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Violence as the Imposition of Difference: A Case Study of the 2020 Riots in Minneapolis

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Violence as the Imposition of Difference: A Case Study of the 2020 Riots in Minneapolis

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
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ABSTRACT

Violence has received a great deal of study in many disciplines—as an act of force, or as a theoretical concept. Slovenian political philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek provides in his work *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* a unique typology of violence, building and expanding upon decades of existing research in many areas. In so doing, Žižek establishes uniquely insightful links between different forms of violence that open the opportunity to examine outbursts of violence, be they riots, rebellion, or war, in a new way. Cognizant of the inability for us to simultaneously analyze both the person-to-person violence seen in acts like crime or riots and the systemic violence of phenomena like institutional discrimination or cultural stereotyping, Žižek casts six sideways glances, reflections of which can be seen in my case study of the events of the Summer of 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the wake of George Floyd's death. I contend that media responses to that tumultuous Summer are not merely incomplete, but miss a very fundamental relationship between the violent acts of individuals and the violence inherent in our symbolic order—in our government, in our culture, and even in our very language—that Žižek's typology helps illuminate; in missing this relationship inherent to the matrix of violence, common responses also miss its potential solution: *divine*, emancipatory violence, erupting suddenly and aggressively like a Biblical swarm of locusts to tear down injustice at its very foundations.

Keywords: Slavoj Žižek, violence, injustice, George Floyd, Minneapolis, riots, Lacan

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MAGA   Make America Great Again

BLM   Black Lives Matter

HOLC   Home Owners Loan Corporation

MPD   Minneapolis Police Department

CHAPTER I: VIOLENCE AS THE DOMAIN OF HARM

On September 1st, 2022, President of the United States Joe Biden gave a speech at Independence Park in Philadelphia ahead of the 2022 midterm elections. This speech was a year and a half after the January 6th attack on the Capitol, and evidently amidst a polarized political climate a push away from armed insurrection against the government. Much of Biden's speech decried the violent extremism of the MAGA (Make America Great Again) conservatives, describing them as an existential threat to the American political project at large, and the sanctity of American democracy.

More importantly, however, Biden identified this extremism specifically with political violence, to which he said, "This is a nation that rejects violence as a political tool. There is no place for political violence in America."

This statement should, beyond a cursory glance, seem peculiar: is political violence strictly the territory of extremists? Nearly a year prior to this statement, the US Central Command launched an investigation into a drone strike in Kabul, Afghanistan that they ordered. That strike killed ten innocent Afghani civilians, including a two-year-old girl, because of suspected links to terrorist groups. An attack on foreign soil using lethal autonomous weapons is unambiguously an act of targeted political violence. There are many examples of political violence to be found in all Presidential administrations, but I do not wish to belabor what is on reflection a pretty trivial observation; the United States is a military superpower—managing an entire four-year term without some act of political violence would be a feat in itself. Yet, I still found it hypocritical that Biden's implied notion of what constitutes political violence was so restrictive, that it apparently did not apply to actions undertaken by his or any other administration that claimed more

lives than on January 6th, 2021. I doubt Biden's sentiment expressed in his September 1st speech would excuse political violence as long as it was not "political violence *in America*" or wasn't being used "as a political tool," so the apparent hypocrisy made me uneasy. It was this general feeling of unease that drove me to consider what other acts of violence go unheard of, unseen, or unexamined, and whether "political violence" or violence generally should be restricted so narrowly to the acts of individual terroristic extremists.

In our daily lives, this conversation about what really constitutes violence or the hypocrisy of condemning one act of violence and implicitly justifying the other seems entirely academic, but should it be? As a further example, Biden's administration has at time of writing started pumping record numbers of oil, the production of which *will* cause thousands of excess deaths and health complications, just as it did under Obama's administration (Buonocore et al., 2023). These deaths, past and future, are doubtlessly unfortunate—but are they not, in some sense, an intentional act of violence? Is this administration not, however indirectly, inflicting predictable and preventable deaths onto thousands of Americans, most of which are non-white and poor? How might we define violence if we include both of these examples? What reason, if any, would we have to exclude certain acts from being considered violent?

