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Taking Back the Streets & the Movement

By **Remy Kharbanda and Andrea Ritchie**
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Since Columbus first set foot on North American shores, and since the formation of the first state sponsored police forces, slave patrols, state violence and resistance to it have been permanent fixtures of the American experience.

"We Charge Genocide," presented to the United Nations by the Civil Rights Congress in 1951, documented thousands of incidents of police brutality against African-Americans alone. The Black Panther Party first came together in response to police violence in Oakland, CA. When the issue of police brutality exploded into the national consciousness following the 1991 videotaped beating of Rodney King, communities of color were quick to point out that "this kind of thing happens every day."

However, the early 1990s represented a turning point for the anti-police brutality movement in the US. Endemic police violence gained mainstream attention, first through the King case and then through national hearings held by the NAACP and the US Civil Rights Commission. Large civil and human rights bureaucracies such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the ACLU then joined the fray—framing police brutality as a "domestic human rights" issue, holding tribunals, and publishing reports documenting police brutality across the country. Since then, for better or worse, these organizations have played a central role in framing, circumscribing, and driving mainstream anti-police brutality discourse in the US.

Then came September 11, 2001, which fundamentally changed the nature and viability of anti-police brutality organizing as we know it. Understandably, attention shifted and narrowed to the violence of US enforcement agents overseas, and to the domestic fallout of the "war on terror." However, the mainstream has largely failed to make the links between the "war on terror," ongoing militarization of police forces in the US, and the continuing epidemic of police brutality in communities of color.

Movement diluted

Where does this leave us in 2006, now that the attention of mainstream civil and human rights organizations has largely shifted away from broader police brutality issues? Where do those of us who see police brutality as one of the frontline manifestations of violent state power and control go from here? How do we assess the limitations and successes of anti-police brutality organizing to date and envision a reinvigorated movement challenging state violence in all its forms?

Critically examining the role of mainstream civil and human rights organizations in the US anti-police brutality movement is an important first step in this process. It is understood by many in the anti-police brutality struggle that these organizations espouse and pursue an agenda that is radically different from our own. Moreover, despite the fact that they work on issues directly affecting victims of police brutality, they have not seen themselves as accountable to the individuals and communities whose experiences they document and whose rights they purport to vindicate.

As a result, these groups have failed to support local leadership and organizing in communities most impacted by police brutality in a sustained and respectful fashion. They have also been largely unwilling to name or take action around systemic oppressions beyond police brutality, that are at work both in American society and within the organizations themselves.

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Despite giving lip service to working in partnership with impacted communities—the “sources” that enable these organizations to garner funds and accolades—these communities are given little meaningful agency with respect to how their experiences are represented and contextualized. We are expected to share our experiences, contacts, and perspectives with “objective” researchers whose location within systemic power relations is never questioned. They insist that we expose the details of our brutalization—the more “egregious” the better—before the media or a panel of “experts,” but we cannot be trusted to provide the appropriate analysis and context to our “stories.” The recommendations they make based on our experiences are carefully controlled to preserve enhanced credibility with policymakers resulting from their predominantly white and/or middle-class staff and memberships. Therefore, they often reject out of hand perspectives and experiences that don’t conform to their predetermined agenda.

Ultimately, large civil and human rights organizations have failed to advance an effective response to police brutality, instead trusting law enforcement agencies—and those whose interests they serve—to police the police. In some cases, they have contributed to perpetuating reliance on law enforcement-based responses to social problems, suggesting that states should meet their obligations to protect people from interpersonal violence with more of the very “law and order” that allows police brutality to take place with impunity.

Grassroots response

As we move forward, it is important to examine our simultaneous disempowerment by and complicity in the power relations of the US police brutality movement of the past decade-and-a-half. Grassroots organizers and survivors of police violence cannot be faulted for collaborating with such organizations and taking advantage of the resources and media attention they are able to attract. However, as individuals who have pursued this route, we now question whether continuing to do so, particularly in the current climate, ultimately serves our interests or is a productive use of our energies.

Since 9/11, virtually every funding source for police accountability work has dried up. No mainstream foundation wants to support work that undermines the image of police as “heroes” in the “war on terror,” despite the fact that we live in a time when extra vigilance with respect to local and federal law enforcement is sorely needed. And while large civil and human rights organizations appear to have narrowed their foci to law enforcement abuses related to the “war on terror”—wire tapping, suppression of dissent, and post 9/11 round-ups—they have failed to hold the line on many other types of police brutality. Rather there has been a withdrawal of resources from work around daily police shootings, beatings, rapes, and harassment taking place in virtually every community in the country. There has been a failure to capitalize on invaluable opportunities to draw parallels between US foreign and domestic policy and ongoing police violence against poor and people of color.

