

Reclaiming the streets

Black urban insurgency and antisocial security in twenty-first-century Philadelphia

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Abstract: This article focuses on the emergence of a new pattern of black urban insurgency emerging in major US metropolitan areas such as Philadelphia. I locate this pattern in the context of a new securitization regime that I call “antisocial security.” This regime works by establishing a decentered system of high-tech forms of surveillance and monitory techniques. I highlight the dialectic between the extension of antisocial security apparatuses and techniques into new political and social domains on the one hand and the adoption of these same techniques by those contesting racialized exclusions from urban public space on the other. I end the article with a discussion of how we might adapt the commons concept to consider the centrality of race and racism to this new securitization regime.

Keywords: commoning, inner city, race, securitization, United States, urban politics

In Philadelphia, on 10 April 2013, dozens of African American youth converged in what municipal authorities described as a “flash mob” at the heart of the city’s central business district. Called together with the use of social media, these young people blocked traffic, massed on street corners, and ran down several city blocks until they were dispersed by the local police. Dozens of flash mobs, some involving hundreds of African American teens, took place in Philadelphia from 2009 to 2016.¹ In response, politicians and police officials held press conferences during which they condemned participants for vandalizing property, shoplifting, disrupting commerce, and violence. The local TV news

broadcast sensationalized reports about “crazed teens,” “mob violence,” and “youth rioting.” In 2011, Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter (2008–2016) criticized African American teens for participating in unruly gatherings in public spaces. From the pulpit of Mount Carmel Baptist Church in West Philadelphia, where he is a member, he scolded: “You’ve damaged yourself, you’ve damaged another person, you’ve damaged your peers and, quite honestly, you’ve damaged your own race” (quoted in John-Hall 2011). In 2010, then City Council member Jim Kenney described the disruption caused by a gathering of African American teens as an act of “urban terrorism” (quoted in Owens 2017).



Nutter signed legislation stepping up police enforcement of teen curfews, while Kenney called for aggressive “zero tolerance” policing and steeper punishments for unruly teens. Kenney succeeded Nutter as mayor of Philadelphia in 2016.

I begin with this example of a moral panic over African American teen “flash mobs” to open a discussion of race, insurgent politics, and securitization in Philadelphia. Broadly speaking, I am interested in how urban elites understand and enact security over public spaces, the struggles that ensue when subordinated groups seek to occupy and reclaim public spaces in ways that disrupt and unsettle elite plans for their use, and how race politics shape these dynamics. More specifically, I am interested in the intersection of race, insurgent politics, and securitization in Philadelphia during the period from 2008 to 2016 of what Jamie Peck (2012) calls “austerity urbanism.” In a context characterized by lean municipal government, new reductions in social-service delivery, reduced fiscal capacity, and austerity politics, the disruptive actions taken by African American youth are best understood, I argue, as an effort to reclaim urban public space, albeit fleetingly, for those who have been labeled as “undesirable,” “pathological,” or a “threat” to Philadelphia’s future and who have thus been targeted by the city’s policing, surveillance, and legal apparatuses.

In contrast to both popular and political discourses that emphasize black youth gatherings as antisocial criminal conduct, or that treat them as apolitical, I argue that they are a form of black urban insurgency. In Philadelphia and elsewhere, we have seen a recent uptick in acts of protest against the spatialized instantiation of antiblack racism and violence, including, of course, Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the Movement for Black Lives (MBL) (Camp and Heatherton 2016; Williams 2015; on race, place and space, see Brown 2009; Gregory 1998; Lipsitz 2007; Maskovsky 2006). Indeed, if “teen flash mobs” are a fiction told by municipal elites and their supporters to obscure the spatialized effects of large-scale political economic change

on urban African Americans (Massaro and Mullany 2011), then “turbulent crowd actions” involving African American teens should be understood, I think, as part of a broader protest landscape that is revolting against these arrangements.² Christian Ducomb and Jessica Benmen (2014) coin the term “turbulent crowd action” in an article that applies Latour’s actor-network theory to flash mob performances and that emphasizes both the historical continuities of contemporary actions with those from the past and the contingencies that shape crowd action; in contrast, I use the term to emphasize its nascent political potentialities for the present.

Central to this perspective is my framing of these actions also as a response in part to the rise of a new urban securitization and surveillance regime that I call the regime of antisocial security. This regime is grafting onto the racialized urban post-welfarism and the carceral turn of the late twentieth century a decentered surveillance and security system comprised of high-tech monitory procedures and hyper-specific forms of mediatized surveillance. Antisocial security is oriented not so much to maintain social order by segregation or fortification but rather to surveil and police parts of the city—its downtown commercial districts mostly—that are difficult to secure. These are public spaces where the daily flow of people makes fortification, citadelization, or ghettoization logistically or politically difficult in a post-industrial context in which commercial activity dominates the urban core (cf. Marcuse 1998). What has emerged in these spaces, then, is a nimble form of securitization and surveillance that seeks to identify threats in racially diverse and socially inclusive spaces without impeding the movement and mobility of the people who are inhabiting them. At the same time, antisocial security also must work almost paradoxically to privilege elite groups of shoppers, workers, and residents; to racialize public space; and to subjugate urban African Americans and other people of color. This article sheds light on this paradox. It builds on scholarship on insurgency (Holston 2009; Murphy 2015) and on securitization and

urban public space (Hall 1978; Holdbraad and Pedersen 2013; Low 2017; Low and Smith 2006; Maguire et al. 2014; Mitchell 2014) to explore the unique political and governmental challenges that antisocial security poses for urban African Americans on the one hand and the new forms of racial politics that contest its instantiation and extension into new geographical and institutional spaces on the other hand.

