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POLICE AND POLICING

Historical Roots of Modern Policing and the Contemporary Police Strategy

Kristian: Hi, this is Kristian Williams, and I'm the author of *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America* and more recently *Hurt: Notes on Torture in a Modern Democracy*.

Alanis: In *Our Enemies in Blue*, Kristian reigns in the myth that police misconduct is just a matter of "bad apples," and demonstrates that instead so-called misconduct is a function of the very nature of policing in the US. Kristian examines populations most often subjected to police abuse and the forms that that abuse takes, delving into the role of police brutality in repressing political dissent and in preserving existing structures of inequality.

Kristian, let's begin by tracing the evolution of the modern police force back to the slave patrols.

Kristian: My argument in the book is that the police originally grew out of a previous sort of social control mechanism called the slave patrols. And the slave patrols were a militia-based arrangement where white men were conscripted into patrolling plantation area in the evening and enforcing pass laws and keeping the slaves on plantations and also making sure that they didn't have certain prohibited items like, depending on the location, firearms, alcohol, etc. From that process of adaptation, we get the first examples of what we can recognize as the modern police force. The earliest one that I've found was in Charleston, South Carolina at the very end of the 18th century.

So we find that at the beginning of the 21st century, [the police are] still acting in ways which disproportionately affect people of color, still acting in ways that maintain patterns of existing segregation, still acting in ways that reduce the possibility of members of oppressed groups exercising any sort of self-determination. And so, again, the argument of the book is that the changes in the law are to some degree cosmetic, that there are these deeper structures of inequality that structure our society and that the role of the police really is to preserve those, white supremacy being one of the most important.

Alanis: During the heyday of Occupy, some protesters rushed to the defense of the police, insisting that they are a part of the 99 percent. How does this obscure the role of police in a capitalist society?

Kristian: The notion that the police are part of the 99 percent partly relies on a misunderstanding of how capitalism is structured. It makes capitalism simply a matter of income inequality and not a matter of power, not a matter of labor, not a matter of ownership.

It isn't simply a matter of percentages; it's a matter of classes. At its most basic, there's a class that owns things, and that owns things and meets its needs and perpetuates itself simply by owning things. And, then there's a class that owns more or less nothing, and in order to individually meet their needs and also perpetuate itself as a class, it has to sell its labor. Which really means that people rent themselves to people who own things for the sake of getting their means met.

Now the tricky part is that in the middle there is a group that takes on some of the character of both of these two main classes. And that's the class that manages things. So most of us, we go to work and the person who is our boss is not the person who owns the establishment, or not even a member of the group that owns the establishment. He's a manager. He also rents himself out, and so in that sense he's part of the working class—but the thing is that he rents himself out to do is represent the owners. And therefore he identifies with them, the interests that he preserves are theirs; his whole job is keeping the working class doing the things that keep this cycle of extortion going.

So if we apply that very basic analysis to the broader social system and we look at the police in terms of preserving inequality and we look at their actions historically in terms of disciplining the workforce and also suppressing any sort of union activity or any sort of other class-based political efforts, then it's pretty clear that their role within the society is a part of the managerial apparatus of capitalism. That even though at times their working conditions are abhorrent, and even though they are not themselves capitalists and do have to rent themselves out, and even though they often come from blue collar, working class backgrounds; despite all of that, their position in the class society is that they are there to keep the working class working for the benefit of capitalism. And so for that reason it makes more sense to treat them as a part of the boss class rather than as workers. And therefore the efforts to bring them over to the side of the 99 percent are misguided.

Alanis: So, dovetailing that thought, Occupy Hashtag brought the issue of police brutality to the mainstream. I think the militarization of the police was something that many Americans thought would be reserved for foreign terrorists, and the media made a solid effort to explain away why city governments were unleashing a military-trained local law enforcement on their rambunctious children—oh yeah and poor people. How does this fit into the history of protest police strategy?

