**Dissent in a World of Structural Oppression**

Protests broke out in April 2015 in response Freddie Gray’s death in the hands of the Baltimore Police Department. Eventually coming to be known as the Baltimore Uprising, two acts on April 27, 2015 came to be symbolize the protests in the eyes of the public. The first was the burning of a CVS Pharmacy near the Mondawmin Mall. Responding to a Twitter call for “All High Schools” to “purge” the area from the mall to North Avenue, the store was first looted, then burned (the employees of the store had been evacuated earlier in the day). Closely following this was a second event that spurred greater confusion and outrage: a CNN report inadvertently showed a protestor cutting holes in the hoses the Baltimore Fire Department was using to extinguish the flames. During a live report, a masked protestor emerged from the edge of the frame, stabbed a few holes in a hose, and ignited a media firestorm of confusion and anger.

The next day, President Barack Obama responded by condemning the destruction and violence he saw accompanying the unrest:

There's no excuse for the kind of violence that we saw yesterday. It is counterproductive… When individuals get crowbars and start prying open doors to loot, they're not protesting. They're not making a statement. They're stealing. When they burn down a building, they're committing arson. And they're destroying and undermining businesses and opportunities in their own communities. That robs jobs and opportunity from people in that area.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake offered a similar criticism of the protestors’ actions: "Too many people have spent generations building up this city for it to be destroyed by thugs.”[[2]](#endnote-2) In claiming that none of the protestors’ actions are productive “statements,” the President and Mayor each translated the actions of the protesters into a familiar language: violating private property becomes stealing, burning a building becomes arson, and destroying a business becomes robbing the poor of jobs. The spontaneous acts of the protestors are at their core acts of destruction, running counter to the norms of liberal democracy and accepted forms of civil disobedience.

These readings of the protests were echoed by others. The conservative news website *The Daily Caller* criticized Ta-Nehisi Coates’ defense of the protestors’ actions, “Nonviolence is Compliance,” claiming that “Sophisticated thinkers want you to understand that the mayhem unfolding in Baltimore is not a riot.” Where intellectuals wanted to obfuscate the events at hand, *Caller* writer W. James Antle IIIsaw the protests as a simple thing: “self-defeating violence” that only could lead to the “city’s decline.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Civil rights historian David J. Garrow offered a similar skepticism of those that found politics in the protests: “Part of this is an affectation to give political meaning to behavior that may not have political content…We’ve got observers perhaps trying to give greater meaning to the behavior than the people involved may intend.” He goes on: “But to my mind, this effort to label it with political meaning largely fails if you’re targeting random retailing establishments not government institutions.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

In these readings, the protests are read as minimally politically meaningful (at best) or as the negation of (liberal democratic) politics (at worst). The apparent irrationality and unthinking destructiveness of the protestors’ actions is taken as a sign that the Uprising was politically void and worthy only of condemnation. Even if Freddie Gray’s murder exemplifies a long series of injustices perpetrated by police against black Baltimoreans, the fact that the protests used violence – and particularly violence against private property – is taken as evidence that the movement undermined the foundations of American political culture. Through readings that emphasize property rights, instrumental claim-making, and narrow senses of politics, policymaking, and propriety, these interpretations are consistent with a political culture that looks to Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi as models of morally permissible dissent.

This discourse finds a parallel in many studies of dissent. Considering actions from the Paris Commune through the Occupy and Arab Spring protests, many such studies focus on the instrumental claims, ideological underpinnings, and structural constraints that motivate, inform, and delimit these movements.[[5]](#endnote-5) Working in this tradition, one social movement theorist defines movements as collective actions “used by people who lack regular access to institutions” who “act in the name of new or unaccepted claims and behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Work on “New Social Movements” – or, movements making claims for human rights and recognition rather than material wellbeing – also follows in this tradition, focusing primarily on dissent as a form of instrumental claims on inherited cultures and identities.[[7]](#endnote-7) For accounts of both classical and new social movements, this process of instrumental claim-making to reform or transform institutions is taken to be definitive of what makes for a social movement.

This evaluative framework is also shared among radical scholars who seem likely to break from such instrumentalist readings of social movements. Slavoj Zizek, in his speech at to the Occupy Wall Street encampment at Zuccotti Park, was warned of the risks of not acting instrumentally: “Don’t fall in love with yourselves. We have a nice time here. But remember, carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal lives. Will there be any changes then?”[[8]](#endnote-8) More subtly, David Harvey, in his call to revolt against capitalism, or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in their call for a new revolutionary identification to challenge Empire, are not satisfied with isolated and fleeting pockets of local resistance – seeking respectively the solidarity of a global revolutionary proletariat or Multitude.[[9]](#endnote-9) In these claims, Zizek, Harvey, Hardt, and Negri follow much of political science, social movement studies, and political and economic elites in looking to the horizon and asking, either in a spirit of solidarity or incredulity, “what happens the day after the revolution?”

These instrumental, ideological, and structural analyses generate a set of yardsticks that are used to evaluate the success of these movements: Did they achieve their aims? Did they realize their ideas in practice? Did they even have a chance? While such approaches contribute significantly to our understanding of these movements’ goals, tactics, accomplishments, and failures relative to institutional political processes, this is only one way of understanding their empirical and normative features. Because dissenters often fail to achieve their ends (facing institutions that can overpower, co-opt, or ignore them),[[10]](#endnote-10) compromise their ideals in practice (building a movement by negotiating between multiple ends),[[11]](#endnote-11) and struggle to act against distant and dispersed institutions (national governments and global economic structures can be hard to challenge through localized protest movements),[[12]](#endnote-12) an instrumental reading of dissent mirrors popular discourse in interpreting them as failed, compromised, or utopian. The interpretation of social movements from a narrowly instrumental perspective therefore provides little sense of why people would continue to engage in urban social movements or what their value is (if any).

My goal is to provide an alternative reading of the political life of dissenting actions that are often dismissed as a- or anti-political; one that does not obsessively look ahead to the day after the revolution but instead recognizes the value of the here and now of dissent itself. I do this by contrasting the ethical and tactical landscapes of civil disobedience and dissent under conditions of structural oppression. Counter to accounts that frame enduring injustices as perpetrated by a malicious Sovereign or conspiratorial elite, structural oppression draws attention to the often decentered, non-agential nature of enduring violence, exploitation, cultural imperialism, marginalization, and powerlessness.[[13]](#endnote-13) Taking structural oppression seriously means taking seriously the possible shortcomings of frequently-used models of legitimate dissent. Under such conditions there is not always an identifiable individual or institutional source of oppression, there is no clear leverage point for shifting the foundations social structures, and therefore interpretations of the tactical and ethical landscape of dissent miss out on important features of contemporary injustice.

How should the political discourse of structural oppression reshape the tactics, ethics, and reception of dissent and disobedience? To answer this question, I proceed in four sections. The next section considers the moral and tactical landscape of dissent offered in liberal models of civil disobedience. I then develop my own account of deep structural oppression through Hannah Arendt’s account of world-building, arguing that civil disobedience is not an insightful normative guide to a world of enduring group-based oppressions. The final two sections develop an alternative ethical framework for reading dissent in a world of structural oppression. The first of these sections draws from Jewish, Marxist, and queer theory to develop an “ethic of redemption” that reads the value of a dissenting action from its ability to disrupt political culture and open a path to new social worlds. The final section then offers four tactical features of dissent guided by an ethic of redemption ­– non-instrumentality, gratuity, locality, and destructiveness – before noting the limitations of the account I have developed.