I focus on three related issues. First, I discuss in more detail what I mean by the regime of antisocial security and highlight how I see it reshaping the US urban core and its racial geography, with Philadelphia serving as my primary example. Second, I analyze the new pattern of black urban insurgency and street protest that I see on the political horizon. In my discussion of insurgency, I bring into focus the “commoning” of parts of the new security apparatus as an essential aspect of attempts to resist new forms of racialized cultural, material, and spatial enclosure (Ecologist 1993; Nonini 2007; Susser and Tonnelat 2013). I end the article with a critical discussion of the commons concept as an anti-racist emancipatory rubric given the implications of the new securitization regime. I draw on ethnographic and historical evidence gathered through long-term fieldwork conducted intermittently in Philadelphia on race, class, civic life, and economic revitalization from 2000 to 2017 to explore the intersection of race, insurgency, and securitization.³ An ethnographic investigation of residents’ discourses and practices of insurgent politics and security illuminates the complexity of new power relations and political and governing imaginaries that are reshaping the urban core in cities like Philadelphia.

Antisocial security: A new form of urban security

In Philadelphia and other major metropolitan areas in the United States and elsewhere, racialized policing practices are central to the ordering of public urban spaces and have long been intimately linked to the ordering functions of

urban revitalization policies, commercial districts, and neighborhood “quality of life” programs.⁴ Scholars in anthropology, geography, and other related fields tend to tie these developments closely to the rise of urban neoliberalism (Low and Smith 2006; Maskovsky 2006) and to the integration, post-9/11, of more coercive, militarized policing and surveillance techniques into urban securitization schemes (Maskovsky and Cunningham 2009; Ruben and Maskovsky 2008; for a non-US example, see Goldstein 2010). Along these lines, in “The War on Teenage Terrorists: Philly’s ‘Flash Mob Riots’ and the Banality of Post-9/11 Securitization,” feminist geographers Vanessa A. Massaro and Emma Gaalaas Mullaney (2011) describe the crackdown on public gatherings of African American youth in Philadelphia’s commercial districts as part of a wider pattern of post-9/11 antiterrorist securitization, which they see as supporting the militarized enforcement of spatial segregation and the defense of spaces for neoliberal capitalist development and commercial consumption.⁵ By calling it banal, they are drawing on Cindi Katz’s notion of banal terrorism, which, she writes, “embraces a theme about ‘us’—‘we’ are ‘threatened,’ ‘they’ hate/are jealous of ‘us,’ ‘we’ share a ‘homeland’—but it goes a step further as these notions about ‘us’ authorize and propel a common sense notion of ‘them’ as threat” (2007: 351). Broadening the critique of neoliberalism to include attention to the banality of illiberal measures that have been successively introduced from the War on Drugs to the War on Terror tells us a great deal about how fear of crime and of the disorderly street surface to justify and legitimate draconian policing practices, the extension of urban security and surveillance apparatuses into new domains, the crackdown on public space, and the continued reinforcement of spatial segregation in the urban core more broadly, and in Philadelphia in particular with its long history of militarized police violence targeting African Americans (see, e.g., Massiah and Cade Bambara 2006).

I wish to extend this analysis by arguing that this ad hoc system of urban securitization and

surveillance is also enhanced by a system of “continuous control.” This is a formulation, first elaborated by Gilles Deleuze in 1992 in “Post-script on the Societies of Control,” in which people’s movements, ideas, spending, and habits are tracked and monitored by “ultrarapid forms of free-floating control” (1992: 4). Roger Lancaster (2017), following Thomas Mathiesen (1997; see also Mathiesen 2013) calls this new regime of power “synopticism,” a variation on the modern disciplinary regime described by Michel Foucault that was inspired famously by Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon.⁶ If panopticism is characterized in the disciplinary societies of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries by the organization of vast spaces of enclosure into factories, schools, families, hospitals, and prisons, synopticism is a form of power in which these disciplinary enclosures are crisscrossed by “plural techniques” of surveillance that differentiate individuals from each other, sort people into categories of productive and unproductive personhood, and, importantly, single out pariahs who should be punished for violating aesthetic and moral principles that are difficult to discern and unevenly applied. Unlike the carceral state, synopticism relies less on excessive punishment and militarized control and more on social media, texting, online search engines, electronic toll collection systems, cell phones, airport security screenings, body cameras, fitness trackers, antimalware software, street cameras, and other seemingly benign forms of surveillance.