Kristian: There is a deep connection between protest policing and the way that has developed and the militarization. And to understand how these things are connecting. It's really important to look back toward the last major societal crisis that threatened the police altogether, which was during the late 60s and early 70s, really culminating around 1968. During that period the police were using a

form of crowd control called escalated force. And the notion was that it was the job of the police to maintain control and suppress public protest and to do that they would use force at a level one step higher than the resistance they met, and that they would begin at the lowest level of force and then escalate as resistance escalated. This was a disaster for them. And it went wrong in several ways. One of the ways that it went wrong was that as police escalated their force, crowds tended to escalate their resistance. So the things that probably would have been peaceful rallies or polite picketing became major occasions of disorder because the police were antagonizing the crowd.

And other ways that it went wrong was that the police attacked peaceful groups. And most famously. Bull Connor attacked Martin Luther King in Birmingham, and the television showed this all over the world, which was hugely discrediting to the cops themselves and to the city government and to the entire system of segregation that they were trying to preserve. So they sort of won tactically but then failed politically.

And so there was a shift within policing at the beginning of the 1970s. There were two shifts, and both of them are representative of the negotiated management strategy. One was the shift toward militarization, which people mostly think of in terms of SWAT teams and helicopters and weaponry and all of that kind of stuff. But I think the organizational aspect, though, is actually much more important.

The other main shift was toward what's called community policing, which is the softer policing approach where police form partnerships with community, and are very invested in building relationships with people in the community and especially leaders within the community, and try to put a friendly face on the way law enforcement is done.

Alanis: You put those two things together in a crowd control setting and you get negotiated management.

Kristian: What negotiated management meant was that instead of just showing up with horses and clubs and crushing demonstrations, the police were instead going to engage with the leadership and make arrangements, make deals, about how demonstrations would proceed, and so the police would be put in this role of managing the demonstration provided that the demonstration stayed within certain lawful parameters. And so that initiated the long and, for many of us, very

frustrating period of peaceful and completely ineffectual protest that began roughly in 1980 and ended precisely on November 30, 1999.

Because the police went with the negotiated management kind of plan. Their whole plan was to negotiate with the leaders of the demonstrations. They were going to make very clear arrangements about where demonstrations were allowed and when. They were going to maintain avenues of communication. And instead, the actual protesters were hell bent on actually disrupting the WTO meeting, and they did that. When they did that, when barricades went up in the streets when people were refusing orders to move, when people were refusing to not only do what the police said but also to do what the marshals of the demonstrations were telling them to do, the police really had nothing to fall back on, except what they do the rest of the time, which is hurt and arrest people. So they fell back on something like an escalated force model.

We've seen a new period of innovation in crowd control and a new period of experimentation. The people who have the best theory as to how this is developing are a couple of sociologists named Patrick Gillham and John Noakes. They describe the new system as strategic incapacitation.

Strategic incapacitation borrows from both escalated force and negotiated management. And selectively applies different aspects of it to different kinds of protesters. So protesters who are tagged as troublemakers who are tagged as disruptive, receive escalated force kinds of treatment, while protestors who are tagged as lawful, who are tagged as cooperative receive negotiated management types of treatment.

Added on top of this, there is a new emphasis on controlling the narrative publicly, so that the police are aggressive in terms of their media strategy. Some of that is used to discredit protestors tagged as disruptive, and some of that is to help paint themselves in the best light that they can. And then there's also a renewed and much more advanced emphasis on intelligence gathering ahead of time, because the police want to know exactly who is coming to a demonstration, and for exactly what purpose, so that they can sort which groups they should accommodate and which groups they should negotiate with, and which groups they should suppress.

Alanis: Thank you of joining us, Kristian.

Crimethinc's THE POLICE Poster

Clara: Hey, Alanis? Can I get your opinion? I was just trying to decide whether or not to read the text from this Crimethinc poster.

