.

¹<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-04/america-s-policing-budget-has-nearly-tripled-to-115-billion>

That is to say, anytime there is private property and wealth in a society, there MUST be police in order to protect the property and wealth of those who have from those who have not. Anytime there are no police, the wealthy class will organize and hire them. To put it another way, anytime there is what we would today call income inequality (though that is not the phrase we prefer), there must and will be some form of police.

To be perfectly clear: this is not a defense of private property or wealth- in fact, quite the opposite. This is merely an attempt to establish a social law on par with the laws of physics.

If one were to let go of a piece of glass, it would fall to the ground and shatter. This is not an endorsement of breaking glass or an expression of hate or love for either the glass or the hard ground. It is merely a scientific observation. In the same way, social sciences dictate that the accumulation of private property (as distinguished from personal property) and other wealth can only be maintained over time with some sort of force that is committed to protecting that property.

When the original group of private property owners called an urgent meeting to discuss how to protect their wealth from all of the non-wealthy people who needed to eat the food that the wealthy were hoarding, they realized the need for a force to protect them and their property.

At this point, the early human wealthy property owners went from becoming individuals in a similar situation to a clearly defined ruling class. While the protection for the ruling class looks different today than it did in the early days of the human society, the fundamental function of what we now call the police remains the same: to enforce the will and protect the interests of the ruling class. Class antagonisms, or tension between two or more classes, necessitates some form of police.

As an important side note, in addition to enforcing class relationships, police are often responsible for enforcing identity based privilege relationships, such as race and gender, as well. The police enforced Jim Crow segregation laws in order to maintain the social relations dictated by white supremacy. Today, police enforce gender roles by arresting people deemed to be in the wrong bathroom based on their perceived gender.

The order of operations here- the police as a consequence of wealth, not the cause- is critical to scientifically establishing a path towards abolition of police. If the existence of police is the cause of the type of wealth that leads to poverty and oppression, then defunding is a necessary step towards liberation. However, if police are the consequence of wealth- i.e., anytime there is wealth there must be police to protect it- then defunding will not abolish them, it will only compel the ruling class to reconstitute their protective force in a new formation.

It is important here to be explicit: defunding will not abolish the police, it will only force the wealthy to take up a collection in order to hire Blackwater, or another company of mercenaries, to serve as their private, non-governmental police.

Because the very purpose of the police is to protect the ruling class, the only way to abolish the police, in any meaningful sense of the term, is to end classes. If the police are a necessary consequence of protecting class interests, then they will dissolve once class interests themselves dissolve.

In the most pragmatic terms, we assert that a community can only abolish that which it controls. We cannot force our oppressors to abolish their primary tool of oppression. We can only abolish that by controlling it first.

Understanding the police as the protector of the ruling class leads us directly to the next argument.

Defunding will not deny the ruling class the ability to exploit and oppress

It is absolutely correct to assert that the police force is the main tool used by the ruling class to protect their wealth, implement their will and to enforce their colonial domination over Black people. After all, we did not volunteer to be oppressed colonized subjects, we were forced by armed troops. It is easy, then, to see how the next logical leap is made: defund this arm of oppression.

Deeper analysis through game theory, however, reveals this tactic will likely prove counterproductive.

Because class antagonisms necessitate some form of police, defunding what we now call ‘police’ might very well result in the demise of the armed and uniformed government force we have come to know. However, the end of a government police force will not end the need of the ruling class to hire its own protective and enforcement force.

Let’s “game theory” this scenario: the campaign to defund the police succeeds wildly and police in all, or even most, cities are defunded to zero and, therefore dissolve. There are no more police employed by the US government, any of the 50 states or any of the municipalities therein. However, white supremacist patriarchal capitalism persists.

How does the downtown financial and business district protect its skyline facades and obscene wealth? How do major corporations maintain a desperate workforce? What does Walmart do next? How do wealthy white enclaves respond? Do they just say “oh well, I guess we must change because there are no more police to do our bidding”?

South Africa is a modern capitalist country that is mostly post-industrial, featuring pockets of development that mirror the wealthiest western nations. Yet, the government there does not spend anywhere near the amount of resources on police as the United States. So how do upscale malls, financial districts and wealthy white neighborhoods protect themselves from the majority of residents living in poverty?

They hire private security firms to enforce the rules of the establishment. Private security firms do not enforce the laws of the province or country, they enforce the will and protect the interests of those who hire them.

Shortly after the civil war, the US converted roving squads of slave catchers into a public utility that we today recognize as modern police departments. The transition not only allowed the ruling class to reduce costs by pooling their own resources, but eventually shifted the financial burden associated with protecting their wealth from their own payroll to all taxpayers.

However, the shift from private security to public utility created the contradiction that allowed civil rights organizations to fight for equal protection under the law, public transparency and other reforms. Of course, this did not end police brutality or alter the fundamental function of police as the protector of wealth and enforcer of the will of the ruling class, but turning the police into a public utility did provide some important tools necessary for the reduction of harm and heightening contradictions when those harms came.

When the government arm of the police is shut down, the need for a protective and enforcement force for the ruling class will persist. The chamber of commerce, Walmart and the wealthy white enclave will not simply say “well, I guess there are no more police.” They will form their own force that is answerable only to them.

In the same way that security guards do not enforce the law, they enforce the rules of their employer, the new police force will not enforce some ostensibly objective set of laws that were enacted by people elected by the public and supposedly for the benefit of all. The new police force will be overt and unambiguous mercenaries.

As limited as the legal and public pressure options have been since slave catchers were transformed into public servants, the post-police options will be essentially non-existent.