The idea of a system of antisocial security rooted in synopticism is useful because it offers an important corrective to more celebratory accounts of the wave of prison reform that has recently taken place across the United States, from the repeal of the Rockefeller Drug Laws in New York State (which inaugurated the contemporary period of post-civil rights era mass incarceration in 1973) to new kinds of experimentation around prison reentry and other reforms that have moved criminal justice policy in less punitive directions during Barack Obama’s administration. Far from establishing

a return to a more benevolent, rehabilitative, and less racist form of social control, I see the situation instead as one in which the system of surveillance is now so dense and so expansive that incarceration, citadelization, containment, and ghettoization becomes less crucial to social control. To be sure, the existence of the carceral state that has penalized racialized poverty and established an expansive criminal justice and prison system to warehouse the black poor is undeniable, as is the exercise of coercive control over the urban core across the United States (Wacquant 2009). These trends are not disappearing anytime soon, as is evidenced, for example, by the immediate reversal of Obama-era criminal justice reforms and the embrace of law and order policies by Donald Trump’s administration. But surveillance capacities have become so sophisticated that different kinds of individuals can now be tracked, managed, sorted, and, if necessary, criminalized or, at the very least, targeted for public humiliation and ridicule. Among the new pariahs are flash mob teens, sexual predators, teen sexters, suburban heroin addicts, goths and gamers turned possible school shooters, deluded ISIS sympathizers, and so on. There is, of course, nothing unprecedented about moral panics over racialized and gender non-normative wayward youth and other pathologized threats. But the speed with which we move from one potentially threatening group to another, the level of detail we see streaming across our desks daily about the kinds of people who represent a new social threat, and the extent to which we invest in parsing out who is and who is not a threat and a social pariah is new, if not wholly unprecedented. And the kind of surveillance that allows this new threat matrix to become visible is profoundly antisocial, in the sense that it is unconcerned with the questions of social cohesion and normalization and concerned instead with identifying, animating, and proliferating heterogeneous subjectivities whose relationships to a larger social whole are largely irrelevant to the new hegemonic order. This articulation is concerned not with the social whole or the body politic but rather with

newer, more fleeting and exclusive assemblages of people, positions, and practices.⁷

Importantly, the system of continuous control that I describe here is by no means color-blind. Although it is not invested in maintaining the same kind of disciplinary control over black bodies that arose as a central feature of nineteenth- and twentieth-century panopticism, the instruments of surveillance that have coalesced into a system of continuous control were in many respects invented and honed through the historical effort to assert control over black bodies and neighborhoods, from slavery to Jim Crow to the post-civil rights era War on Drugs and mass incarceration. They are therefore best understood as a refined set of surveillance instruments that are capable of sorting people in ways that reinforce racialized hierarchies and antiblack social and political prerogatives rather than as a system organized around color-blind cultural or political logics.

On the urban scale, in the United States and elsewhere, the surveillance technologies of the security state are increasingly integrated with those used in commerce and leisure spheres, creating a new multidirectional patterning of surveillance within and across urban enclosures. Corporate security forces have long cooperated with the police, and often act independently as well. The US government's capacity to spy on Facebook accounts or read text messages or listen to telephone conversations has certainly generated a great deal of controversy. But it is only a small part of a broader, more expansive surveillance system that goes in all sorts of directions so that the US government's spying efforts are linked in some ways to big data information-gathering techniques used by social media and technology firms. But, as anyone who uses Facebook knows, we are also spying on each other, on the government, and on technology companies. Deleuze argues that in the society of control, the primary mechanism of control is modulation, not enclosure. In this situation, controls are "like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh

will transmute from point to point" (1992: 4). This is precisely the kind of surveillance we have seen taking hold in Philadelphia's downtown commercial corridors. In addition to imposing a curfew on teenagers, Philadelphia police also began monitoring social media and friending youth on Facebook and Twitter. They ramped up the police presence at downtown intersections and forged a private sector partnership with commercial business owners, who were asked to notify the police if teens gather. The Philadelphia Police Department has also used "swarm" policing, a tactic borrowed from the military of advancing from every direction on a suspect or group of suspects, who are, in this case, teens congregating in a public space (Jervis 2011). Taken together, these measures suture together a dense web of surveillance and security activities that do not help to constitute a fortified elite enclosure. Rather, they enable the commercial zones to remain porous and open even as they are densely surveilled synoptically.

Major shifts in the US political economy since the 1980s have shaped the pattern of antisocial securitization affecting cities like Philadelphia. In the urban United States, the rise of the new synoptic capacities that commerce and technology have enabled is linked closely with aspects of a new pattern of racialized capitalist socialization and authoritarian rule that has fragmented social and political alliances within and across the boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. And it is precisely the situation of extreme economic inequality and political polarization and disaffection that creates the condition in which continuous control, enacted horizontally as much as vertically, can flourish.