*2: Liberal Standards of Respectable Dissent*

When Thoreau coined the term “civil disobedience” in a 1848 essay explaining his refusal to pay federal taxes that would have gone to support slavery and the United States’ war with Mexico, he keyed in on an established point of American political pride.[[14]](#endnote-14) The American founding mythology – the Boston Tea Party, Revere’s midnight ride, Jefferson’s Tree of Liberty watered with the blood of patriots, and the Whiskey and Shays rebellions – grants pride of place to disobedience against tyrannical political authorities. Thoreau’s gave vocabulary to practices of dissent that kept government in line, enlivened the democratic community, and cultivated virtue, critical thought, and civic vitality. As Frederick Douglass would write a decade after Thoreau:

If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Even in cases where one disagrees with the political motivations for the disobedience, the American tradition generally recognizes a “right to civil disobedience” as a foundational democratic good and as a necessary condition of social progress.[[16]](#endnote-16)

While a political culture celebrating dissent is deeply rooted in many liberal-democracies, a number of deontological and utilitarian criteria have emerged over time to mark the distinction between its permissible and impermissible forms. On one hand, dissenters have a duty to conform to a set of norms about what sort of actions are permissible, bounding appropriate dissent in terms of the moral qualities of the acts themselves. These deontological criteria – nonviolence being the most commonly expressed – apply to acts of dissent irrespective of political context. On the other hand, the permissibility of dissent is also contingent on utilitarian criteria that account for the context in which dissent takes place and the tactical effectiveness of dissenters’ actions. An action could fall within the scope of deontologically permissible acts of civil disobedience (say, taking the form of a sit-in at a public building), but it can only be justified if the sit-in is likely to be an effective way to affect political change. Conversely, civil disobedience may be a clear way to reform an unjust law or social norm, but the nature of the disobedient actions may render such actions immoral (say, burning down a CVS).

Five criteria are most commonly used to evaluate the permissibility of dissent: non-violence, instrumentality, coherence, accountability, and civility. Each criterion is simultaneously viewed as a duty of dissenters and as a utilitarian means to affecting positive political change; thus, not only is non-violence (or any other criterion) a deontological standard that protestors must satisfy into order have their actions be permissible but it is also believed to be the best way for them to achieve their sought-after political reform.

*Non-violence*: The most clearly stated and commonly applied standard for evaluating civil disobedience is non-violence toward people and property. A basic principle of liberal politics since Locke, the argument against violence civil disobedience is simple: “any interference with the civil liberties of others tends to obscure the civilly disobedient quality of one's act.”[[17]](#endnote-17) The great heroes of dissent – the Gandhis, MLKs, and Mandelas of the world – are understood to have gained their moral high-ground and achieved their political goals by adhering to strictly non-violent forms of disobedience. While there are some limited exceptions where violence is seen as a legitimate means of registering dissent (Joseph Raz proposes that where state institutions and social norms are egregiously unjust, then violence may be a necessary means for restoring the liberties that are denied through political coercion[[18]](#endnote-18)), violence against people or property compromises the moral purity and political expedience of disobedience.

Baltimore protestors’ destruction of the CVS and police cruisers reduces the dissenters to “thugs” and arsonists, evacuating the political content of the actions. Awareness of the reception of violence lead to one of the most striking moments of the Uprising, as elder members of the Bloods and Crips shielded police and private property during the most tumultuous days of the uprising in an effort to save the message of the protests from actions that would discredit it.[[19]](#endnote-19) Similarly, Toya Graham was held up as the “mother of the year” by a number of media outlets when a video of her forcefully pulling her son away from an Uprising action went viral. Asking her son “You want to be out here doing this dumb shit?” she became a figure (somewhat ironically – she was repeatedly slapping him in the video) for respectability triumphing over violence.[[20]](#endnote-20)

*Instrumentality*: disobedience is expected to be a means to two ends: to condemn a present set of legal or social norms and to prompt the reform of these legal and social norms in the future. The more directly the act of dissent frames past wrongs and generates future positive reforms, the more likely it is to be cast as morally permissible.[[21]](#endnote-21) If an act of civil disobedience is not clearly interpretable as a means to affecting political reform, it is often quickly dismissed (as the Uprising was by President Obama or David Garrow) as merely criminal or meaninglessly unpolitical. And if the disobedients’ acts appear frivolous (such as the public dance parties that dotted Baltimore during the Uprising[[22]](#endnote-22)) or seem like they don’t reflect a future the dissenters would want to build (such as the aforementioned practice of cutting fire hoses), then they are seen as failing to understand that disobedience ought to be a goal-oriented activity.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Within the social movement studies literature, more expansive understandings of instrumentality have emerged that look beyond claim-making. In particular, the material and cultural manifestations of movement are increasingly understood to themselves be real and valuable achievements. As Alberto Melucci notes in his study of contemporary social movements, *Nomads of the Present*, “The organizational forms of movement are not just instrumental for their goals, they are a goal in themselves.”[[24]](#endnote-24) Another social movement scholar notes that instrumentalist readings can lose “the magic” of movements by “overemphasizing classic social science questions (why and so what) to the exclusion of the experience.”[[25]](#endnote-25) Put another way, movements can still be read as instrumentally valuable regardless of their effectiveness as claim-makers in the case that they prefigure the experiences and changes that dissenters want to see in the world. Yet, even in this case, the assumption is that dissent must be good for *something* that can be identified as politically productive in order to be legitimate; if the tactical and experiential life of dissent does not clearly prefigure social progress, it fails to satisfy this criterion.

*Coherence*: connected with the criterion of instrumentality is the expectation that dissenters must be clearly legible to the broad (liberal, non-dissenting) public. Where instrumentality refers to the actions of the protestors, the criterion of coherence applies more clearly to the discourse and presentation of the disobedience; not only must actions be a clear means to the end of reforming unjust laws or social norms, but the dissenters themselves must speak clearly and with one voice. Social movement theorist Charles Tilly refers to such signals of coherence as “WUNC displays”:

*worthiness:* sober demeanor; neat clothing; presence of clergy, dignitaries, and mothers with children;

*unity:* matching badges, headbands, banners, or costumes; marching in ranks; singing and chanting;

*numbers:* headcounts, signatures on petitions, messages from constituents, filling streets;

*commitment:* braving bad weather; visible participation by the old and handicapped; resistance to repression; ostentatious sacrifice, subscription, and/or benefaction.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Without signaling their willingness to conform to certain trappings of the dominant culture in their speech, self-presentation, organization and willingness of sacrifice, dissenters fail the test of speaking with a single, clear, and compelling voice. Incoherence leaves acts of disobedience (as David Garrow claimed of the Uprising) “meaningless.” The pressure is therefore on dissenters to adhere to a set of overlapping discursive norms determined by the non-dissenting majority.

In this context, Stephen Marshall reads the public work of Trayvon Martin’s parents to maintain coherence as a heroic effort to publically display of liberal respectability:

The discipline of Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin managed to wrench Trayvon’s cries back from Zimmerman... An important dimension of Fulton and Martin’s discipline is the labor required of both parents to contain their grief within the boundaries of respectability and articulate their grievance as a claim for legal justice. The restraint exercised by both is nothing less than heroic and ought to elicit our admiration as a model of liberal civic virtue. Still, respectability is a discipline that frames black abjection for sympathetic engagement by non-blacks.[[27]](#endnote-27)

In their willingness to restrain their emotions and claims in order to align themselves with a progressive understanding of legal justice, the Martins presented their claims in a way that was legible to powerful groups.[[28]](#endnote-28) This display of coherence was, however, discredited in the eyes of many by the failure of the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement to adhere to Fulton and Martin’s model.[[29]](#endnote-29)

