

Innovative Protest Tactics Disrupt NYC

[Stuart Schrader](#), December 18, 2014, In : [#BlackLivesMatter](#)

Protesters in the streets of New York City know something novel is happening. Whereas a couple years ago the cops threatened to arrest anyone who impeded car traffic, over the past few weeks, protesters have blocked roadways almost daily. Whether mobilization numbers have been great or small, cops have not leapt at the first opportunity to arrest. Instead, arrests have occurred late at night or as groups splinter.

City Police Commissioner Bill Bratton recently reinforced those perceptions. Asked whether the New York Police Department is now taking a “hands off” approach to policing protests, he [answered](#), “we do.” In comparison to his predecessor, Ray Kelly, Michael Bloomberg’s top cop, Bratton’s approach to protests does seem different.

At the same time, the NYPD has still tried to “kettle” protesters, and has not mothballed its pepper spray or the [Long Range Acoustic Device](#) “sound cannon.” Hundreds have been arrested, despite Bratton’s good-cop routine. The department has also recently [signaled](#) that a crackdown looms.

The shifting tactics of protest, and their changing targets, prompt an inquiry into what’s old and what’s new in the policing of New York City’s streets.

During Occupy Wall Street, a refrain aired among some quarters was that to focus on the police was to change the topic. The protests were about economic inequality, the power of finance capital, and the social effects of state austerity, went that argument. No one denied that the police seemed to take particular pleasure in clamping down on Occupy, particularly as the occupations wore on. Yet [some](#) argued that the problem was simply that radicals were neglecting to include cops under the big-tent banner of the 99%. In the end, although Occupy Wall Street had internal problems galore, to blame its dissolution on anything other than the actions of the NYPD is delusional. From mass arrests to violent evictions to harassment, cops [killed](#) Occupy in New York City and elsewhere.

Yet in the process of dealing with the cops’ harsh response to Occupy, militants [innovated](#). For example, because the NYPD tried to control the routes of marches and keep protesters out of the streets using their scooter brigade, protesters developed ways to neutralize the scooter cops. The best way was to march in the street against traffic. With traffic, on an open roadway, the scooters had full maneuverability and were able to get in front of any wildcat march that left the sidewalk. Against traffic, in between stopped cars, the scooters were unable to outrun the march. Chanting, singing, and holding up signs at eye level with drivers stuck in traffic also proved powerful. The city’s usually grumpy car commuters expressed solidarity, recognizing themselves as part of the 99%. Still, after the eviction of Zuccotti Park, many now-mobile protesters yearned to reoccupy public space, to plant a new base of operations. The NYPD, though, was never going to allow that to happen.

In the aftermath of the grand jury decisions not to indict the killers of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, protests in New York City and [around the country](#) have looked a lot more like these hit-and-run tactics that came out of Occupy than like occupations. They also call on a long, submerged [history](#) of roadway takeovers.

Protests have swarmed bridges, highways, and city streets. Temporary die-ins and walkouts have interrupted business as usual in Grand Central Station, university libraries, department stores, courthouses, and hospitals. And protesters have withdrawn from the consumer bacchanalia by, for example, expanding ongoing efforts to boycott Black Friday.

If the fixity in space of Occupy Wall Street was its greatest strength, it also was its greatest weakness, because maintaining momentum after the eviction was so difficult. The protests now occurring, which are focused on racist policing and state violence, are intentionally unmoored. Momentum is everything. Consciously or not, these protests recognize that long-occupied public space can become an albatross. Instead, they aim to control public space temporarily, to short-circuit the smooth circulation of goods and people that is the lifeblood of the economic system.

Whereas Occupy sometimes struggled to make connections between racist police violence and economic inequities, the protests now occurring have no such difficulty. In their inspiration, their targets, and their outcome, they aim to draw attention to, but also actually interfere with, the thorough-going racial inequality that is, as the late social theorist Stuart Hall [once put it](#), “the modality in which class is ‘lived,’ the medium through which class relations are experienced.” In other words, the protests of autumn 2014 understand that at its heart, racial inequality, including the horrific frequency of the murder of Black people by police, is secured through economic inequality, and vice versa.