At the level of political economy, a central feature of these antisocial articulations is the form of capitalist political economy since the 1980s that is frequently glossed as neoliberalism but, as Gavin Smith argues, is better understood as a shift in the dominance of forms of capital from production to finance.⁸ Smith explains that the dominant class blocs in the period dominated by finance capital have pursued

what he calls “selective hegemony,” which “restricts the field of negotiable politics to selected participants, so there is a sphere of action beyond such politics where no such negotiation is possible” (2011: 4–5). Outside of this restricted field is an “absolute residual population” whose only recourse is counter-politics—the attempt to dismantle dominative and hegemonic power, not to negotiate with capital. The efforts of Wall Street to control economic growth and governance introduced higher levels of volatility and crisis into the economy, requiring state-coordinated upward wealth transfer repeatedly since the 1970s. The 2008 housing market meltdown is certainly the most exaggerated moment to date in this prolonged crisis—and the most blatant bank rescue—but it follows on the heels of the collapse in the 1990s of the technology boom, the 1980s savings and loan disaster, and the two oil crises of the 1970s. Each of these crisis moments combined with a sustained push to weaken labor power at the hands of capital and to require the economic sacrifice of major fractions of the middle- and lower-classes at the altar of finance capital. And the new demographics of economic inequality and poverty that have accompanied these developments are now well documented, as are the new patterns of uneven urban development and of investment and disinvestment in the urban core (Smith 2011).⁹ This contrasts with a prior period of expansive hegemony during which different populations were able to extract concessions by negotiating with capital for a stake in the political economy. There is an inside/outside dynamic at play here in which finance-driven, profit-making mechanisms and instruments are at once extremely complex and uncoordinated yet unified by an elementary logic of expulsion (Sassen 2014).¹⁰

Extending this idea to capitalist racialization, we could also say that the current purportedly postracial period is marked by a parallel shift that is more selective than expansive, in the sense that a white elite is less concerned with securing the social order by maintaining a stable albeit hierarchalized racial order than it is in using race politics narrowly and strategically to

disrupt challenges to its control. The leaders of finance are hostile to racial justice—they were brazenly predatory on black and Latinx communities in the United States in the lead-up to the 2008 housing market collapse (Crump et al. 2008)—more so perhaps than other sectors of capital, while they were perfectly willing to engage in profit-making schemes that devalued labor on a global scale, including that of white industrial workers in the metropolitan centers of the global north. Finance tends to oscillate between corporate multiculturalism and color blindness with a cavalier indifference. The abandonment of large segments of the white middle and working classes is fine in this situation of selective hegemony in the United States, but so too is a white racial project of enforcing financialized precarity on people of color.

One obvious consequence of the exercise of finance-led selective hegemony is an increasingly large absolute surplus population sorted into new fragmented and hierarchalized groups within the general category of the expelled, and a growing group who are trying desperately to hang on and prevent their own expulsion. Importantly, expulsion and precaritization are not in themselves politically unifying developments. It is certainly useful to consider what is happening to, say, home mortgage defaulters in Florida and Arizona; the chronically underemployed remnants of the once “affluent” white working class in Youngstown, Ohio; homeless people in San Francisco; Flint, Michigan, residents poisoned by privatized water systems; undocumented laborers who are rounded up and deported in Chicago; African Americans harassed and murdered by police in Baltimore, Ferguson (Missouri), and New York City; students of color in Philadelphia’s funding-starved schools; sick and injured farm animals in the Midwest. Or, to think beyond methodological nationalism and consider what is happening to migrant workers in the Americas or refugees from the Middle East, as part of a global population of displaced, evicted, and dislocated people, cast out of professional livelihood, living space, and even from life itself. However,

we cannot assume that this massive social, economic, and political dislocation will catalyze mass counter-politics. On the liberal Left in the United States, the hollowing out of an expansive hegemony into which disenfranchised groups could fight for entry and its replacement by selective hegemony, including the growth of an “absolute surplus population,” abandoned by capital and the state, has led some to argue for a new class universalism, an alignment of the ranks of disposable people in a new movement from below (Brecher et al. 2000; Frank 2004). The liberal-left criticism of “identity politics” gained traction after Trump’s narrow electoral victory in November 2016. This entailed a push for a platform of economic populism that is disdainful of cultural radicalism, which is viewed at best as a troublesome diversion from a new working-class politics and as thus a factor contributing to the rise of economic inequality (see, e.g., the widely influential *New York Times* op-ed by Mark Lilla [2016]).