*Accountability*: beyond expressing themselves in the vernacular of civil liberties and rationalist discourse, those engaging in civil disobedience are expected to submit themselves to the legal and social consequences of their actions. Doing so is taken to be a sign that a dissenter is not working to undercut the rule of law but instead is acting to uphold the normative core of the social and legal order. The willingness of members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to be arrested *en masse* after disobeying the law during the Civil Rights Movement showed that they respected the broad principles of civility even as they challenged the morality of individual laws. In contrast, many members of the Uprising were not willing to submit themselves to the legally mandated consequences of their actions and therefore crossed the line from protestors into “thugs” when, as an example, they responded to the call for a “#purge” at the Mondawmin Mall without then turning themselves over to the police whose devaluation of black lives they were protesting.[[30]](#endnote-30)

*Civility*: finally, and most generally, morally permissible acts of dissent are marked by a willingness to maintain the general trappings of institutional and social legitimacy while violating particular legal norms. What makes civil disobedience *civil* is that it ultimately upholds normative understandings of liberal democratic citizenship; failing to conform to the standard of civility is taken to indicate that dissenters are prematurely or irresponsibly threatening social order (this is particularly problematic if one is dissenting in the context of broadly liberal institutions). Thus, when Rawls claims that an act of civil disobedience ought to be the “last resort” of dissenters, the significance is twofold: first, that dissenters must show deference to the legal and social order before giving up on proper forms of recourse, and, second, that the dissenters affirm the general legitimacy of the broad social order before challenging it.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Reflective of such an expectation is the common critique of participants in the Uprising that they should have advocated for police reform through institutional political channels before taking to the streets.[[32]](#endnote-32) Putting aside the curious inattention to the long history of police brutality and failed lobbying for police reform in Baltimore, this critique is fueled by a sense that the political institutions and norms of civility in America are such that taking to the streets threatens to illegitimate a fundamentally just and responsive political system. [[33]](#endnote-33) By jumping straight to #purging and riots, liberals can cast black Baltimoreans as prematurely and unjustifiably threatening civil order.

This combination of non-violence, instrumentality, coherence, accountability, and civility builds up a broadly liberal framework for marking acts of dissent as either legitimate or illegitimate. While these five norms are neither exhaustive of the standards used for evaluating acts of civil disobedience nor universally accepted in public discourse, they do provide a general overview of the standards often used to evaluate dissent in liberal democracies. Violation of these norms is generally taken to be permissible only in the context of deeply unjust, undemocratic, and illiberal societies, where citizens have a right to violate liberal norms of respectable dissent in rough proportion to the failure of surrounding political institutions to respect their rights as citizens.[[34]](#endnote-34) This is roughly an extension of Raz’s claim that “members of the illiberal state do have a right to civil disobedience which is roughly that part of their moral right to political participation which is not recognized in law.”[[35]](#endnote-35) In cases where political institutions demonstrate a long train of abuses against their citizens, their citizens may exercise commensurate illiberality in their response. Thus, acts of illiberal dissent are likely to be viewed as morally permissible in apartheid South Africa or Nazi-occupied France than in post-apartheid South Africa or contemporary France.

Outside of these conditions (conditions which are generally thought not to exist in the liberal-democratic West) the five criteria of respectable dissent apply. In the following sections, I will challenge both the standards liberal respectability and the claim that permissible tactics of dissent shift exclusively in accord with the liberality or illiberality of the state. I argue that liberal standards of respectable dissent sustain oppressive social orders by unjustifiably and callously condemning illiberal forms of dissent and that applying these norms irrespective of structural conditions ultimately protects oppressive legal and social norms from challenge, particularly in the liberal states where these standards are cast as applying most strictly. First, though, I will offer an account of “deep structural oppression” in order to claim that the conditions of enduring exploitation, powerlessness, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence exist as the foundations of all political and social order (and thus irrespective of the liberality or illiberality of institutions), and thus that a new framework is required to think through the ethics and tactics of dissent among oppressed groups.

*3: Understanding Structural Oppression*

The vocabulary of “structural oppression” has a fairly short history in American political discourse, though “oppression” and “structure” have had long political lives on their own. The Declaration of Independence used “oppression” as the umbrella term for the twenty-six “injuries and usurpations” perpetrated by the King of Great Britain against the American colonies. Following in the classical liberal and social contract traditions, this use of the term describes a sovereign’s willful violation of their subjects’ inalienable natural rights (thus, we see peaks in the use of the word “oppression” that correspond with the English Civil War, American Revolution, and French Revolution[[36]](#endnote-36)). The Declaration is exemplary of this understanding of the politics of oppression, justifying the colonies’ independence though appeal to the “long train of abuses” of Americans’ rights to freedom, equality, and commerce, holding that “A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Put another way, the sovereign loses their legitimacy by willfully impinging on their subjects’ natural rights repeatedly. This sustained violation over time is what marks oppression.

While the vocabulary of structure is absent from the American Declaration, it plays a key role in the *Federalist Papers’* explanation of the workings of the federal government and Constitution. In Federalist #51, “The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments,” James Madison argues that “ambition must be made to counteract ambition” through a constitutional arrangement of institutions that channel faction and disharmony into moderate government.[[38]](#endnote-38) By creating a structure by which the strengths and weaknesses of the branches of the government check and balance each other, the functioning of the state could be depersonalized and made self-regulating. This understanding of institutional structures highlights the unwilled incentives and limitations created by formal rules and informal norms that generate predictable patterns of political and social behavior.

The social ontologies of structure and oppression thus operated on different registers in the early political history of the United States: oppression being a willful and repeated violation of natural rights by the elite against a subordinate group, while structure was instead a formal arrangement of institutions that stabilized the social or political order. It took until the mid-nineteenth century, and Marxism’s structural account of economic exploitation, to bring these two ideas together in political discourse. Marx’s account of exploitation’s structural relationship with the class system connected the structural foundations of society to the kind of ills identified as oppressive. By shedding the Madisonian image of structures as benevolent machines deliberately established to maintain the order, and the Declaration’s identification of oppressive actions in a malevolent Sovereign, Marxism gave a clear vocabulary to understand the insidious and unrecognized sources of oppression. Through an analysis of the means of production and the buying and selling of wage labor, this account attended to the ways the “everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society” maintain enduring power asymmetries without an identifiable perpetrator deliberately setting out to oppress particular populations.[[39]](#endnote-39) In this sense, Marxism introduced the first modern account of the structural oppression that tied together a positive account of the non-agential sources of a social order with a normative account of group-based oppression.

In spite of this, there has been little academic realignment to reflect this unified discourse of structure and oppression. The field of sociology (which emerged in the late nineteenth century) has largely been concerned with identifying and taxonomizing the levels on which structure operates. From macro-scale formal institutional arrangements, through meso-scale social networks and micro-scale informal norms, sociologists have been concerned less with providing an account of where structure comes from (this is the task of historians and ethnologists) and more an account of the way rules, incentives, and habits lead to patterned social outcomes. On the other side, moral philosophers have developed accounts of the social implications of oppression. “In the most general sense,” Iris Marion Young notes of this modern use of the term oppression, “all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Marilyn Frye notes similarly, “One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, and deprivation.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Where sociology focuses on the non-agential constraints, habits, norms, and incentives that generate stable groups and social outcomes, normative scholars focus on the multiple faces and individual experiences of oppression as a moral wrong. The Madisonian and Jeffersonian division of labor carries over into the academy.

Missing in this academic division of labor is something that was present in Marx. Where Marx’s account of exploitation made the argument that the capitalist economic order structured social and political life at all levels in a way that was constitutively exploitative, more contemporary work instead provides a shallow account of oppression as the consequence of a series of historical accidents. In describing these accounts as shallow, I mean to designate that the many contemporary accounts see oppression as running only as deep as specific formal and informal incentives and norms. If only schools would be integrated, police forces would wear body cameras, mortgages would be accessible to all, people would stop prejudging each other, etc., then oppression would fade away.