Few things have troubled political scientists, philosophers, peace researchers, and international relations experts more than the study of violence. A long-standing difficulty in discussing the subject arises from the difficulty in defining violence with the level of precision necessary to be useful, but also with the level of complexity necessary to match the myriad ways the term "violence" is used descriptively (Pontara, 1978).

In most everyday usages, violence is regarded as an intentional act carried out by an individual, group of individuals, or elsewise some immediately identifiable entity. As this is the most immediate idea of violence in our everyday lives, it is most commonly what you would get if you wanted to find a definition of violence quickly with a search engine: "behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something" (per Oxford Languages). However, such a definition contains many components which would exclude things we should be able to meaningfully describe as violent. For example, is bullying someone into suicide not in some sense an act of violence? Is producing harmful gasses which you know will cause health complications to people not in some sense an act of violence?

To head an objection off at the pass, it is worth noting that, for our daily lives, the above Oxford Languages definition *works*. It mostly gets across the distinction we wish to make between intentional, interpersonal acts that are explicitly non-violent and ones that we consider explicitly violent (e.g., explicitly non-violent hugs versus explicitly violent dropkicks). It might be claimed that attempts to make violence about more than just this immediate distinction are just academic; the product of armchair philosophers and theorists faffing about as if they were really doing anything other than making simple things complicated in order to sound smart. Even if this was mostly true, there are still nonetheless problems with such a narrow definition of violence that trickle down, so to speak, to the way we discuss violence most generally.

The inadequacy of the above definition and others like it has led to many demarcations and divisions within what can be called violence, suited to different kinds of research or discussion. "Personal violence" or "subjective violence" are terms used to

distinguish the aforementioned definition of violence from others, such as "structural violence," "systemic violence," "objective violence," "symbolic violence," or "ontological violence." All these types of violence have a part to play in its holistic study, and all of them are situated in a typology of violence put forward by philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek in his work, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. Žižek's typology is noteworthy because of its inclusion of many kinds of violence researchers have identified over the past several decades, and how all those kinds of violence relate to one another. Additionally, Žižek's inflammatory and polemic usage of various examples and stories help to turn the concept on its head and force us to reconsider much of what we think we know so strongly about violence.

What is so powerful about Žižek's typology is the simultaneity of its simplicity and its depth; violence is separated into two main types, *objective* and *subjective*, based on whether the violence is a result of the actions of an individual (or *subject*) or a consequence of the functioning of social, political, and symbolic structures. *Objective violence* is further subdivided into *systemic violence*, or violence exhibited by biased or unjust sociopolitical systems, and *symbolic violence*, the implicit usage and legitimization of particular symbols, ideas, and signifiers that enable and perpetuate other kinds of violence. Žižek also discusses *divine violence*, a term coined by German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, which is violence targeted against injustice, seeking the dissolution of the coercive power of the law. The precise ways in which these kinds of violence interact with one another will be saved for a later section; when moving through the evolving history on the scholarship surrounding the concept of violence, however, it

will become clearer what Žižek's typology was influenced by, and what exactly he expands and improves upon.

In brief, my central thesis is that violence in the milieu of the postmodern age is a matrix of acts, systems, and contexts—intentional and unintentional—which seek to impose or maintain *difference* between individuals. Overcoming said difference in the aim of promoting justice and equality requires something beyond what our present systems of law, justice, culture, and economics are capable of achieving. The riots of Minneapolis in 2020, in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, are offered as a case study to see both the limitations of current attempts to overcome the systematic imposition of difference and to suggest the necessarily radical conclusion Žižek reaches near the end of his work: emancipatory—*divine*—violence. Such a fundamentally extreme conclusion is partly intentional, to invite the reader to think of why we continue to fail to address inequality and injustice, even with proactive well-intentioned individuals at important positions in our society. This conclusion is also meant as the endpoint of this particular means of examining violence in this particular time, viz., it is another way of looking at our ideological-political predicament that accepts the amorality and broadness of violence as its starting point. If nothing else, my argument is not intended to be strictly persuasive—its foremost purpose is to invite the reader's own sideways glance at violence, to cause them to sit back and think about our individual actions, how our society influences us all, and how the very language we use to discuss this subject falls prey to the same imposition of difference. If I fail at persuasion, let the provision of a new way of looking at the world, society, and yourself suffice as payment