National organizing around police brutality is far from dead, however. Over a hundred people came together for the 2004 National Conference on Police Accountability in Portland, OR, sharing local organizing challenges and successes. Hundreds participate annually in the October 22nd Coalition’s National Day of Protest to Stop Police Brutality, Repression, and the Criminalization of a Generation. A vibrant “stop police abuse” listserv documents the daily dose of death and brutality meted out by law enforcement officers across the country, and networks thousands of anti-police brutality activists.

Several local groups like the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement in New York City, and “Copwatches” in Phoenix and Berkeley, continue to patrol the streets with video cameras and “know your rights” material. Many groups including the Southwest Youth Collaborative’s Generation Y, Chicago Anti-Bashing Network, First Defense Legal Aid in Chicago, Communities United Against Police Brutality in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Derechos Humanos in Tucson, and Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality, document violence by police, immigration, and Border Patrol agents.

New York City’s Coalition Against Police Brutality recently organized a successful march through the streets of lower Manhattan on the day one of Amadou Diallo’s killers was released. Several, including the Prison Moratorium Project, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, and Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) have turned their attention to police violence in schools. FIERCE! and the Audre



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Lorde Project are organizing against police and community violence against LGBT folks in two New York City neighborhoods.

Often however, despite our systemic analysis of police brutality, our organizing is focused at the local level—reacting to individual incidents of police brutality. Even anti-police brutality organizing in the wake of Katrina that has commemorated those whose lives were stolen by law enforcement officers, and pushed for local reforms, has remained at the local level.

Reclaiming the movement

Faced with increasing state repression combined with waning interest in police brutality on the part of big NGOs, the mainstream media, and funders, our challenge as grassroots anti-police brutality organizers is to force the issue of back on the national agenda. This work must move beyond Bush's platitudes about ending racial profiling, re-envisioning and rebuilding a broad-based national movement that is not reliant on or led by institutionalized civil and human rights organizations. After all, these organizations could not do what they do without the participation and cooperation of community-based organizers, a fact they often fail to appreciate.

Such a movement must make the links between militarism, the "war on terror," anti-immigrant sentiment, and ongoing rampant police violence in our communities. We also need to broaden the lens of the current discourse around law enforcement violence to include the experiences of individuals and communities not commonly perceived as targets of police brutality. We must integrate and address the experiences of women of color, sex workers, homeless, youth, immigrants, folks who are or are perceived to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or gender non-conforming, and all those who stand at the intersection of these identities.

In order to do so, we need to bring "Copwatches" to prostitution strolls, street vendors' locales, parks, and other public spaces where queer, young, homeless people, and immigrants are targets of pervasive police abuse and harassment. We need to challenge inappropriate and often violent police responses to domestic violence, sexual assault, violence based on race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, and homophobic/transphobic violence.

Even as we defend ourselves against the police, we also need to build a vision of community-based responses to violence that don't involve the police. Local organizers are increasingly concluding that efforts to reform the police are having limited success, and any gains achieved over the past decade are quickly eroding in the post-9/11 era. Increasingly, groups like Critical Resistance, INCITE!, Creative Interventions, and Generation Five are working to keep the cops out of our 'hoods and out of our lives by building mechanisms of community accountability.

We need to occupy the national space that has been left by NGOs having "moved on" from police brutality or narrowed their focus to the "war on terror." Links must be made while keeping police violence in most adversely affected communities front and center on the agenda. We need to assert our leadership and hold civil and human rights bureaucracies accountable to grassroots groups, rather than continuing to allow them to set the stage while we serve as mere props. It's time to take back the streets from the state, and the anti-police brutality movement from the non-profit industrial complex!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Remy Kharbanda is a South Asian activist researcher and budding documentary filmmaker based in New York. Her work focuses on immigration issues, the war on terror, and displacement in the South Asian diaspora.

Andrea Ritchie has been involved in anti-police brutality organizing in the US and Canada over the past decade. Her organizing currently focuses on law enforcement violence as experienced by women and LGBT people of color.

Together, they make up RFR (Research for Revolution), a partnership providing support to community-based organizations seeking to integrate research into their organizing initiatives.