That structural oppression might not be overcome through a progressive process of universal reconciliation is difficult for contemporary liberalism to accommodate. Seen most clearly in the contemporary left, the vocabulary of structural oppression allowed members of the New Left to describe the broad scope of injustices being confronted by the civil rights, feminism, gay rights, and labor movements, while retaining the decentered, non-agential account of political structure found in *The Federalist Papers*. Such shallow accounts of structural oppression appeal to an Enlightenment humanist optimism that there exists some more authentic form of liberated social organization that is either unmediated by structures (a sort of social Romanticism often distilled in straw-man versions of the anarchist position) or that can be solve the problem of oppression scientifically by developing a scientific mode of social organization (seen both in Federalist 51 and strawman versions of scientific socialism). Each impulse shares in the hope is that there is some way that oppressed and oppressor can join together as individuals in order to recognize and respect one-another’s basic worth.[[42]](#endnote-42)

In contrast with shallow accounts, a deep account of structural oppression highlights how powerlessness, marginalization, exploitation, cultural imperialism, and violence are experienced and sustained as constitutive antagonisms built into the foundations of the political world. As Hannah Arendt claims in *The Promise of Politics*, such a process of world-building is fundamental to all forms of political order: “Whenever human beings come together – be it in private or socially, be it in public or politically – a space is generated that simultaneously gathers them into it and separates them from one another.”[[43]](#endnote-43) This space, a “space of appearances” where individuals see and are seen by one- another, is the condition of politics, without which people cannot be together in a meaningful sense. She continues in *The Human Condition*:

This world, however, is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life. It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as the affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.[[44]](#endnote-44)

These objects are interests, both “in the word’s most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people” (the objective world) and also in “an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men’s acting and speaking directly *to* one another” (the subjective world).[[45]](#endnote-45) The world consists both of things which structure our material lives and of the network of meanings are “overlaid and, as it were, overgrown” with these structures.[[46]](#endnote-46)

A stable political community is built on a world of objects and meanings that appear natural, neutral, and given. Yet, this world is none of these. This common ground, Arendt saw, could only be established if it seem to be the “manifestation of the world or rather of those parts of the world which certain groups, *corps*, or classes had in common because they were situated between them.”[[47]](#endnote-47) While appearing ontological, this world builds off a particular intersection of groups’ interests and beliefs about how the material world is organized, who is a part of ‘us’ and who isn’t, and what modes of interaction are normal and civil. The world comes to appear natural and neutral only because it seems so intuitive from the perspective of the groups that hold power and can locate certain points of interest and identity in common.

What a deep account of structural oppression helps us see is that the material and discursive world we live in is built on unseen and naturalized group-based interests. When these take concrete material and discursive forms through politics, those who are not of this world are subjected to structural exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Where the left’s shallow account casts structural oppression as a product of faulty and contingent incentives and norms, this deep account sees that the terms of political culture always reflect and impose a distinction between inside and outside, or those whose lives matter and those whose lives do not.

As an example, Frank Wilderson outlines a core holding of afro-pessimism in claiming that racialized oppression is the ontological condition of American liberal democracy: “through chattel slavery the world gave birth and coherence to both its joys of domesticity and to its struggles of political discontent, and with these joys and struggles, the Human was born, but not before it murdered the Black, forging a symbiosis between the political ontology of Humanity and the social death of Blacks.”[[48]](#endnote-48) An exclusionary account of the human – able to bear rights, worthy of the franchise, and possessing inherent social value – is the common ground of American politics. The New World is a world built materially and discursively on around an ontological and gratuitous anti-blackness. This is the paradigm of black existence, defying New Left optimism to collectively work together and overcome through a commitment to liberal humanity.

When Wilderson claims that “violence against black people is ontological and gratuitous as opposed to merely ideological and contingent,” he draws attention to the way the structures that maintain racialized violence are built into the material and discursive practices that constitute the American politics.[[49]](#endnote-49) In being ontological, oppression is co-extensive with social reality, more fundamental than an ideological misstep to be critiqued and left-behind in the course of social progress. In being gratuitous, it requires no ongoing justification. Jared Sexton offers similarly that:

Structural vulnerability to appropriation, perpetual and involuntary openness, including all the wanton uses of the body…should be understood as the paradigmatic conditions of black existence in the Americas, the defining characteristics of New World anti-blackness. In short, the black, whether slave or ‘free,’ lives under the commandment of whites.[[50]](#endnote-50)

This deep account casts oppression as more than social accident, faulty norms, or isolable mechanisms, and instead sees that the oppressed are restricted to the edges of the perceptible, valued world.[[51]](#endnote-51) Structural oppression on this account is “deep” in that it is built into the material and discursive foundations of the world, condemning the oppressed to live in the world’s “social purgatories, leprous badlands” – the spaces outside a generally accepted social reality.[[52]](#endnote-52)

Iris Marion Young’s claim, cited in the introduction, that “the political discourse in which oppression is a central category” occupies a political landscape that is “incommensurate with the language of liberal individualism,” can now be understood more clearly.[[53]](#endnote-53) Where a liberal account frames the meaningful units of political analysis are individuals who act willfully in pursuit of their own interests through markets and democratic institutions that treat all as equals, this deep account sees structural oppression as built into the perceptions and assumptions that shape our world. Structural oppression is a naturalized way of being – the ontological foundation of the social order. The liberal imperative that dissenters adhere to norms of non-violence, instrumentality, coherence, accountability, and civility is thus shown to be both callous to those groups that have no claim on the world and unrealistic in claiming that respectable dissent is an effective way to generate social change.

To require non-violent resistance from the oppressed in a world where voice and audience – the conditions of non-violence resistance’s effectiveness – are systematically denied to a group is to condemn the oppressed to ineffective forms of action. As Franz Fanon argued in *The Wretched of the Earth,* an overriding drive to secure oneself and the world from violence reproduces the existing moral and political order, leaving racialized oppression in place.[[54]](#endnote-54) Civil disobedience above all is about maintaining a civil order, while violent protests destabilize social worlds. As one author notes:

In relation to riots in particular, calls for ‘social justice’, ‘rights’, ‘police accountability and transparency’ obscure the essence of these movements, whose meaning resides entirely on the surface. They are fundamentally demandless and intentionally destructive. There is no ‘point’ except for utter dissolution of the current state of affairs. As viewed by the Afro-pessimists, the demandlessness of these struggles cannot be reduced to any single empirical aspect – freedom here and now must be absolute not relative. An irreconcilable antagonism produces black existence positioning it against humanity. This antagonism can only be resolved by the cathartic purge of violence.[[55]](#endnote-55)

This ‘purge’ – the exact vocabulary used to draw the Uprising to the Mondawmin Mall – is a means of negating the social order where non-violent agitation to curb police aggression was failing. Violence against people and property – even if never desirable – is one of the few forms of meaningful dissent available to those without a foothold in the free world.

To require coherence from the protestors ignores the particularity of experience, fragmentation, and historical disenfranchisement of many oppressed groups. When oppression is ontological and gratuitous, no readymade vocabulary exists to challenge it. To expect the black population of Baltimore to be able to speak with one voice, and to tailor their demands to the correct body of policymakers – in short, to ask that the oppressed speak with the same unity and reasoned-style as long-organized, enfranchised groups – is to ignore the long, diverse history of racialized injustice:

Why must frustrated black teenagers in Baltimore city have a clear message? To say ‘they have no goal’ or ‘they should be peaceful’ is to place brackets around the protest. It is to sanitize the riot (‘it’s not a riot it’s a rebellion’) in a way that prevents it from undermining race, class, and gender hierarchies. We must realize that *there is no movement or message*. That there are only people on the streets making shit happen, those trying to stop them, and those who haven’t (yet) been faced with the decision to act.[[56]](#endnote-56)

Claiming that black Baltimoreans lack of coherence and that their dissent is meaningless is to read them narrowly and uncharitably: it fails to understand that the experience of structural oppression denies many populations the tools necessary to speak with one easily-heard voice.