for your time. Hopefully, there is something insightful to you about the typology of violence that Žižek presents.

Žižek's notion of violence underlying the argument of this paper requires discussing the historical broadening of the concept of violence in the literature over time, to which much of his typology borrows. Before bringing in wider notions of violence, it is worth clarifying the limitations on the more narrowly defined, common-sense usage of the word "violence" to justify expansions to the concept. Much of the academic discussion on violence deals with increasing layers of abstraction or distance that would likely feel strange or unconvincing if pitched to a layman as an expansion to the concept. Violence, insofar as the term is commonly defined for practical everyday use, refers almost exclusively to the intentional use of physical force on a person or object (often the property of another). Violent crimes, for example, refer to "rape and sexual assault, robbery, assault, and murder" (National Institute of Justice, 2023). This notion of violence is literal and immediate, in that it clearly denotes tangible harm caused by an agent to a victim. However, we tend to both *descriptively* use the word violent to refer to more than interpersonal acts of intentional force, and *normatively* use the word violent to describe acts, behaviors, social structures, etc. which involve destruction, harm, or an excess of force. Violence, thereby, can also be understood as metaphorical, as in the case of a violent hurricane.

These two ideas of violence so commonly spoken, literal and metaphorical, are meaningfully distinct when it comes to the presence (or lack thereof) of intentionality, tangible harm, or a victim. The hurricane may be metaphorically violent, but cannot be literally so because it has no agency to intentionally inflict harm (Jacquette, 2013, 295).

This distinction is significant because it determines blame. For example, one would not accuse a storm of killing my cat by causing my house to collapse on him, nor would one insist that my cat was the victim of a violent act, or so the logic goes.

This category of definitions concerning violence is "restricted," in that it narrowly describes violent acts as "positive interpersonal acts of force usually involving the infliction of physical injury." "Wide" definitions would include structural violence, cultural violence, and other forms of violence which involve social injustices and inequalities (Coady, 1986, 4). It is the first category of definitions that are the most immediate in the mind when one hears the word violence, and most commonly reflected in law that explicitly uses the term. This first "restricted" category tends to exclude things covered in the second category that we might meaningfully call violent, however. For example, a policy of protectionism may not be literally violent, but (like the consequences of a storm) nevertheless can cause significant injury or very *real* suffering to particular groups of people.

It is the second category that involves the increasing level of abstraction between agent and victim. Per Jacquette's distinction between literal and metaphorical violence, structural violence or cultural violence is not literally violent *as such* because it lacks an agent intentionally and forcefully inflicting harm. It is on this that we arrive at a central limitation of this first category of definitions: to limit that which we call violent to intentional and forceful acts is to meaningfully preclude structures and acts which should be included when defining the matrix of violence. If all that we consider violent are acts of intentional physical force or metaphorically violent hurricanes, "then too little is rejected when peace [the absence of violence] is held up as an ideal. Highly unacceptable

social orders would still be compatible with peace" (Galtung, 1968, 168). A nominally peaceful totalitarian dictatorship that elevates a small social class into exorbitant privilege while providing only the needs of survival for everyone else is completely literally non-violent under a restrictive view of violence, insofar as it is not intentionally inflicting direct physical force on anyone, nor depriving them of essential needs for survival.