Alanis: Oh yeah, this one! I have that hanging up in my time machine. I think you should read it, it's great!

Clara: Yeah, I like it, but I don't know if I agree with the whole thing. Would you wanna read it?

Alanis: Sure! Ahem!

"The ones who beat Rodney King, who gunned down Sean Bell and Amadou Diallo and Oscar Grant, who murdered Fred Hampton in his bed. The ones who broke Víctor Jara's hands and Steve Biko's skull, who disappeared dissidents from Argentina to Zaire, who served Josef Stalin. The ones who enforced Apartheid in South Africa and segregation in the United States. The ones who interrogated Black Panthers and Catholic Workers, who maintained records on 16 million people in East Germany, who track us through surveillance cameras and phone taps. The ones firing tear gas and rubber bullets whenever a demonstration gets out of hand, who back the bosses in every strike. The ones who stand between every hungry person and the grocery shelves stocked with food, between every homeless person and the buildings standing empty, between every immigrant and her family. In every nation, in every age, you tell us you're indispensable, that without you we'd all be killing each other. But we know well enough who the killers are. You won't fuck with us much longer."

Alanis: So, what don't you like about it?

Clara: "Well, I think listing really bad things done by police is pretty shallow and doesn't get to the root of the problem at all. Many who defend police and policing oppose the things on that list. The problem with police isn't that they have done 'bad things'. For example, we could come up with similar lists of 'bad things' for a lot of professions: drugs dealers, doctors, social workers, etc. The problem with police is more fundamental than that list. They are armed agents of the state who enforce capitalist social relations with violence."

Alanis: Sure, the champions of police in liberal democracies may pay lip service to sensibilities of justice, but violence like this isn't unusual police behavior and it's not unique to one police force, but rather the capacity to do these bad things is part and parcel to police work, and these arms of the state carry out violence "in every nation, in every age..." I like that; this poster exposes what Police do.

Clara: For me that's one of the reasons why this poster misses the point. The police are so scary, not because of what they do per se, but rather because the *capacity* to commit any violence at a moment's notice lays at the heart of the police function. Cops symbolize violence, and that's their purpose. COPS are specifically charged with keeping things the same, and to do this they are the only ones who can use legitimate violence. And that's why cops lie on a regular basis, why their mere presence is so intimidating, why so much of law enforcement involves bluffing, improv, dishonesty, and brutality. It's *necessary* that they do whatever they want in the interest of the law. That's why police tactics often look the same across time and geopolitical lines.

Alanis: Can I show you this passage from Milan Kundera's novel *Immortality*? I think you'll like it.

Alanis [reading]: "To fight means to set one's will against the will of another, with the aim of defeating the opponent, to bring him to his knees, possibly to kill him. 'Life is a battle' is a proposition that must have at first expressed melancholy and resignation. But our century of optimism and massacres has succeeded in making this terrible sentence sound like a joyous refrain. You will say that to fight against somebody may be terrible, but to fight for something is noble and beautiful. Yes, it is beautiful to strive for happiness (or love, or justice, and so on), but if you are in the habit of designating your striving with the word 'fight,' it means that your noble striving conceals the longing to knock someone to the ground. The fight for is always connected with the fight against, and the preposition 'for' is always forgotten in the course of the fight in favor of the preposition 'against.'"

Clara: Well, I think we agree that "fighting against the police state doesn't cut to the root of the matter at all. Every modern revolution demonstrates how the supposed revolutionary force constitutes a new police force or army, whether it was the anarchist CNT in Spain or the Bolsheviks in Russia. Or, currently existing forces that are powerful enough to fight and win against the police take on the

role of police in areas where they push out the state. However, my main concern is that those who fight against the police end up internalizing the logic and values of their opponent, regardless of good intentions. You know, during the miners strikes in England in the 1980's, the union actually pushed miners into confrontations with police as a means of defeating the strike? This is the sort of thing I worry about."