The guessing game- the wealthy act all liberal in public, so do they want us to attack the poor or not- will be over. Private security firms, such as Blackwater and the like, will do exactly as their bosses tell them to do, and there will be no public records requests to unveil the order. Even the most reformist measures- body cameras, badge number and names on uniforms, reading of rights, pro forma investigations into police misconduct, etc.- will be off the table.

Defunding the police may or may not abolish the police department, but it will not stop the ruling class from exploiting and oppressing Black and other communities. Far from purging classism, racism and patriarchy from its ranks, defunding the police is likely to make the forces of the ruling class look more like Roman centurions.

Most importantly, while defunding the police arguably weakens the racist and sexist state, it does not, by itself, shift power into the hands of Black working class communities. That means that even if we know what part of the system is falling, we have no idea what will rise to fill the void and that outcome will likely fall disproportionate harm upon women and members of our LGBTQ community.

Game Theory Scenarios

In order to demonstrate some potential pitfalls to the defunding strategy, we offer a few ‘game theory’ scenarios.

Scenario: Police defunded and militias rise

Police are defunded and dissolved. While Black and brown communities celebrate, white people seethe and organize. Ragtag militia groups are suddenly given a command structure and tactical training from the influx of newly unemployed former police officers who were already partial to white supremacist groups.

Using the guns hoarded over the course of years and the new command structure, militias begin organized attacks on Black political organizers and then members of the general public, focusing their ire and attention on LGBTQ people who are seen as overrepresented in the movement to defund the police.

Organizations attempt to launch community defense groups but are stymied by the rise in gun and ammunition prices and the lack of access to politically neutral shooting ranges and training grounds.

The underprotected communities appeal to local, state and federal officials to send armed guards to protect them from violent crime. Government agencies hire former police officers to patrol Black and brown communities in order to protect them from the former police officers who joined militias.

Scenario: Dylann Roof 2.0

Police in some communities are defunded and dissolve, while in other communities they remain. White people seethe in private and small groups.

Inspired by Dylann Roof’s 2015 massacre at a Charleston, SC Bible study that killed 9, a small group of white youth seek revenge and plan an attack on a church. After initially planning to shoot up a Black church in their own town, they quickly realize there is a city two counties over with a defunded and dissolved police department.

They make the 2 hour long drive, pretend to join the service and then shoot up the church. Service goes have

not organized an armed guard to the church and calls to 911 get picked up by a recording that states the police are dissolved.

Scenario: Black Power

Police are defunded and dissolved. Black communities are inspired by our own show of power and expand the struggle, eventually winning control over schools, land and factories. We are now in control. We are now in power. We are, collectively, the ruling class of some of our own communities. White people who feel out of power seethe and organize.

Former Trump supporters arm themselves and organize attacks in order to re-establish white rule. The plan for a 'Black Wall Street' style attack on Black liberated zones launches in 2 days.

While the fundamental role of police remains unchanged- to enforce the will and protect the interests of the ruling class- for the first time in recorded human history, the ruling class does not have a police force.

Defunding alone does not mean advancement

For all of the problems exposed by game theory scenarios for defunding the police- for the record, we have been able to workshop a few problematic scenarios for Community Control Over Police as well- the greatest limitation of the defunding demand is that it does not build or organize an institution of independent Black political power.

The Defund the Police campaign includes the two key features of transactional campaigns: first, it makes demands of those in power (as opposed to building the capacity of our base). And second, after winning the demand, there is nothing else for the campaign to do. That is not to say there are no other issues, or that our brilliant organizers will be unable to come up with other campaigns. However, after the vote has been taken to defund the police in a given municipality, what is the obvious next step?

The Civil Rights Movement ended because the campaigns were built around ending Jim Crow segregation laws. After those laws fell, it was unclear what was next. Some thought that was the beginning of the movement, but others thought America would be perfect after that. After the demand was won, most people went home. That is a transactional campaign.

By contrast, if we were to win the Community Control Over Police campaign, we could not go home because we would have a Black power public safety and restorative institution to envision, organize and run.

While there is no guarantee to any campaign, winning the Defund campaign could dissolve a harmful arm of the existing system, but it does not provide a pathway to a better system and might even result in a worse one, if that is even possible.

This movement must be about more than just ending harmful institutions, it must be about shifting power and using that power to build restorative institutions.

Closing

PACA fully endorses calls to reimagine public safety. In our own political education sessions about Community Control Over Police, we have engaged our community in that exact practice. However, we urge anyone seriously interested in this outcome to consider the fundamental approach to this end carefully.

The only ones who can successfully reimagine safety in a way that is beneficial for low-income Black and brown communities, particularly for the women and LGBTQ folks in our communities, are the very people

living in those communities.

Even if they had an interest in doing so, those currently in power- the same ones who increased police budgets in the first place and have consistently looked the other way as police abuse ran rampant- are unqualified to lead the process of reimagination. They are offering to do so now because they fear the rebellions will take all of their power and this is the best chance they have of holding on to their tenuous grip.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s as the continent of Africa waged a mighty struggle against European colonialism, no legitimate liberation movement- even the more conservative ones- demanded a defunding of the occupying army or to engage in a process with the colonizers to reimagine colonial occupation. Africans fought for POWER through the end of colonialism, the withdrawal of colonial troops and for national control over a newly formed military and police.

This is our greatest opportunity in over a generation to reshape the way we think about and approach public safety, addressing harm and the distribution of resources in our communities. We simply cannot entrust this process to the very people we are currently protesting. We cannot afford to ask the fox to consult us on securing the hen house.

Our ability to reimage public safety, and to successfully implement that vision, presupposes power and control over the forces of public safety, whatever they are called and however they are configured. We can only implement that over which we have power.

We must be more ambitious than simply defunding their institutions. We must fight for power and self-determination over our own. We must fight for Community Control Over Police.