But the liberal Left desire for class solidarity ignores, of course, the concrete realities of race, gender, sexual, class, and national politics. It ignores religious and geographical differences within this expanding “absolute residual population.” It ignores the long, sordid history of white supremacy in which whites who shared economic interests with people of color sacrificed them to their religious, national, or racial interests. And it ignores the extent to which inequalities across race, gender, class, sexuality, and nationality produce unequal power relation within the new disposable population, which is itself comprised of groups with distinct histories, grievances, and political sensibilities and sentiments. In other words, even as the disposable population expands, some people are still treated as—and feel—more disposable than others. In the United States, the rise of the Tea Party alongside the rise of BLM, Occupy Wall Street (OWS), and the immigrants’ rights movement—each with its own political repertoires and priorities and each with its own social bases—suggests that tensions and divisions within the disposable population of the United

States are just as likely to intensify as the precarious classes are likely to unite across differences and inequalities. In many ways, the political ascension of Donald Trump also complicates this picture, creating new political challenges for low-income people and people of color in general, but especially for those living in urban areas such as Philadelphia. Urban African Americans in Philadelphia and in other major metropolitan areas hold long-felt grievances against the liberal urban governing coalitions that are expert at reproducing political inequality along racial lines. Yet they have had little choice since the 1960s but to cast their lot with contemporary municipal elites. This dynamic intensified with Trump’s electoral victory. The elitist politics of the municipal elite’s embrace of austerity urbanism are frequently elided by Trump’s vilification of the cosmopolitan elite and by his opponents’ valorization of municipal areas as enlightened zones of liberal cosmopolitanism, about which I will say more below.

Unsurprisingly, a long-term crisis in political authority and legitimacy accompanies the rise of selective hegemony, and US political elites have had difficulty asserting a coherent strategy of rule even as the forces of reaction and authoritarianism have grown since the 1980s. The authoritarian turn in the United States has been decades in the making. It should be remembered that one of the most astute observations by Stuart Hall and his colleagues (1978) in *Policing the Crisis* is that Thatcherite authoritarian populism emerged in a context of a prolonged and intensifying crisis of legitimacy of the postwar Labour-led governing coalition in the United Kingdom. In the United States, the crisis of legitimacy plaguing the Democratic Party since the collapse of the New Deal has followed a similar path, and the politics of fear and reaction—and of sentimentality more generally—have filled the political void, even as they have garnered few fully committed supporters.

In this situation, the centrality of antiblackness and nativism to the new authoritarianism’s popular appeal is unsurprising. The authoritarian projects that gain political traction in the

contemporary United States, like that of Trump, do so precisely because they are designed to address questions of wealth distribution and social and economic mobility by inflaming xenophobic and nativist passions and by discrediting black and brown political authority and accomplishment (Maskovsky 2017). Yet everyday refusals to submit to political authority or to acknowledge the legitimacy of political elites are commonplace in Philadelphia and elsewhere, as diverse factions of the US urban public disengage from the political system, rage against Washington and sometimes against the indignities of state surveillance programs, and lampoon political authorities. In Philadelphia and elsewhere, the rise of the regime of antisocial security, with its selective hegemony and authoritarian dimensions, may seem on the surface to disable anti-racist politics. But it also created new grounds for black insurgent politics, to which I will now turn.

Black insurgent politics in Philadelphia

If the emerging regime of antisocial security saturates urban public space with surveillance and security measures and techniques, these efforts have been of limited effectiveness in controlling black teen crowd action (Palmer and Farr 2017). One reason for this is that the very same surveillance technologies through which synoptic power condenses into a form of continuous control also enable new forms of sociality and unrest that challenge race and class hierarchies and the racialized control of urban space. Comprised of people who reside mostly in Philadelphia's "outcast ghettos" (Marcuse 1998), they nonetheless are not contained there and are mobile enough to come together in commercial areas. And the threat that they pose, and the reason therefore that they are so often trivialized by the mainstream media and by municipal elites as nonpolitical forms of senseless social disruption, is that teen crowd actions are, like riots, an expression of public space occupation and reclamation by black

youth who are widely viewed as inherently ungovernable, disorganized, and disruptive, and hence without any legitimate right to inhabit urban public space on this scale. The political disruptions caused by black youth in Philadelphia and other assertions of the right to occupy public space by those who are putatively referred to as the "urban underclass" should thus not be underestimated or discounted. What makes these actions political is not just the disruption itself. It is also their persistence. These actions have occurred frequently, if sporadically, since 2009. They have not stopped despite widespread condemnation by the municipal elite, including prominent leaders in the city's African American community. And they have not stopped despite a scaling up of surveillance and of policing measures designed to stop them. These actions are also politically disruptive because in many instances participants engage in direct conflicts with police officers, risking the violent reaction that these kinds of encounters frequently entail.