[Note: This is a relevant selection from *The Unseen*, a novel written by Nanni Balestrini, quoted in the comments: "We are left at a dead-end because the destruction of this society will inevitably involve conflict with the state, but war with the state seems to destroy any possibility of a better world emerging from it. It is a Bonapartist problem of losing even when you win. Of course, this is not a problem that can be 'worked out' or solved on paper. Also, real and extended conflict makes coolheaded tabulations of experience difficult or impossible. When in conflict with the state, one can be drawn in so far one can no longer just step away, even when the situation is hopeless or one wants to do something else. Conflict with the state seems like a distraction. No, distraction is the wrong word, because this conflict means billy clubs and prison sentences and bullets to the head. But even when entire police forces or armies or governments or types of government are overthrown or defeated, the underlying social relationships of capitalism seem to stay constant."]

Alanis: That's the systematic nature of institutions, and that's the same reason why although "some police officers may have good intentions, insofar as they obey orders rather than their consciences, they cannot be trusted." –Seven Myths #3

Clara: The point is that the police must not be allowed to brutalize people or impose an unjust social order. Though it can be empowering for those who have spent their lives under the heel of oppression to settle the score with their oppressors, liberation is not a matter of exacting revenge but of rendering it unnecessary. Therefore, while it may sometimes even be necessary to set police on fire, this should not be done out of a spirit of justice or establishing a righteous order, but from a place of care and compassion—if not for the police themselves, at least for all who would otherwise suffer at their hands. On a more day-to-day basis, anything that encourages police officers to quit their jobs is in their best interest, as well as the interest of their loved ones and society at large.

Alanis: Hey, have I ever told you that my dad is a cop?

Clara: No, really?

Alanis: Yep, he's been a cop as long as I've known him. He worked at the county jail when I was a little kid. He patrolled the city that we lived in when I was old enough to break curfew. And he has been a K-9 training officer ever since. His dogs lived with us, and searched cars for drugs, and attacked people in flight, and defended my dad from so-called violent criminals. My dad didn't tell me about how horrible working in the county jail was until after I told him that I was an anarchist and asked him to quit his job. He told me that he can't, because it's the only thing that he knows and he needs to support our family. After I moved out and I told him that he wasn't allowed at my house, he didn't say anything. But over the years, I've become the only person whom my dad can tell that he hates his job, he hates the people with whom he interacts, he doesn't care about protecting anyone but my mom and us kids, he hates druggies, he hates [enter any profane racist slur in plural form], he hates his coworkers, his hates the detectives, he hates his supervisors, he hates what he's done and hates who he's become. I look at him and sometimes I see more my dad than a cop. There are never times when he is just my dad. There have been a few times when he's stopped being my dad and just been a cop. He's put me in jail before, and he's told me that when you break the law, sometimes that's the consequence. He's a total enigma to me. I want him to quit his job. I look at him and I can't understand what motivates him. That might be what makes him a cop.

Clara: As the arguments go, the conditions of modern urban and industrial life create conflicts and tensions that can only be mediated by the existence of police.

Alanis: WRONG!

Clara: It's true that collectively we lack a lot of the skills that we need to resolve our conflicts without some Big Brother looking over our shoulder.

Alanis: Oh, and we'll explore more of these skills and alternative models in future episodes.

Clara: And, it's true that, socialized as we are into a world based on competition, coercion, and repression, that if the police vanished overnight that there would certainly be a lot of conflict. But the police exist to protect and serve

the permanent conflict and disorder required for a class society based on exploitation, for a political society based on wielding power over us rather than all of us making decisions for ourselves.

Alanis: You know, as an anarchist I've been called naïve and people think that I assume human nature is inherently good, because I advocate for things like a world without police.

Clara: But as anarchists we're not making any claims about human nature; it's cops and their champions who have to argue that humans are an inherently depraved and violent species to terrify us into believing that they're necessary.