This is all to say that while certain wider types of violence may be seen as frivolously broad when compared to a homicide, it is the common feature of preventable harm that warrants the expansion of the concept. Expanding it to the satisfaction of all disciplines, however, is a kind of "conceptual quicksand", a quagmire difficult to wade through to accommodate the differing and broad needs of relevant disciplines (Jackman, 2002, 388).

Before discussing Žižek's work on this subject in detail, it is important to assemble a glossary of sorts, of the kinds of violence that he recontextualizes. One of the most influential additions to the study of violence is the concept of "structural violence," coined by Johan Galtung, defined as violence without the subject in a subject-verb-object relation, i.e., violence without a clear and identifiable agent perpetrating the act. Galtung provides an example to elucidate the concept: "Thus, when one husband beats his wife there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance there is structural violence." As a means to avoid abusing the word violence, Galtung equates the essential meaning of structural violence to the normative concept of "social injustice" (Galtung, 171). Essentially, structural violence exists when social injustice persists as a result of a problem in a social, political, or economic system (e.g., employment disparities as a result of bias towards white-sounding

names (Francis, 2003)). Galtung avoids using the word "exploitation" when discussing structural violence because it would inappropriately imply that structural violence is intentional, which he argues is not always the case. In addition, Galtung also provides several other distinctions:

- Physical violence ("violence that works on the body"/intentional physical harm to a person or object),

- Psychological violence ("violence that works on the soul"/intentional psychological harm to a person through "lies, brainwashing, indoctrination"),

- Manifest violence (violence manifest as observable harm),

- Latent violence (violence with the potential to be realized as manifest violence),

- Biological violence (violence which constrains human action/"reduces somatic capability"),

- Physical violence *as such* (violence which constrains movement, such as imprisonment or uneven access to transportation),

- Truncated violence (violence without a hurt victim, but with the potential to easily harm someone physically or psychologically; violence without an object in the subject-verb-object relation), and

- Personal/direct violence (violence directly intended by a subject) (Galtung, 169-172).

Many of these specific forms of violence overlap in small or big ways (personal/direct violence and structural violence could contain both physical and psychological violence, for example), but what is important is what unifies them: the presence of some form of harm. Specifically, Galtung states that "violence is present

when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (Galtung, 168). Sometimes this harm is present in ways that are not immediately identifiable—whether through delayed action, the absence of a victimized subject, or the intangibility of the harm—but is nonetheless a defining feature of various violent acts.

It is worth noting that providing a complete and whole definition of violence that encompasses common and theoretical usage is an impossible task, and it may not even be desirable. In coining any definition of violence, "it should immediately steer one's attention towards problems that are on the political, intellectual, and scientific agenda of today, and tomorrow" (Galtung, 168). For example, a type of violence Galtung does not specify directly is "linguistic violence," or violence inflicted through the usage of words (which may cause psychological harm) (Gay, 1998). Galtung yet raises a crucial point: violence is not an ideologically neutral, static concept—it is a constantly evolving social enigma, the definition of which can serve specific ideological interests.

Galtung's typology of violence was not without some level of controversy, as creating six dimensions with each sharing some narrow similarity raises "the same kind of difficulties as attempts by engineers to find a purely technical definition of optimality" (Eide, 1971). Some have attempted to collapse the typology into fewer, yet more meaningful distinctions; instead of six separate divisions, others have argued for three: direct/indirect violence, organized/unorganized violence, and actual/potential violence (Derriennic, 1972, 363). Regardless, what is important here is that the last half-century has seen the broadening of what we call violence to far more than forceful, intentional harm between two subjects. Galtung, further expanding his typology, would later also

coin "cultural violence," or any aspect of a culture that legitimizes structural and direct violence (Galtung, 1990). This addition creates a kind of "violence triangle," where cultural violence legitimizes (through religion, language, science, or more broadly, *ideology*) structural violence, which in turn creates the conditions for direct violence to occur.