To require clear instrumental claim-making from dissenters assumes that the there is a clear source of oppression that can be targeted to affect change. But the means that are typically instrumentally effective are neither accessible to, nor effective for, systematically-oppressed groups. Sometimes dissent that appears pointless or destructive from a liberal perspective – meaning, that is not presented as a clear form of means-ends claim-making – is the only resource available to an oppressed population. As one critic noted of recent protests, “Various automatons of public opinion have increasingly remarked on the nihilistic nature of such destructive acts, stinking of paternalism and moralistic authority: ‘why not be more selective?’ or ‘why do you destroy your own neighborhoods?’ or ‘how does this achieve anything?’”[[57]](#endnote-57) Dismissal of destructive acts as nihilistic and unproductive misses that racialized inequality is built into the foundations of Baltimore and that no clear means exist within a world built on racialized inequality to assert that black life matters.

To require legal accountability from dissenters is to assume that the oppressed owe something to the world that oppresses them. To claim that dissenters should prop up the existing legal or social world, or seek absolution after violating its norms, is to assume that the dissenter owes a debt to the state; or, as Jackie Wang wrote in the wake of Troy Davis’ execution, “to sacrifice ourselves in order to meet the standards of victimhood, to throw our bodies into traffic to prove that the car will hit us rather than calling for the execution of all motorists.”[[58]](#endnote-58) Yet black Baltimoreans didn’t need to throw themselves to the mercy of the city’s criminal justice system after the Uprising to prove that their city is racist and it is hard to understand why they are called upon to shore up the legitimacy of the world they sought to destroy.

To require civility from the oppressed means assuming a world of structural injustice is worthy of being addressed in the terms it demands. Further, it requires the oppressed to behave as though they will be treated as equal citizens of a world that will not – and cannot – do so. Asking groups facing enduring suffering and deprivation to affirm the world’s material and discursive norms not only misunderstands the foundational power of oppression but is also cruelly indifferent to the long-term realities of racialized violence. In the words of one protestor, “At the end of the day, as far as this earth is concerned […] there’s a lot of Freddie Grays, there’s a lot of Mike Browns, and everywhere there’s a lot of racism. It ain’t never gonna change. It ain’t never gonna change. And I’m telling you to your face, to the camera, to the media: ain’t shit gonna change.”[[59]](#endnote-59) In America, the civilization that civility preserves has persevered largely because it is built on the enduring foundation of anti-black violence.

In sum, while recent shifts have prompted a more sophisticated understanding of group-based structural oppression, most accounts fail to account for the depth and intractability of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. By treating structural oppression as a regrettable and correctable social accident rather than an ontological condition of politics, these accounts remain firmly on the terrain of liberalism. Such shallow accounts therefore have little effect on the liberal standards of respectable dissent, retaining as they do the liberal optimism that incremental progress will correct, and rid us of, the social structures that generate oppression.

Following the work of Arendt, my account of structural oppression as a form of world-building suggests that the problems facing the oppressed run far deeper than liberalism suggests – and therefore that the liberal ethic of respectable dissent places unjustifiable and inhumane limitations on the forms of political action available to the oppressed. On my account, structural oppression is constitutive of social reality, giving shape and stability to a politics that is inextricable from it. The norms used to evaluate the moral legitimacy of dissent confine the oppressed to forms of action that cannot meaningfully confront or overturn oppression: non-violence upholds the people and property that are already valued while leaving the oppressed to suffer gratuitous harm; coherence demands a clear voice of those who are neither asked to speak not are heard when they do; instrumentality demands a clear vision of a future that is impossible to build within this world’s material and discursive norms; accountability inflicts suffering and punishment from those already experiencing disproportionate suffering and punishment; civility maintains the comfort of the population that relegates the oppressed to living social death. Those excluded from the social and political world therefore ought not be expected to accept their exclusion or to enact dissent only in those ways the world is already comfortable with.

We arrive at a new set of questions. If all political worlds are constitutively oppressive, what is to be done to affect positive change? When group-based exploitation, marginalization, disempowerment, cultural imperialism, and violence become the natural and neutral conditions of political community, what tools are left for the oppressed to deconstruct a political order that cannot be opposed on its own (liberal) terms and build something better? What, in sum, are the descriptive and normative terms of that can evaluate the landscape of anti-oppressive dissent? It is to these questions that I will turn in my final two sections. In the next section, I will outline an alternative to the liberal standards of morally permissible dissent that is more sensitive to the challenges facing resistance in a world of structural oppression. The final section then considers the practical and tactical implication of this alternative ethical framework by suggesting four tactics that ought to be embraced as legitimate forms of dissent in a world of structural oppression.

*4: Anti-civil Disobedience and the Ethic of Redemption*

The prior sections have made two broad claims. The first is that a set of norms have developed over the past two centuries that govern the reception of dissent in liberal-democratic societies. Acts of disobedience are expected to satisfy criteria of non-violence, instrumentality, coherence, accountability, and civility to be viewed as politically respectable. These liberal standards of respectable dissent operate as deontological and utilitarian standards for evaluating the moral permissibility of disobedience.

My second claim is that these criteria are inadequate to addressing contemporary conditions of structural oppression. While acts adhering to these criteria may be politically transformative when dissenters are on an equal political playing field with the powerful, structural oppression builds group-based exploitation, marginalization, disempowerment, cultural imperialism, and violence into the foundations of the political world. Applying liberal standards to evaluate the ethical permissibility of anti-oppression dissent is therefore unjustifiable and callous, failing to appreciate the depth and endurance of structural oppression.

Oppression cannot be meaningfully confronted on liberalism’s terms and, as I will argue in the remainder of the essay, thus generates a new (distinctly illiberal) ethical and tactical terrain for dissent. If structural oppression is built into the world, then the oppressed would seem to have the right to engage in those forms of action capable of unbuilding the world and opening the way for something new to emerge. What, however, does this mean specifically for the ethics and tactics of dissent? With no single institution or sovereign responsible for structural oppression and with no clear levers to pull to vote “no” on the way the world is built, how might the oppressed act to affect change?

The ethics and tactics of anti-civil disobedience are doubly difficult to imagine: a post-oppression future is unclear (even impossible) and the way to get there is blocked. The difficulty in formulating a descriptive and normative account of dissent in a world of structural oppression cannot be loosed from this double bind, yet similar questions of ethics in a world of uncertain means to uncertain ends have long been a focus in multiple traditions of thought. It is in these traditions – Jewish messianism, Marxist revolutionary theory, and queer critiques of reproduction –that I find an ethical guide for dissent in a world of structural oppression. I refer to this alternative framework as an “ethic of redemption” – called so because it aims to fundamentally transform an unjust world, even if it must do so without a clear sense of the means to salvation or the form that salvation might take.