Alanis: In fact, I think that a vast range of human behavior exists within the spectrum of our nature from our cruelty to our altruism, our exploitation to our kindness. So, the real question isn't 'what we would do outside of social institutions, but what kinds of behavior do our social institutions reward or condemn?

Clara: Believing that a world without police is possible *isn't* naive. It's naive to believe that a political system based on violence and repression will keep us safe. The LA Riots, September 11th, Christopher Dorner... do we really need any more evidence against that?

Alanis: And it's also naive to believe that just because the power of the police seems permanent now, that things can't change. The most highly funded dictatorship in the world under Mubarak in Egypt toppled in just a few weeks... and the news today shows us that even a so-called democratic regime isn't enough when the people identify police and military power as their enemy.

Clara: From Chicago to Chongqing, from Belgium to Chile, we live in a world under the eye of a camera.

Alanis: The odds are stacked against us, and policing and surveillance in "the land of the free" have reached levels that would have made the East German Stasi or Soviet KGB salivate. Yet history suggests that the more force a regime has to exert against its subject population to keep it under control, the less stable it becomes.

LIFE WITHOUT POLICE

Clara: So as we concluded last time: fuck the police. Fair enough, but how are we going to stay safe? How do we resolve our conflicts without police and prisons?

Alanis: That's a big question. Where do we start? Well, the police always try to scare us into thinking that they're necessary with all the stories about homicidal maniacs and such, just like the government uses terrorists as their bugaboo, as it were, to justify whatever repression and surveillance they want to do. So to break down these scare tactics, let's actually look at what it is the police do.

Clara: Hmm... when I think about what it is the police actually do most of the time in my town, it's random things like directing traffic or big crowds, responding to noise complaints, and crap like that.

Alanis: Certainly we don't need an armed repressive wing of the state to wave cars through intersections when a traffic light goes out or ask the neighbors to turn their music down. A lot of the functions police fill could be done, and probably done better, by simple cooperation and communication between people.

Clara: And a lot of what they do is flat out unnecessary. Usually I just see them walking down the street harassing homeless people, kicking teenagers out of parks, and generally being assholes. Clearly we can do without that.

Alanis: The justification they always give when they're stopping and searching people in their cars or on the street is that they're looking for drugs. But that's so obviously just an excuse to control people. As if smoking a joint or snorting some coke was more destructive than tearing someone away from their friends and family and locking them in a cage for ten or twenty years. What kind of sense does that make? Let people do what they want, and if they have a problem, give them health care and support in breaking addictions, not prison.

Clara: On the other hand, sometimes communities do struggle collectively against drug dealers and addiction, and have better results without police. There was an interesting example in Dublin, Ireland in the 1990s where working class neighborhoods ran a successful grassroots campaign to kick heroin dealers off the block, without relying on the state.

Alanis: Yeah, there was something like that too in Christiania, the autonomous neighborhood in Copenhagen, Denmark, which has no laws or police. They had found themselves with a pretty serious hard drug problem in their neighborhood, and after debates, decided to ask the cops for help. But the cops just used it as an excuse to establish a presence in the neighborhood and arrest people for soft drug possession while letting the harder drugs continue to destabilize the social world there. So the neighborhood residents kicked the police out and used social pressure and informal strategies to discourage hard drug dealers.

Clara: OK, so what about when someone breaks into your house?

Alanis: That happened to us a few months ago. We didn't call the cops, though.

Clara: Why not?

Alanis: Well, because we're anarchists, and cops are more likely to harm us than help us across the board. But regardless, it's pretty unlikely that we'd get our stuff back even if they did arrest the people who did it. And sending someone to jail doesn't make us safer, though it does make the prison system stronger and corporations richer. We just changed our locks, started leaving the lights on, and asked our neighbors to watch out for us when we're out of town.