Just as racism and racial inequality may be sustained through poverty, relations of domination and inequality may be sustained through the symbolic order, through things like language, images, culture, and social norms. Symbolic violence, coined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, refers to violence present through the tacit acceptance of relations of power. Colorism (discrimination based on skin-tone), for example, is a form of symbolic violence; the lighter-skinned person, who holds on average more social and cultural capital than the darker-skinned person, shapes the social and cultural order that determines self-conception in a social hierarchy (in this case, beauty related to skin-tone). Put more simply, those with power over the symbolic order influence how people come to view themselves symbolically. Key to this relation is the tacit acceptance of the victim to their own subjugation. Internalized colorism is the result of the symbolic violence of colorism; the relations of domination between the lighter-skinned person and the darker-skinned person cause the victim to view themselves as an inferior being, accepting of their lower status in a social hierarchy.

Language is often the means through which violence is embedded or expressed in a symbolic system; this is easily visible when one considers, for example, the number of ethnic slurs for African-Americans versus the number of ethnic slurs for White Americans, in addition to the emotional and social impact of such slurs.

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Bourdieu's definition explains how hierarchies of power are created and sustained primarily by social and cultural roles, rather than economic or political forces (as with Galtung). What art and food we consider good taste are determined by those with high cultural and social capital, and those without such capital tacitly accept such determinations (Bourdieu, 1979). Similarly, what physical qualities we consider desirable, what phenotypic traits are seen as beautiful, what behaviors are considered acceptable (and by whom), are all determined by those with symbolic power, and those without such power are conditioned to accept such determinations passively. This can lead to those born with darker skin to use the dangerous practice of skin-whitening (Glenn, 2009). It is not merely the domination perpetuated by symbolic power that is violent, but also the somatic and mental effect of being the dominated one that is. Symbolic violence is thus the disjunction and alienation one feels when chafing against social and cultural norms; the disjunction felt about one's place in society, a place accepted as the natural result of a just system. The harm this kind of internalized subjugation creates is often just as real as direct, personal violence. Related, though distinct in some respects, is the concept of ontological violence, the imposition of a way of conceiving and experiencing the world onto another (particularly, other cultures that hold different views on various subjects). Particularly relevant in post-colonial studies, ontological violence helps sustain Western cultural supremacy over indigenous cultures and ways of being (Walker, 2004). The imposition of a certain way of conceiving of the world, just as with the creation of what constitutes good taste by a society's elite, causes those without symbolic power to tacitly accept that way of thinking.

It is worth mentioning that each type of violence hitherto discussed becomes more and more removed from the direct, person-to-person violence we come to expect from the term. Structural violence has no individual perpetrator, instead being the effects of the organization and overall structure of our society's institutions. Cultural violence and symbolic violence are perpetrated through symbolic categories such as language or ideology, and are conceived as violent as such because of their observed effects on individuals.

This sense of increasing *distance* between the perpetrator of violence and the victim is likely why the common restrictive notion of violence persists, and wider notions require explanation and qualification to be properly understood. Direct violence is appropriately named precisely because it is not-at-all abstract: a perpetrator directly inflicts harm upon a victim. Normally, you can see and hear this kind of violence, see its effects on the victim and the face of the perpetrator. All wider notions of violence have unclear perpetrators, where even if identified as a collection of influential individuals (e.g., fracking tycoons causing health problems by poisoning water) are difficult to hold accountable precisely because of this *distance* between act and consequence. Is this increasing sense of distance enough of a factor to discount the very real suffering experienced through systemic racism or colorism?

Enter Slavoj Žižek, providing a holistic yet interconnected typology of violence that includes, connects, and examines all the types of violence hitherto mentioned. Central to Žižek's argument is that, because one tends to conceive of violence as visible and direct, this masks an undercurrent of invisible and indirect violence that at every turn fights our ability to prevent direct violence (Žižek, *Violence*, 1). It is not merely that