There is also a clear political message that can be discerned in what black teens themselves say about "flash mobs."¹¹ Billy Penn, a web-based news hub founded by a former *Washington Post* web editor, published an extensive exposé on flash mobs in Philadelphia. Cassie Owens (2017), the author of the piece, interviewed several teens, who explained the participation of their peers in "flash mobs": "I think they're trying to show off in front of people," said one. "I don't know," said another, "To get recognition. They want to be cool." By text, I asked a young woman I know why she participated in several "flash mobs" years ago when she lived in Philadelphia. "To get out and be seen," she texted back. These responses suggest a politics of visibility—of gaining recognition by being looked at—that could be interpreted as an apolitical expression of youthful narcissism. But I speculate that it is more than this. For many years, urban African Americans have used technology to unsettle long-term patterns of surveillance and policing that helped to reshape the urban core, its retail sector, its residential neighborhoods, and its streets. The release of cell phone recordings

of police brutality and murder inspired protests across the country. The mainstream political response to these protests, and to the scandal of police misconduct and violence more generally, is the call for more body cameras for the police. This response exemplifies precisely how synoptic power extends itself into new domains. Body cameras bring viewing and being viewed into new domains. Though not entirely unprecedented as a police accountability measure, an uncharted kind of viewing is being established here, as the police record what they do for others to see. There is no doubt that a great deal of magical thinking behind the idea that body cameras will somehow create the kind of unambiguous “evidence” necessary to either prove the police innocent or guilty of misconduct. As Judith Butler (1993) argued long ago about video evidence from the Rodney King beating, different interpretations of video footage are possible based on how the footage is framed for different audiences, from liberal publics to juries that are tasked with the narrow legal responsibility to decide guilt or innocence to inner-city residents who live daily under the threat of police violence. The point here is not so much whether or not there is a preferable or “correct” reading of cell phone footage of police conduct, or of body camera footage. The point is that the questions “What is permissible? What is reasonable? What is just?” are increasingly framed in terms of “What looks permissible? What looks reasonable? What looks just?” The political and ethical terrain is thus delimited more and more by the practice of looking, and patterns of inequality will be reinforced or contested in terms set by synoptic power. I think that young African Americans are aware of this. Their desire to be seen in urban public spaces where they are not permitted to congregate en masse is a political commentary of sorts. It is not just a refusal to be contained in the outcast ghettos to which they have been relegated. It is about the affirmative power of being seen, of being both in the city and of it. It is thus an insurgent expression of urban citizenship, one that also has national and global implications, as black youth circu-

late recordings of their crowd actions beyond their local communities. Surprisingly, synopticism helps in this case to enable black insurgent politics. And this case resonates as well with the kind of insurgent politics that has been pioneered by Black Lives Matter in Philadelphia and in other locations across the United States and elsewhere. BLM has famously refused to specify a list of concrete policy demands or policing reforms. This is in line with a similar refusal by OWS and by other insurgent groups. Pundits from many quarters criticize this refusal as an indication of a lack of understanding about “how politics really works.” Yet there is another way to read this refusal: as an attempt to defend black communities and neighborhoods from violent, militarized intrusions by the security and surveillance apparatuses, an essential task that many BLM activists see as a first step in a larger process of the reclaiming the streets, shops, and the city itself from the encompassing web of an ever-encroaching antiblack social order. Indeed, BLM mobilizations are an assertion of sovereignty for African American individuals and communities that unsettles simplistic public and private divides and the liberal orthodoxies that promise better race relations via reformist attempts to fix the welfare state or other pragmatic public policy solutions. More than just protests against the coercive power of the state (which presumably could be ameliorated by better policies), they represent a powerful critique of antiblackness, not just the racist and discriminatory practices associated with one branch of government or another, but of the centrality of black impoverishment and social and physical death to the white social order itself. In fact, the pervasiveness in different political quarters of the “all lives matter” or the “black labs matter” retort to BLM is quite clearly an attempt to make the protest against black social and physical death into an expression of reverse racism. And it is thus possible to see “all lives matter” and other similar retorts as a form of revanchist politics that seeks to impose at the level of culture and ideology color-blind racism by masking white supremacy through the assertion

of white victimhood at the hands of purportedly entitled racial minorities. In both cases—“flash mobs” and BLM—there is an interesting dialectic between seeing and being seen, looking and being looked at, security and insecurity that plays out in the battle over urban public space. As a black political activist in Philadelphia explained to me, “If you take the slogan, ‘Black Lives Matter’ at face value and even separate it from the Movement for Black Lives, black teens congregating in a downtown space outside of their home turf is a way of expressing the same thing—we matter, we exist, deal with us.”

This insurgent political sensibility is also reshaping black politics in Philadelphia. For the poorest African American Philadelphians, very little has changed in the past four decades, despite the political ascension of many black elected officials and white liberal Democrats. From the point of view of many African Americans, the Office of the District Attorney has long been one of the most revanchist parts of city government, the fear-mongering, corrupt, and racist epicenter of the city’s law and order political establishment that has gone out of its way to criminalize black people to gain political favor with white voters. On 17 May 2017, Larry Krasner won the Democratic primary. Krasner was a defense attorney who has been taking on civil rights cases for Black Lives Matter, Occupy Philadelphia, AIDS activists, and protesters arrested at political conventions. He ran a campaign against the death penalty and against the DA’s office, which he described as “a place with a mad zeal for the highest charge, for the highest level of conviction, a culture that can find no flaw in police misconduct, that is drunk on the death penalty” (quoted in Brennan and Terruso 2017). Krasner handily defeated six other candidates in the primary, including Tariq El-Shabazz, the only black candidate who was a first assistant district attorney. Whereas Krasner, a white progressive, worked as a defense and civil rights attorney and often defended African Americans against malicious prosecution and discriminatory policing practices, El-Shabazz