Also, we're trying to stay focused on the real issue. Sure, it sucked that we lost some of our stuff. But capitalism and class society is the problem, not the loss of my laptop and speakers. And the police are the primary armed forces that uphold that system. Abandoning our vision of a world without work or rent or property so that we can maybe feel a little more secure to hang on to the stuff we've got doesn't seem like a very good bargain.

Clara: There was an organization in west Philadelphia called Citizens Local Alliance for a Safer Philadelphia (CLASP) that formed in 1972 to address street crime and home burglaries, which the police weren't preventing. They combined education and sharing resources with neighborhood walks by folks who lived in the area to intervene in thefts and burglaries. Within a few years there were hundreds of autonomously organized blocks which had dramatically fewer break-ins and muggings than blocks policed by the Philly city cops. Their experience showed how folks can be as or more effective than police in keeping their homes safe, even in supposedly high-crime urban areas.

Clara: Ok, so it seems like we could do away with the majority of what cops do, either because it's useless, or because we could do it ourselves without all the coercion and violence or bad mustaches and donuts. But -

Alanis: - but -

Both: but what about the rapists and the murderers?

Alanis: Yeah, this is what everyone always says.

Clara: And of course: it's scary! How are we gonna stay safe? It's a serious question, and not an easy one to answer.

Alanis: Sure, but let's keep a few things in mind.

One: humans lived together without police or prisons for the vast, vast majority of our time as a species, and still do in some places in the world. There's nothing about "human nature" that would have us all killing each other without the state to keep us in line.

Clara: Ok, fair enough.

Alanis: Two, cops and their defenders work reeeeeeally hard to convince us that we need them. The media constantly blares news at us of crime, violence, and disorder, with the intention of keeping us afraid and dependent on the state. The

police strategically ignore certain kinds of harm and actively contribute to others in order to reinforce this impression. Yet in the vast majority of circumstances, folks get along every day just fine, interacting and solving problems together without relying on the state.

Clara: Yeah, it's true that violent crime is blown way out of proportion in order to keep us afraid and in line. But-

Alanis: Three, whatever they may say, the police aren't there to keep us safe. They're there to preserve the power of the ruling class over the rest of us. Whether it's arresting rapists and murderers or keeping the homeless out of empty buildings and the hungry out of grocery stores, our safety only matters to the police if it upholds the law, property, and the state. And the vast majority of what they label crime or disorder are expressions of resistance to the violent and exploitative order they preserve. It's like what Mayor Daley of Chicago said in 1968, "The policeman is not here to create disorder. The policeman is here to preserve disorder."

Clara: Yeah, yeah, I know. But you're not listening! Yes, people have lived without cops; yes, violent crime is not nearly so prevalent and scary as they want us to think; and yes, the cops exist to protect power, not us. But you still haven't given me (or any of our listeners) any idea about what we would do other than call the cops when our bodies or lives are threatened by others! If we actually want to live in an anarchist society with more people than just you and me in it, people are gonna want to have some idea about how we can resolve conflicts and keep each other safe without the state.

Alanis: Yeah, that's true. It's tough, because for the last century at least, cops have had such a stranglehold on us that we've had very few opportunities to see what it would actually be like to live without 'em and try other things.

Clara: Looking at statistics about "crime" and economics, it seems clear that societies in which resources are distributed fairly equally have way fewer thefts and violent attacks than societies like ours in which there are dramatic gaps between the haves and the have-nots. So certainly a major part of alleviating violent crime is simply removing the barriers to a more free and equal distribution of wealth - which the police play the biggest role in upholding.

Alanis: We can also look at some traditional and indigenous societies in which harm isn't seen as an issue of individual guilt but a collective responsibility for restoring harmony. Take, for example, the ritual apology methods of the Rotuman people of the South Pacific, or the peacemakers of Dine or Navajo communities in the southwest.

Clara: That's cool, though I'm a little suspicious of relying on the accounts of mostly white anthropologists who may be taking these systems out of context. Still, these accounts at least challenge US- and European-based notions of what "justice" means and remind us that people all over the world have operated without these institutions we take for granted.