direct violence is more visible because there's less distance between the act and its consequence; direct violence obscures its own underlying causes precisely *because* of that visibility. Žižek brings up the example of Nikolai Lossky, an anti-communist intellectual expelled from Russia at the end of the Russian Revolution. Lossky, a member of the gentry under the Russian Empire, wondered why he and his family were exiled, for they had lived gentle lives and spoke often of the wonders of the arts, literature, and music. "Lossky was without a doubt a sincere and benevolent person," but "such an attitude betrays a breathtaking insensitivity to the *systemic* violence that had to go on in order for such a comfortable life to be possible" (Žižek, 9). Lossky, his friends and family, and others like him likely never engaged in direct acts of violence, yet still thrived because of the undercurrent of systemic violence that served to benefit Russia's elite. They were blind to the underlying violence their prosperity relied on because that underlying violence as a normal, background state of affairs.

Already, Žižek has arrived at the very first distinction in his typology of violence mentioned at the beginning of this paper: that between *subjective* violence and *objective* violence. Subjective violence includes *direct violence* of any kind, whether physical, psychological, linguistic, or otherwise (i.e., between two or more subjects). Žižek defines subjective violence as "violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent" (Žižek, 1). This would include violent assault, rape, terrorism, verbal abuse, and so on. Objective violence contains every wider notion of violence mentioned previously, be it symbolic violence, ontological violence, structural violence, and so on. Žižek defines objective violence as "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth function of our economic and political systems" (Žižek, 2). Žižek further subdivides objective violence into

systemic violence and *symbolic* violence. Systemic violence mirrors Galtung's structural violence, just as *symbolic* violence closely resembles Bourdieu's symbolic violence.

Žižek's description of the relationship between subjective and objective violence essentially contains three parts, though he doesn't explicitly specify them as I do: the objective cause, the subjective outburst, and the objective response. These parts are not chronologically ordered, though they are sequential in some sense; the subjective outburst happens because of the objective cause, and thereby leads to the objective cause being obscured.

Subjective violence does not arise spontaneously, or out of nowhere. Rather, it is produced, however distantly, by an invisible undercurrent of objective violence. Armed robberies do not happen because of some evil robber gene in someone's genome, but because of innumerable social, political, and economic factors that motivate such acts of subjective violence; maybe the robber is desperate and needs money for survival, or is suffering addiction and acts out of desperation to stop their discomfort or anxiety. In any case, that robbery—this sudden outburst of subjective violence—obscures its own cause by its very visibility. Would it not seem odd, at first glance, to report on a robbery by discussing poverty, mental illness, and/or addiction? To blame a single armed robbery on systemic poverty (and many other factors) attracts again this sense of absurd distance between cause and effect, where the cause is too abstract to be confronted directly. It is far simpler to believe that the cause of subjective violence is strictly and only the subject, whose motives are inscrutable yet also simple. To believe this, however, is to ignore that undercurrent which incentivizes those violent acts in the first place, and prevents the ability to stop occurrences like it in the future.

Žižek claims this is because one can confront and examine subjective violence or objective violence, not both at the same time. Subjective violence is "experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level," whereas objective violence is "precisely the state of violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things" (Žižek, 2). Subjective violence is disruptive, an outburst among a normal state of affairs, yet this status quo is sustained and perpetuated by the very real yet invisible objective violence going on behind the scenes. This inability to view both violences at the same time is why Žižek casts "six sideways glances" at the concept, to try and understand the emotional authenticity and rawness of subjective violence while also dispassionately examining the undercurrent of objective violence all around us (Žižek, 3-4).

Media portrayals of subjective violence face this exact problem all the time. Žižek mentions the 2005 looting of suburbs in Paris, but a more contemporary example would be the immolation of buildings during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protest movement, which we will discuss later in much more detail. The outburst of violence that the media portrayed in both 2005 and 2020 appears as a disruption of the peace, the normal state of affairs; as Žižek's provided hypothetical goes, a reporter of these violent outbursts might ask an activist, "Did you do this?" while pointing at a burning building, to which the activist counters, "No, *you* did this!" (Žižek, 11). For the subjectively violent actors, the "normal" state of affairs is a violent assailant without a body—so they know they should lash out, but not at whom. The media portrayals of these instances of subjective violence—of these perturbations of the (seemingly) peaceful and normal status quo—fail to truly capture these moments as the unusual phenomena they are because they either

insist on the rioters' acting as unruly or violent individuals, or deprive them of their agency and reduce their action as a robotic consequence of a failure in this or that policy.