was personally recruited to run by the former district attorney, who is under indictment for corruption and who implemented no criminal justice reforms during his two full terms in office. Members of Black Lives Matter supported Krasner’s candidacy, as did Color of Change, a national racial justice organization whose leadership saw the Philadelphia district attorney’s race as ground zero for criminal justice reform in the United States. Color for Change established a savvy social media-based Get Out the Vote operation in support of Krasner. During his campaign, Krasner vowed not to take cases brought by precincts that engage in the regular practice of stop-and-frisk, so Krasner gained the endorsement of several prominent radical black leaders. In the early 2000s and before, it would have been impossible in Philadelphia for a white politician running a radical platform to gain a significant number of black votes for district attorney. This suggests not only that a sizable percentage of black Philadelphians are united in opposition to current criminal justice policies and are invested politically in reforming the legal, surveillance, and policy apparatuses in the city. It also indexes broad dissatisfaction with the liberal urban political establishment, including the black political establishment, on the part of many African American Philadelphians. Furthermore, at a moment when the liberal urban political establishment is frequently celebrated at the national level as the cosmopolitan antidote to Trumpism, developments such as the political ascension of Larry Krasner point to a more complicated political situation, with class and race politics in major metropolitan areas working to unsettle the liberal cosmopolitanism versus white nationalist Trumpism political logic that tends to undergird popular accounts of US politics. Indeed, careful attention to dynamics such as these reveals that large swathes of the urban electorate are dissatisfied with both options and that they assert their right to the city that contradicts the imperatives of austerity urbanism when they find the opportunity to do so.

Conclusion: Antisocial security and the fate of the commons

In organizing this article around the theme of surveillance, I hope to encourage an analytical move beyond a simplistic domination/resistance paradigm to explore a new regime of antisocial security. The emphasis here is on the antisocial, individualizing ways that social groups and communities are carved up and how individuals and groups are singled out, labeled as pariahs, and disciplined in new and unexpected ways. This regime will create new modes of racial inequality and class division while it reinforces extant patterns. This is thus the regime to which black insurgent movements are learning to respond.

The conceptual and political promise of the concept of black insurgent politics lies in its power to push beyond the class universalism of the white Left in the United States to help us to think through what kinds of social arrangements might adhere in a society that is not invested foundationally in black social and physical death. It pushes us to go beyond questions around what an anticapitalist commons might look like or what prefigurative politics should look like today to ask what an antiracist commons might look like. Indeed, there is no doubt that many of the commoning politics projects that exist today, or that have existed in the recent past, in the urban United States, have been exclusionary in ways that harm black urbanites. Proponents of the commons concept therefore need to address race explicitly in their elaboration of equality, justice and collective stewardship (see, e.g., Harney and Moten 2013). It is certainly possible to prioritize efforts to establish forms of sociality, community, production, cooperation, and resource stewardship and use that do not collude with racist logics and practices, are not indifferent to black social and political death, and do not imperil black lives as an essential feature of their organization. Although it is possible to imagine doing this alongside and to a certain extent in cooperation with the struggle to build anticapitalist

commons, we should not assume that these two struggles are natural allies or that one should always be categorically subordinated to the other. At the same time, we should not presume that antiracist commoning will or should necessarily be anticapitalist; nor can we assume that anticapitalist commoning will or should be antiracist, though both efforts, and many others, are vital means for working toward a nonracist, noncapitalist world.

I wish to end with an additional comment on the adequacy of the commons as an emancipatory rubric given the implications of antisocial security. If modulation, not enclosure, is the new means through which power will operate in the world today, then commoning must address the many dangers of a society of continuous control. Are the refusals by teen crowds, BLM and Philadelphia voters to follow the scripts provided by past movements and politics an attempt to resist enclosure and to reclaim public space and resources in order to build commons, or are they after something else, something as yet unnamed that has less to do with establishing a common will and more to do with a form of political action that can move rapidly from place to place, from person to person, group to group, to protect vulnerable and precarious people from the harsh, arbitrary and unjust gazes to which they are subjected?

Acknowledgments

I thank antiracist activists in Philadelphia for their helpful insights. Amadee Braxton was especially helpful. This article also benefited from comments by Sidney Donnell, Ida Susser, and two anonymous reviewers. All mistakes or remaining points of confusions are my own. Research was supported by the PhD Program in Anthropology at the Graduate Center and by the Department of Urban Studies, Queens College, City University of New York, and from grants by the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the National Science Foundation.