Alanis: The critique that defenders of the cops make is that while these strategies might work in small-scale communities, modern urban industrial societies are big and anonymous and fragmented enough that we don't have the social bonds we could use as a basis for police-free living, so we have to have the state to keep us from hacking each other to bits. Are there any examples of how people have prevented violence without the state in urban areas in recent times?

Clara: Here's one example: in the Seattle general strike of 1919, strikers organized a "Labor War Veteran's Guard," which defined its purpose as "to preserve law and order without the use of force. No volunteer will have any police power or be allowed to carry weapons of any sort, but to use persuasion only." And it worked- even the US Army Major General deployed there said he'd never seen so quiet and orderly a city as during that time. Even though the strike was defeated, the combination of solidarity and non-coercive methods of keeping order showed there could be a viable urban alternative to the police.

Alanis: We can also look at the street committees formed during apartheid South Africa, when the white police forces were solely repressive against the black population and folks had to self-organize for internal safety. Members of these committees were publicly elected, had open meetings, and dealt with a wide variety of problems: at times with violence, but most often with other forms of redressing the harm that was done. Even when the apartheid regime fell and the African National Congress took over the government and the police forces, many of these street committees continued, and still exist today as an alternative alongside the formal police, challenging the state's monopoly on defining order and justice.

Clara: In Catholic areas of Northern Ireland, where extreme hostility to the colonial police made it pretty much impossible for them to control the population, the IRA administered a fairly brutal kind of street justice, but Republican communities wanted to find alternatives for dealing with their problems. So in the late 1990s they devised Community Restorative Justice programs to deal with conflicts in the community without violence. These programs have successfully resolved thousands of cases without the police.

Alanis: On a smaller scale, there are groups such as Sista's Liberated Ground, a collective of black and Latina working class women in Brooklyn who were aiming to end violence in their neighborhoods without relying on the state. They used a combination of public art, door-to-door advocacy, education around self-defense and conflict resolution, and circles to intervene in cases of violence.

Clara: And marginalized communities have always self-organized to defend themselves. For instance, there are the bad date hotlines set up by sex workers in different cities to share information about violent johns and protect themselves. Or queer community groups like Safe OUTside the System in New York, which organizes and educates about how to stop violence without relying on the police, who are often indifferent or homophobic, or the Northwest Network project called Friends Are Reaching Out that builds networks of communication in queer communities to help prevent abuse in relationships.

Alanis: What about when the threats are not from other folks in your community, but from the state itself, or other gangs of paramilitaries or bullies?

Clara: For a situation like that, we can look at the Civil Rights movement in the South in the 1960s. Armed defense groups fought off the Ku Klux Klan and other white terrorists when state forces wouldn't stop the racist attacks. In the late 1950s, Robert F. Williams led an armed NAACP chapter in Monroe, North Carolina to defend black folks against the Klan.

Alanis: But I thought the Civil Rights Movement was all non-violent.

Clara: Well, that's the story our leaders want us to believe. In 1959 Robert F Williams debated Martin Luther King Jr. over the merits of nonviolence at the NAACP national convention; the organization suspended him for six months for disagreeing with the national leadership, even though his armed self-defense efforts were saving lives.

Robert F. Williams: And so I recommended that they meet violence with violence, that Negroes must be prepared to repulse attacks, that they must be willing to fight, that they must be willing to die and to kill if necessary, that there was no law, no 14th amendment to the United States constitution of legal protection in the South, and that therefore they didn't have any deterrent, and that they would have to create the deterrent force themselves [1:41 - 2:12]

And others in the movement were inspired by his example. The Deacons for Defense and Justice were an armed civil rights defense group founded in Louisiana in 1964, which eventually grew to have over 50 chapters across the South. They provided security for demonstrations and marches, guarded the homes of workers and activists targeted by racists, and intercepted police radio signals and showed up on the scene of arrests to keep the police in line (foreshadowing the Copwatch programs of today, as discussed on the last episode). Contrary to the mythology of nonviolence that governs most histories of the civil rights movement, these armed groups were important and influential on black resistance in the south and beyond.