The especially important key to these examples—why they are such seemingly unusual phenomena—is that they were just "outburst[s] with no pretense or vision" (Žižek, 74). No concrete demands were made that were refused, and thus caused the outburst—rather, these acts of unbridled frustration craved *recognition*, to have their unrest be known. How their predicament would be solved is unclear, but the seemingly pointless outburst attempted to signal the existence of *some* problem that could no longer be ignored. The problem, however, was the inevitable response that only seemed to confirm the nonexistence of the violence's cause. In both cases, in 2005's France and 2020's America, conservative media insisted upon the need for law and order to prevent these unruly outbursts, while liberal media emphasized the ailing welfare state and the need to culturally integrate migrants (though perhaps not in those precise terms) (Žižek, 80). Neither response sees the ouroboros at play, wherein objective violence causes such subjective outbursts, and in the attempt to combat those outbursts, "commit systemic violence that generates the very phenomena they abhor" (Žižek, 206). This somewhat resembles Galtung's "violence triangle" between direct, structural, and cultural violence, but concisely and explicitly outlines the process by which they interact. Symbolic, cultural, and structural violence compose the objective cause and response, whereas direct violence is visible in the resulting subjective outburst. The result is a system that is categorically incapable of truly resolving the cause of these acts of violence without severe and substantial restructuring, and possibly, the threat and action of *divine violence*, described in detail in CHAPTER 3.

To fully examine why this dynamic is so difficult to solve, it is worth undertaking a deep examination of it. To that end, I offer a case study of Minneapolis, Minnesota in the late Spring and early Summer of 2020, where a number of activists, just as in the suburbs of Paris in 2005, set fire to homes, businesses, and their places of work to the astonishment of the world.

CHAPTER II: VIOLENCE AS THE DOMAIN OF DIFFERENCE

On May 25th, 2020, a local black man named George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis by Derek Chauvin, an MPD (Minneapolis Police Department) police officer who had initially encountered Floyd after receiving a call claiming that he may have paid for cigarettes with a counterfeit bill. Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes while pinning him to the ground, and Floyd suffocated. This was a murder (*State v. Chauvin)*. The next day, at approximately 12:45 A.M., Darnella Frazier, a bystander to the murder, posted a video on her Facebook and Instagram where one could see Floyd crying out, losing consciousness, and dying while Chauvin and other nearby officers ignored him (Boone, 2020). The video swiftly went viral. The police's initial statement, released very close to the same time the video was posted, was later widely criticized for omitting several key facts that the video clearly shows: Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes, the "medical distress" Floyd suffered was *not* heeded, and he was obviously unarmed.

By early morning, several things had happened: the Minneapolis Police Department announced that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had joined the investigation into the murder, Minneapolis' mayor (Jacob Frey), Minnesota's governor (Tim Walz), and a state senator (Amy Klobuchar) had condemned the murder and affirmed the intention of the public to seek justice. By midday, thousands of people were in the streets, marching. Demands were made by protestors, and statements were made by several public officials that this event would be dealt with. By the afternoon, however, a small portion of the broader protest group broke through a fence surrounding the

Minneapolis police third precinct, and started throwing rocks and bottles at officers and the precinct building.