In “Toward the Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” Gershom Scholem isolates two arcs of the Jewish messianic narrative – the restorative and the utopian.[[60]](#endnote-60) The restorative narrative casting humanity as fallen: an “elegiac” attitude, in the vocabulary of Walter Benjamin, in which the decline of the present still carries the ineffaceable yet submerged and fractured marks of the divine.[[61]](#endnote-61) The ambition of the restorative messianic narrative is *“archaeological*,” creating a sense of a present moment in which we seek the submerged fragments of a primordial unity.[[62]](#endnote-62) The utopian narrative instead looks forward to a future “radical upheaval of all reality” that will mark the destruction of the material and historical conditions that maintain humanity’s separation from the ideal.[[63]](#endnote-63) Such a messianic conception is “*eschatological*: truth is in becoming,” with the goal being a future radical historical break and ethics being the domain of crafting and attending to those moments where redemption can emerge at the heart of worldly being.[[64]](#endnote-64)

This dialectical tension of past and future results in an anxiety regarding the possibility of ethical action in the present; what Stephane Moses refers to as “a very strange experience of time: it is lived, in its very nature, in the mode of expectation; neither the pagan joy of the present moment, nor a spiritual escape beyond time, but an always renewed aspiration for the emergence, in the very heart of time, of the brand-new.”[[65]](#endnote-65) Such messianic consciousness results in what Scholem referred to as a sense of “life in suspension;” even though agency is firmly rooted in the lived reality of the present, the agent’s eyes, limbs and mind all strain for that which may have been and might come to be. In Moses’ assessment, the messianic agent must understand and accept the “fundamentally paradoxical nature of messianism, for which Redemption must be visibly manifest in the concreteness of history, but for which, at the same time, no real messianic attempt will ever be up to its aspirations.”[[66]](#endnote-66) The messianic agent cannot know what redeemed reality looks like, whether her actions will bring it about, or how to break with the conditioning forces of this world to bring about a separate and perfect redemption.

To bring about the best world in its totality, the agent must do what humanity and our seemingly foreclosed political reality sets up as impossible: imagine with certainty the form of a better world, determine the course of action by which this world will come about, then overcome the defining and limiting aspects of the known world in the name of the ideal. Yet, as impossible as this situation may be, to give into the world as it is is more unbearable. To turn away from the redemptive horizon leaves us trapped in a bloody and cruel world, where, in the words of Aviezer Ravitzky, “the only alternative to paradox would be despair.”[[67]](#endnote-67) Treating catastrophe as a cause for agency and optimism is one of few alternatives to succumbing to a thoroughly unjust world.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ scattered accounts of the coming working class revolution roughly conforms to the same expectation, both in their criticisms of utopianism and their own circumspection regarding the form of the post-revolutionary social order. It is has been observed that Marx and Engels wrote many volumes on the past and present without spending more than a few pages imagining the future. Beyond vague exhortations that the proletariat “can redeem itself only through the total redemption of humanity,”[[68]](#endnote-68) both held that hardened images of post-revolutionary utopias (in the styles of the Saint Simonians, Charles Fourier, or Robert Owen) are typically arrogant and counter-revolutionary assertions that are neither free from the assumptions of capitalism nor likely to be practically desirable after the revolution.[[69]](#endnote-69) It would take the radical break and redemption of the revolution that functioned as a moment of opening to a new redeemed world (rather than a goal-oriented or instrumental opening of new possibilities).

As Marx put it in the “Civil War in France,” “The working class…have no ready made utopias to introduce. They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which the old collapsing society is pregnant.”[[70]](#endnote-70) Communism may be the goal of the revolution but it doesn’t yet clearly exist in the minds of the workers whose lives and imaginations are defined by a capitalist social order. While society is pregnant with possibility, it is not clear how activists might midwife it into reality without careful materialist analysis. Even then, it would take the radical opening of new possibilities that went along with the early stages of the Communist order’s evolution for this new social order to solidify.

Communism and Jewish messianism both foreground an alternative political ethic and temporality based not on political progress toward a desired end-state, where actions cannot be clearly evaluated on their utilitarian or deontological value. Instead, their ethic is based on hope – a hope to open new revolutionary possibilities emerging from a world that is thoroughly and structurally fallen by “blast[ing] open the continuum of history.”[[71]](#endnote-71) The idea of such changes is not to save the good of the old social order or to make incremental progress in order to make good on the promise of the old (fallen/exploitative) order, but instead to redeem the world by wiping the slate clean for something new – a new material and normative structure – to build itself up; as one commentator put it, “the task to be accomplished is less the reconciliation with the past (or nature, classes, etc.), but rather the redemption of the hopes of the past.”

A third model of this redemptive ethic can be found in the body of work growing from Lee Edelman’s critique of “reproductive futurism” in *No Future*.[[72]](#endnote-72) Referring to the common political and ethical motivation to act in ways that improve the wellbeing of future generations, reproductive futurism figures improving the life of the Child (as a sort of mythical figure that can make good on the promises of the present while healing the wounds of the past) as a universally appealing motivation to act:

For politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child.[[73]](#endnote-73)

This investment in reproduction is not only heteronormative (favoring reproduction as the means to a better future while disfavoring those without a reproductive stake in the social order) but it also quiteist – marginalizing the voices of dissent that might disrupt the orderly flow of the present into a future that is safe for the next generation. The logic of reproductive futurism is the logic of social reproduction of oppression, ensuring that the world continues on it roughly the same shape indefinitely.

In offering a politics beyond reproduction, Edelman does not leave ethics behind but instead looks outside “the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized” to find a new motivation for action.[[74]](#endnote-74) This queer ethics, “forsakes *all* causes, *all* social action, all responsibility for a better tomorrow or for the perfection of social forms” and “performs, instead, an act: the act of repudiating the social.”[[75]](#endnote-75) While this politics and ethics functions without the Child – and thus without a clear image of the absolved future – there is still a hope, agency, and excitement there. As Edelman and Lauren Berlant put it in the preface to their dialog, *Sex, or the Unbearable*:

Generally negativity signifies a resistance to or undoing of the stabilizing frameworks of coherence imposed on thought and lived experience. In its disturbance of such totalizations, negativity enacts the dissent without which politics disappears. Negativity, in this sense, is inseparable from the struggles of subordinated persons to resist the social conditions of their devaluation.[[76]](#endnote-76)

While such a move might appear “quietistic, apolitical, nihilist, defeatist, or even irresponsible,” this negativity instead acknowledges that social structures, and the ethical frameworks used to evaluate dissent within them, systematically devalue and disempower the oppressed from thinking in terms of their own liberation.[[77]](#endnote-77)

Offering no readymade utopia and no clear guide as to how to break with a constitutively oppressive world, Edelman’s critique of reproductive futurism suggests a redemptive ethic in the model of Jewish messianism and revolutionary Marxism. Acknowledging that the negation of the world and openness to an uncertain future are political, ethical, and tactical imperatives in the fight against oppression. While humanity might only have a “weak messianic power” to unlock something new at the heart of the world, this is better than surrendering to oppression as irredeemably built into the world.[[78]](#endnote-78) The future as we can study it, understand it, and predict it (the future of classical liberalism, the free market, or the Child) is in an important sense foreclosed to the emergence of something truly and radically new: this is the world of predictability, optimism, and steady progress. The redemptive ethic does not accept the arc of the universe bends inexorably toward justice but, instead, prioritizes the uncertain disruption of those redeeming, revolutionary, and negating moments when something totally new promises to emerge.

A world built on structural oppression, a new tactical landscape of anti-civil disobedience can be read out of this redemptive ethic. Where norms of respectable dissent suggest that dissenters must adhere to liberal intuitions about the means to social progress, anti-civil disobedience instead struggles against a resistant world to open the space for something totally and unpredictably new. Movements like the Baltimore Uprising thus travel on a temporal and ethical terrain that is totally distinct from that mapped out by liberalism’s deontological and utilitarian standards of respectable dissent; a terrain where tactics that are commonly dismissed as meaningless, thuggish, or anti-political take on new legitimacy, laudability, and permissibility. While the means to prepare the world for redemption are hampered by uncertain means and uncertain ends, the ethical imperative is nonetheless to work to open the world for transformation and redemption.[[79]](#endnote-79) When read as efforts to deconstruct and redeem, rather than oppose and reform, oppressive structures, these dissenting tactics gain new legitimacy even as they remain unclear in both what future they generated how they are going to get us there.