Alanis: Yeah, the Black Panthers continued down some of those paths, with all the education they did around gun laws and self-defense, the escort programs they organized for the elderly, and their attempts to redistrict law enforcement to bring control over policing black neighborhoods into those communities.

Clara: Also, during the uprisings in Oaxaca, Mexico in 2006, the general assembly established these rotating community watches called topiles, modeled on indigenous customs, which helped defend the uprising against police and paramilitaries as well as dealing with internal problems.

Alanis: Likewise, some groups today are taking on how to stay safe both from violence within our own communities and from the police. Groups such as INCITE! Women of color against violence and Creative Interventions have been gathering and sharing strategies from communities of color about how to respond to both interpersonal and state violence.

Clara: That's a whole other question - how do we respond when these things do happen? If we're rejecting the police, that also means figuring out how to address harm without prisons or the criminal legal system.

Alanis: Good point... but that's more than we've got time for on this episode. Next time we'll take a closer look at strategies for conflict resolution and accountability beyond the state.

Clara: In our last episode we spoke with Kristian Williams, author of *Our Enemies in Blue*. In his afterward to that book, titled "Making Police Obsolete," he discusses a few examples of efforts to do just that, some of which we discussed here. One theme that Kristian emphasizes is making our collective safety our own responsibility, not the state's. No one said that being an anarchist was easy! But if we want to be free, we can't delegate our safety to the state or any group outside of ourselves. We all have to work to shift the conditions that produce violence, and respond to it in transformative ways when it happens (as we'll talk about more next time.)

Alanis: Of course, we don't have any foolproof formulas to determine what we'd do in each situation - and we wouldn't necessarily want to. As anarchists, we don't aim to replace one totalitarian system imposed on every situation with a new one: we want to do away with all totalitarian systems and live our lives freely according to what makes sense in each place and group of people.

Clara: So in some ways that leaves more questions than answers. But hopefully some of the ideas and examples we discussed show just a bit of the diversity of strategies folks have used to live without cops.

Alanis: Let's be clear, though- some of these groups we've discussed were authoritarian; some didn't offer roles for women, or failed to challenge other hierarchies within the communities from which they originated. The point isn't to put them on a pedestal or follow their models like a recipe. The point is to learn from their example that many different options exist to defend ourselves without the police.

Clara: So... what about you? How do you resolve conflicts with the people around you? What makes you feel safe? Most strategies for resisting police begin with the choices you make every day. Build networks in your neighborhood, at your job, in your family. Talk with them about who you would call or what you would do in an emergency, how you would address different situations when they came up. Learn and share the skills you need for self-defense, de-escalation, and meeting your needs together, not at each other's expense.

Alanis: One of the real weaknesses of the police is that huge numbers of people hate them and wish they'd leave us be. We're definitely not alone in that as anarchists.

Clara: But that doesn't mean it'll be easy to get rid of them or live without them. The police won't just vanish overnight when the last person takes a self-defense class and writes down an emergency phone tree. They're powerful, and they have a stake in keeping us afraid of each other and dependent on their violence. But even though it may seem like an uphill battle, don't forget that this fundamental feeling of antagonism toward cops, the basic resentment nearly everyone feels about being spied on and bullied, can be a basis for rebellion across all sorts of differences.

Alanis: And we see this happening all around the world, more and more every day. Egypt, Greece, Turkey, Brazil... and those are just the ones in the headlines. Across every continent and every imaginable ideology, people unite around fighting the police. As we continue to resist them in the streets, let's also work to make them obsolete in our everyday lives.

“As the arguments go,



the conditions of modern urban and industrial life create conflicts and tensions that can only be mediated by the existence of police.”