Here is how this analysis plays out in the streets. Take the example of blockading highways, a variation on marching against traffic. First, highways have massive symbolic value. Though ubiquitous, they are nearly invisible pieces of infrastructure. We think about their presence only when they do not function properly, whether due to traffic or failures of upkeep. The protests thus aim to make visible the invisible, to show that our daily routines are the result of consequential political and economic decisions. These decisions include the siting of highways and other infrastructure.

Started in 1956, the interstate highway system was built to speed transport of military matériel and to enable evacuations in case of nuclear attack. The mushroom clouds never came, but the construction of highways sped other evacuations with profoundly racial contours: Suburbanization and the relocation of industry from center cities would have been impossible without this transportation infrastructure. The consequences were reconfigured and heightened racial and economic segregation. Moreover, highway construction often occurred in African-American and Latino neighborhoods, subjecting them to externally imposed blight, severing communities, and restricting access to the very economic gains the infrastructure was supposed to foster.

Second, if one of the stumbling blocks for Occupy was a certain hangover from older conversations within the Left about who was a proper member of the working class, and by extension, the 99%, the current wave of protests skips this question entirely. It does so through a literal shift of the terrain of protest. Occupy became a de facto dispensary of social services for those left adrift by economic inequality. The notion that only workers could interfere with capitalism because only workers had access to the means of production did not square with the heterogeneity of the occupiers, or the semi-permanent state of unemployment that characterized many of their lives. In line with an emerging [current](#) of thinking on the Left, highway blockades intentionally do not privilege an old-fashioned worker on the assembly line or carrying a union card. Instead, to block a highway, we need no special access or experience. We need only a bit of daring and trust in fellow protesters. Anyone can do it.

Focused on a crucial medium for the circulation of goods, services, and people, the blockades do not privilege one limb in the capitalist economy so much as disrupt the veins and sinew that connect its limbs. In their unpredictability, apparent randomness, ubiquity, and ease, blockages of infrastructure uncover the vulnerability of business as usual—which is just business—to disruption.

There is another way to think about vulnerability, not the system's but individuals'. Vulnerability is the precondition for the police violence that killed Eric Garner. Historian Barbara Ransby [has urged](#) us to consider why Garner was even in the situation that led him to be killed. He was allegedly selling untaxed cigarettes. But why was a father of six forced to [make a living](#) through this most informal of means?

Broken-windows policing, championed by Commissioner Bratton in the 1990s, takes advantage of the vulnerable. It polices expressions of economic vulnerability by focusing on tiny infractions, coded as disorder, that include people's attempts to make ends meet: sleeping on the subway between shifts, street performance, selling loosies. It goes hand in hand with an economic system that consistently sloughs risks off the top and dumps them on individuals and families who are least well-equipped to deal with them. The correlate of too big to fail is the frustrating feeling so many have of being too small to matter.

Among Eric Garner's [last words](#) was a galvanizing phrase, a slogan far better than what intellectuals like me have devised: It stops today. He was talking about how the cops would relentlessly take advantage of his precarious position to jack him up. In so doing he pointed to the conditions that the protests in his name aim to disrupt. In this spirit, low-wage workers of color have been [transforming](#) their struggles against economic precariousness into struggles against police harassment because they are also its likely victims.

A live question is what economic impacts the protests are having. No one should think that highway blockades or buy-nothing days will end capitalism, but no one should think capitalism will be imperiled without them either. The same goes for racism.

Bratton may thus far have ordered his officers to be [lenient](#) with the protests. But without the protesters having a central base of operations, as Occupy Wall Street did, the police are forced to play catch-up to a mobile and flexible itinerary of disruption. They will, of course, adjust.

The brilliant and inspiring protesters must now use their targeting of the vulnerability of the system to transform the racialized vulnerability of individuals. Whose quality of life is protected when people are forced into interactions with cops? Despite the new approach to protest witnessed on New York City's streets, what we need is a new approach to human-level vulnerability: one that removes cops from the picture entirely.