*5. Four New Tactical Landmarks*

The tactical terrain of anti-civil disobedience that in defined by an ethic of redemption remains to be explored. Difficult and disquieting to navigate (particularly to those more comfortable travelling in the space of liberal individualism or who are off-put by spiritual understones of the vocabulary) it is nonetheless worth exploring given both the power of structural oppression as a framework for understanding injustice and ethics, and pressing conversations concerning the ethics and tactics of movements ranging from Black Lives Matter to the Sandanistas, Bundy family, and BashBack.

I have argued that the classical liberalism and civil disobedience provide inadequate and insensitive tools for evaluating oppression and dissent are inadequate and therefore that a new ethical and tactical framework is necessary for understanding and confronting structural oppression. Where shallow accounts of oppression that remain attached to a classical liberal understanding of politics lead to a premature and callous condemnation of the illiberal dissent of the oppressed, my deep account of structural oppression prompts a more generous understanding of the tactics and ethics of anti-civil disobedience. In short: because structural oppression makes it so that it is difficult to know what a non-oppressive politics look like, how to act to bring a non-oppressive world about, and how to break from the history of material and discursive world of oppression, forms of dissent that can combat structural oppression must work through uncertainty in order to affect positive change.

If dissent structural oppression follows this new ethics and politics of redemption, however, the question remains as to what the tactical implications are for an account of anti-civil disobedience. What actions are permitted to the oppressed in fighting against the social order? While this is a large question and I cannot address it fully here, I will suggest four practical features of anti-civil disobedience that may be rendered permissible by an ethic of redemption: non-instrumentality, gratuity, locality, and destructiveness.

*Non-instrumental actions that operate outside the progressive logic of liberal dissent.* Where the legitimacy of dissenting acts is often tied to their clearly framing an ongoing wrong, articulating an alternative, and then working to affect relevant change, the world of structural oppression is defined by its inability to recognize and address the claims of the oppressed. This justifies non-instrumental acts of dissent – not only because liberal instrumentality is inadequate to addressing the depths of structural oppression, but also because rejecting instrumentality is in-itself an effect means to challenge the dominant terms of civil order in liberal states. If an ethic of redemption frames rejecting the oppressive world and opening the way to something new as moral imperatives, then cutting firehoses or having a public dance party can challenge the basic terms of the liberal order by showing the basic logic of instrumental claim-making does not define the terms of political engagement for all. While this can generate confusion and backlash, it is non-instrumentality’s ambiguity and seeming senselessness that open a space to challenge the deep structures of oppression.

*Gratuitousness actions that are undertaken without justification and without accepting penalty*. Describing an act as gratuitous connotes that it is unreasonable, uncalled for, and unjustified. In these senses, to refer to an act of dissent as gratuitous condemns it as a frivolous violation of liberal-democratic norms; in particular, the imperatives that actions be justified in terms that make sense to the dominant political culture and that dissenters compensate the individuals and institutions they harm or inconvenience. As I claimed above, asking dissenters to coherently justify their dissenting acts shores up the civil order by appealing to discourses and institutions that are founded on structural oppression. Accountability through legal penalties functions in much the same way: by handing oneself over to the legal system or submitting oneself to a trial in the court of public opinion, the dissenter upholds the legitimacy of the oppressive structure that holds them to account. By resisting justification and refusing penalty one can act against the terms of the system as a whole. From the perspective of an ethic of redemption, this is a necessary term of anti-civil disobedience – to subvert without covertly supporting the oppressive order.

*Localized appeals within the material and discursive experiences of particular oppressed communities*. Because structures are woven into the material and discursive fabric of the world – in other words, decentralized – there is no perfect place to target appeals against them. For this reason, dissenters can only fight to negate oppression in the concrete forms it takes in particular times and places. While this might not satisfy the liberal requirement that actions make a coherent appeal to achieve systematic change, it is nonetheless justified to fight this decentered order in the places and forms it is the most concrete. This may mean acting in ways that are read as reactive, ineffective, or arbitrary from the perspective of those in positions of power, but it also means acknowledging that in fighting a structure one must start somewhere or another. Furthermore, because localized manifestations of oppression are connected to the ontological conditions of political culture, even actions far from any apparently privileged point in the structural order can resonate far beyond immediate conditions. Structures may not have centers but, as others have argued, this means that dissent can spread horizontally throughout a network of analogous structural conditions – shedding light not only on the order of the world but also at the shared structural conditions of those who seek to subvert it.

*Destruction of the forms of property and life that are privileged in an oppressive structure*. While there is no more surefire way for a social movement to lose the support of a liberal public, there are moments when the destruction of property and life is one of the few political tools at a group’s disposal. While this is an uncomfortable conclusion considering the recent rise in attacks on police and general social anxiety about rioting as a challenge to civil order, destruction remains one of the few means available to build a movement and reject oppressive institutions. This is not to argue, like, Malcolm X, that violence is justified because it is a “reciprocal” response to the violence (typically unseen or naturalized) of an oppressive order.[[80]](#endnote-80) Instead, destroying a business or attacking police marks, again, a rejection of the most fundamental terms of the civil structure – the need to respect the meanings, forces, and norms that are most fundamental to upholding structural oppression.

While these four features are what James Scott calls the “weapons of the weak” – often being the “default” tools of groups without access to the means of economic, social, or political betterment – I claim that they are not only a product of necessity but they also illuminate a redemptive ethic of political action.[[81]](#endnote-81) Placing these tactics in the context of my account of deep structural oppression, the illiberality of non-instrumentality, gratuity, locality, and violence means they push against the boundaries of what is coherent in contemporary Western forms of structural oppression. The ethic of redemption therefore prompts a new and sympathetic reading of a number of movements that sit uncomfortably in the liberal tradition: the Paris Commune, Situationist International, Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, and Bash Back! were all distinctly illiberal movements but their efforts to break with the terms of the world in order to open “the thrilling sense of an abrupt alteration in the relation between the possible and the impossible” may make them models of a new politics of anti-civil disobedience.[[82]](#endnote-82)

Returning then to the example from the start of this paper, to burn down a pharmacy and cut the hoses of the crews trying to put out the resulting fire was not just the tactic of a group without a foothold in the world. It was also a refusal to engage the world of structural oppression on its terms. Where the readings of the Uprising at the start of this paper insist on dragging its events back into the terms of civil disobedience and liberal optimism, these acts are profoundly pessimistic about the possibility of affective positive change without a radical upheaval of reality. When we follow RL and allow that the meaning of these acts “resides entirely on the surface,” we can allow for the radical possibility that the rioters are not asking for anything, that their actions are neither called for by nor accountable to the forces of civil order, that they are not systematically targeting centers of power, and that they do not seek to leave the world intact.[[83]](#endnote-83) This destruction, rejection, and negation is the first step toward seeing a new world in a new light – one with structure that is fundamentally unrecognizable if one doesn’t strain to recognize it in these fleeting and disquieting moments.

To conclude, what I am articulating is as much a way of looking at acts of dissent as it is an alternative ethical framework to civil disobedience and liberalism. Notably, I am not offering or arguing for a checklist that can be used to identify an action as acceptable or unacceptable (no one should be persuaded that an action is absolutely good once it proves to be non-instrumental, gratuitous, localized, and destructive). Instead I am offering a way to attend to dissenting acts undertaken by members of structurally oppressed groups in a way that is more sensitive to the barriers oppressed groups face and more prepared to think outside the structural constraints of an inherited political order.