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Notes

1. The labeling of African American teen gatherings as “flash mobs” has also happened in Chicago and St. Louis, at the Wisconsin State Fair, and in other major metropolitan areas in the United States. For an excellent critical discussion of this labeling and its implications for post-9/11 antiterrorist securitization in Philadelphia, see Massaro and Mullaney (2011).
2. Media reporting on “black flash mobs” is somewhat variable, reflecting the highly partisan and polarized political cultures represented in the increasingly fragmented US public sphere (Di Leonardo 1998). Since 2010, most mainstream media coverage of “black flash mobs” in Philadelphia emphasize the criminal conduct of the perpetrators and the violence or injuries that they cause, but they tend not to comment explicitly on race. In contrast, the right-wing media tends to describe the activities of black youth as racially motivated. For example, one Daily Wire article complained that the mainstream media would not describe a “teen mob attack” on a bystander as an antiwhite hate crime (Bandler 2016).
3. I conducted two years of full-time ethnographic research focusing on the civic activities of residents in a gentrifying neighborhood of Philadelphia (2000–2002), after completing my dissertation focused on other arenas of urban activism (Maskovsky 2000). I returned to Philadelphia frequently from 2002 to 2017 and stayed in touch with informants who were involved in urban activism. My fieldwork research relied principally on three ethnographic methods: participant observation, open-ended interviews, and an in-depth life-history collection. I studied a wide array of activities involving urban activists and neighborhood residents as they volunteered in nonprofit and church-based soup kitchens, recovery programs, and job-training programs and as they organized around “quality of life” issues such as trash removal, the maintenance and upkeep of abandoned lots, and the construction of affordable housing. I collected data on the strategies and tactics residents used to distribute resources, access services, and attract investment and paid close attention to how residents negotiate with each other, with city officials, and with representatives from the corporate sector. My interview data provided insights into the contested terrain of community life, as residents revealed varied, often contradictory, visions of racial justice, community development, resource mobilization, and neighborhood belonging. I also interviewed public officials, developers, policy makers, consultants, professional staff from nonprofit organizations, and civic leaders. My life histories provided insights into activist trajectories, showing how personal histories of political involvement became a resource for contemporary political action. In my field research, I paid close attention to the ways in which race, class, and gender shaped civic action and was careful to collect data across these axes of difference.
4. For recent accounts of policing and securitization in Philadelphia, see Maskovsky (2006); Massaro and Mullaney (2011); and Ruben and Maskovsky (2008); the link of moral panics, policing, race and class politics, and authoritarian populism is made by Hall (1978) in the classic *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*.
5. See Ruben and Maskovsky (2008) for a parallel discussion of homeland securitization in Philadelphia; see Katz (2007) on banal terrorism and the performance of security in urban space.
6. The argument I develop here is inspired in large measure by Roger Lancaster’s (2017) brilliant new piece, “The New Pariahs: Sex, Crime and Punishment in America.” I extend his argument in a different direction by emphasizing the continuing significance of race and racism via the extension of synoptic power into new urban spaces.
7. To a certain extent, the argument I am making here follows Nikolas Rose’s (1996) argument about the “death of the social” as a key zone,

- target, and objective of government under conditions of globalization (for a critique of this position, see Clarke 2004). My emphasis, however, is not on the widespread reimagining and rescaling of governing practices down to the level of “community,” as Rose argues, but rather the narrow advent of a mobile and plural form of surveillance, enacted more through synoptic than panoptic power, that is invested in policing across disciplinary regimes such as the family, neighborhood, community, school, and public health apparatuses. Calling the kind of security that is imagined, if not fully obtained through these maneuvers, antisocial is meant to mark both the abandonment of social cohesion and social justice as the governmental logic of urban surveillance regimes and the simultaneous establishment of surveillance procedures and programs at various scales that cut across conventional spatialized strategies of government.
8. The term “neoliberalism” has been useful in the past in capturing key governing dynamics that have emerged in conjunction with the globalization of the world economy since the 1980s. But recently, what is meant by the term has become so imprecise that I wonder if it has lost most of its explanatory power (see Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008; Maskovsky and Brash 2013).
 9. Incomes for middle-income whites have been flat for more than three decades even if their economic situation remains better, on the whole, than that of blacks or Latinxs, especially after the 2008 economic collapse. Elite women have made employment inroads over the past three decades, but lower-income women have not (Massey 2009). Six out of ten poor adults are women, and six in ten poor children live in households headed by women.
 10. For Sassen, financiers and the managerial classes across the world may engage in similar kinds of brutal operations through which they savagely “sort” who will matter and who will be counted in the new metrics of productivity, profitability, and growth on the one hand and who will be pushed to live (or die) at what Sassen calls the “systematic edge.” But, for Sassen, elites and experts are not necessarily united in a concerted effort to expropriate and dispossess, for the complexity of the system makes it difficult for them to see clearly the consequences of their actions: mass foreclosures, land grabs and displacement, forced migration, economic collapse, and environmental destruction on a global scale.
 11. From January to May 2017, I attempted to contact several teens whom my activist informants or I knew had participated in a turbulent crowd action. One responded to me, by text, in mid-February 2017.

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