Of course, it is likely that some forms of dissent– in spite of all efforts to give them the most generous attention possible – simply unacceptable; as a gesture toward a new world, either the act itself is beyond the pale or the new world glimpsed in that moment is unlivable (think of the new world glimpsed through acts of terrorism). Ultimately, my aim is not to rid individuals of their capacity to ethically discern between permissible and impermissible acts, but instead to prompt a more thoughtful and generous attention to acts that may be hard to accept from the perspective of liberal values and civil disobedience. Attending to possibility of redemption in moments that seem most challenging, we are better equipped to think outside contemporary political structures and allow for a radical transformation of enduring group-based oppressions.

1. **RATHER THAN REWORKING THE ENDNOTES AND GETTING THIS PAPER IN LATER THAN IT ALREADY IS, I’M GOING TO GO AHEAD AND CIRCULATE IT. IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS OVER A SOURCE, PLEASE EMAIL ME AT CALLUM.INGRAM@TCU.EDU.**

   Bradford 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ohlheiser 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. (Antle III 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. (Cave 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. (Kornhauser 1959; Olson 1965; Opp 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. (Tarrow 1998, 2) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. (Pichardo 1997; Temelini 2014) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. (quoted in Taylor 2011, 68) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. (Harvey 2014; Hardt & Negri 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. (Blumer 1969; Tilly 1978) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. (Staggenborg 2010) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. (Caren 2010), [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press (1990), 39-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, Calcutta: Signet Press (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Frederick Douglass, “If There is No Struggle, There is No Progress,” accessed online (2 November, 2016): http://www.blackpast.org/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Joseph Raz, *The Authority of Law: Essays on Law and Morality*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1979), 268. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 366. Of course, the effects of this common line of argumentation in the classical liberal tradition shape far more than critical accounts of the political life of violence. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Joseph Raz, 1979, 262-75. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Baynard Woods, “Baltimore's Uprising: Rival Gangs Push for Peace After Freddie Gray's Death,” *The Guardian* (27 April 2016): https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/27/baltimore-gangs-truce-freddie-gray-police-decrease-violence. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Kyle Smith, “Baltimore riot mom is Mother of the Year,” *New York Post* (28 April, 2015), accessed online: http://nypost.com/2015/04/28/baltimore-riot-mom-is-mother-of-the-year/. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Kent Greenawalt, *Conflicts of Law and Morality*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1987), 235. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Erica Hellerstein, “The Side Of The Baltimore Protests You Don’t See,” *Think Progress* (April 28, 2015): https://thinkprogress.org/the-side-of-the-baltimore-protests-you-dont-see-be11c7778002#.w2up16c38. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Connected with this, Rawls claims that disobedience is justifiable only when dissenters work with other minority groups to form an effective coalition in order to achieve their social or policy goals (Rawls 1971, 374-5). Without this attempt to build an effective movement, individual acts are unable to rise to the level of political movements that are actually capable of affecting change, ultimately only serving to undercut the effectiveness of the rule of law while achieving no political gain. This is also taken to be an issue with the resort to violence – that it drives away potential coalition partners and allies (Raz, 1979, 267)). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*, ed. John Keane and Paul Mier, Philadephia: Temple University Press (1989), 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Paul Haber, *Power from Experience: Urban Popular Movements in Late Twentieth-Century Mexico*, University Park: Penn State Press (2006), 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768-2004*, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers(2004)*,* 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Stephen H. Marshall. “The Political Life of Fungibility.” *Theory & Event* 15 (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. In conforming to such norms, Marshall explains, the Martins may have gained a sympathetic audience but, at the same time, “the very parameters which constitute grief’s conditions of legibility all but ensure that Fulton and Martin’s grief will never get a genuine public hearing” (Ibid.). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Of course, there is little in the Million Hoodie March or kneeling during the National Anthem to suggest that dissenters are acting incoherently. The public dismissal of hooded sweatshirts and raised fists as violence speaks far more to discomfort with the public displays of a uniquely black politics than it does to any sort of violation of even the strictest normative standards of liberal propriety governing dissent. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Justin Fenton and Erica L. Green, “Baltimore Rioting Kicked Off With Rumors of a ‘Purge’” *Baltimore Sun* (27 April, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Rawls 1971, 390-1. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Brian Beutler, “There Are Victims of the Baltimore Riots*,*” *New Republic*, 28 April, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Mark Puente, “Undue Force,” *Baltimore Sun* (28 September, 2014), http://data.baltimoresun.com/news/police-settlements/ [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. SM course essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Joseph Raz (1979) 272–273. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. This is based on a Google nGram Viewer search for uses of the word “oppression” between the years 1400 and 2015 a.c.e. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. United States, *Declaration of Independence* (1776). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Alexander Hamilton et al, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Ian Shapiro, New Haven: Yale University Press (2009), 264. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Young (1990), 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Young (1990), 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg, New York: Worth Publishers (2007), 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. This optimism that gradual and progressive reform of the social errors that generate structural oppression thus leaves many accounts of structural oppression continuing to think in broadly liberal terms in their search for a political solution to the problem. Such an optimism evidenced in one account of the protests following the Ann Arbor police shooting of Aura Rosser:

    When a women was killed by police who were intervening in a domestic violence dispute: “There, a young black woman who had shared a jail cell with Aura Rosser grabbed the megaphone. “If you don’t know, we are at war! And you can’t fight war with peace. Tomorrow we go to war,” she yelled. An older white woman in the crowd, a product of the New Left generation, yelled back, “No, tomorrow, we go to work, to work together.” The young women responded “Y’all ain’t hearing me.”

    The shallow account of structural oppression offered by the New Left holds out hope that “work together” can generate social progress toward a universal justice but fail to understand that oppression is not experienced or sustained as epiphenomenon, social error, or regrettable historical inheritance (Jared Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” *Rhizomes* (29), accessed online: http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/sexton.html). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, New York: Schocken Books (2005), 106.  [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1998), 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid. 182-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York: Penguin Books (1998), 163-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Durham: Duke University Press, 20–1. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Frank B. Wilderson, III, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” *Social Identities* (9), 229. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Jared Sexton, “Racial Profiling and the Societies of Control,” in *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy*, ed. Joy James, Durham: Duke University Press (2007), 202. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Jacques Ranciere, *Le Partage du Sensible: Esthétique et Politique*, Paris: La Fabrique (2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Loic Waquant, “Territorial Stigmatization in the Age of Advanced Marginality,” *Thesis Eleven* (91), 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Iris Marion Young (1990), 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Franz Fanon, *The Wretch of the Earth,* trans. Richard Philcox, New York: Grove Press (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. RL [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Key MacFarlane, “Rites of Passage,” *ULTRA* (12 May, 2015), accessed online: http://www.ultra-com.org/project/rites-of-passage/. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. R.L. (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Jackie Wang, “Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety,” *Lies* (1), accessed online: http://www.liesjournal.net/volume1-10-againstinnocence.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. MacFarlane (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*. New York: Schocken Books (1971), 3-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Stephane Moses, *The Angel of History*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (2009), 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 135. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 135. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Moses (2009), 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Ibid., 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Aviezer Ravitsky, “The Messianism of Success in Contemporary Judaism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (vol. 3), ed. Stephen J. Stein, New York; Continuum Press (1999), 201. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1970), 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Friedrich Engels, “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader,* ed. Robert C. Tucker, 683-717. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Marx, Civil War in France. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Theses on the Philosophy of History. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham: Duke University Press (2004), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Ibid., 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid. 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Ibid. 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Durham: Duke University Press (2013), xii. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid., xii [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations,* New York: Schocken Books (2007), 254. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid. 257. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Ballot or Bullet. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Scott. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London: Verso Press (2012), 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. Of course, this isn’t to say that there were not also participants in the Baltimore Uprising who were making clear, civil claims on authorities (in fact, many of the strongest condemnations of the “purge” came from within the Uprising). However, my attention here is only to those who participated in these particular acts. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)