Police Chief Medaria Arradondo ordered police to fire rubber bullets and tear gas on the protestors outside the precinct, despite most of the protestors being non-violent. The response was predictable: more things were thrown at the police, and more people joined in to directly resist the aggressive response of the police. While things appeared to simmer down early the next day, by nightfall, an Autozone, a Cub Foods grocery store, an under-construction apartment complex, and other buildings had been set on fire, looted, or damaged. One man was fatally shot by the owner of a pawn shop who believed he was there to loot the store (Furst and Stanley, 2020). In the ensuing days, more buildings were burned and looted, and the police response kept escalating the unrest—in part due to excessive force. For example, MPD officer Samantha Belcourt drove near a crowd and sprayed mace with wild aim, hitting protestors, journalists, bystanders— anyone in the line of fire (Winter, 2022). The protest movement became too large and too angry to contain with what Minneapolis could spare in the first few days, though things would simmer down on the week of June 1st after Minnesota's National Guard was deployed. To put it simply, chaos erupted within Minneapolis in a very short span of time. The death of George Floyd would go on to spur a global protest movement against police brutality and systemic racism. Lootings and burnings would spread to several other cities in Minnesota alone, and the legacy of this chaotic week still ripples throughout the American sociocultural consciousness. Why did this killing, in this particular city, at this particular time incite such a tremendous response from the world? What happened to incite this level of unrest and destruction in such a short time?

In the United States, it is far too common of an occurrence for an unarmed black person to be killed by mostly white police officers. Between 2015 and 2021, at least 135 unarmed black men and women were confirmed to have been fatally shot by police (Thompson, 2021). Some of these deaths receive justice in the form of criminal or civil punishment of the killer, but many do not, or face drawn out legal battles that take years to resolve. Yet, few of these killings inspire the kind of protest movement as George Floyd's death did. What was unique about Floyd, about Minneapolis, and about the summer of 2020?

George Floyd's murder happened at an extremely difficult time for American people of color; a global pandemic was causing the deaths of tens of thousands, which disproportionately affected people of color, many of whom had poor access to medical services and personal protective equipment; the economy was receding in the worst recession since 2008, which hit lower income communities of color especially hard; and amidst it all, a video of an innocent black man begging to live while an officer knelt on his neck, suffocating him, went viral across the world. As 31-year-old social worker Priscilla Borkor said on May 29th, only a few days after the murder, "It's either COVID is killing us, cops are killing us, the economy is killing us" (Alter, 2020). Floyd's murder was, in some sense, a catalyst that ignited a stewing pool of ambient, justified rage.

But there were aspects of Floyd's *murder itself* that were unique, as well. Floyd's death was recorded and uploaded to the internet, where it was very quickly shared. Like war photography, staring into an image of pain and suffering renders the captured experience more immediate, more real to the observer. The recording is especially impactful precisely because it was captured on video with sound, rather than just as a

photo; many can avoid confronting an image of great suffering by claiming that it is

fabricated or staged (Sontag, 2003, 7), but the video of Floyd's murder is hauntingly real.

There was little plausible deniability to be found for Derek Chauvin's actions when his

misconduct was so clearly and publicly visible, nor could an observer easily distance

themselves from the fact that they just witnessed the death of a man begging for survival.

Additionally, Floyd's death took place in Minneapolis, a city which according to census

data experiences among the highest rates of racial wealth and income inequality in the

country; barely a quarter of black families own the homes they inhabit in Minneapolis,

and make less than half of the average white family's income (Ingraham, 2020).

Furthermore, the omnipresence of social media marked an increased velocity in

information-sharing than was possible even a few short years before Floyd's death. All of

these things and more fed the global protest against police brutality that erupted in what

has been described as the "summer of racial reckoning" (Chang, Martin, and Marrapodi,

2020).

When recapped as above, it seems that a future course of action dedicated to

preventing murders like Floyd's would involve quite a few things: addressing explicit and

implicit bias from police officers (Tyler, Luban, and Driscoll, 2020), relegating public

safety concerns to other officials such as social workers rather than armed police (Goff,

2021, Martin, 2021), demilitarizing crisis response officials (Silva, 2022, Singhvi and

Pandey, 2021), implementing policies of mandatory reporting of police misconduct and

the duty-to-intervene standard (Dekmar and Flannagan, 2021), and budget restructuring,

violence prevention, and supportive housing (Sabrumanian and Arzy, 2021).

Doubtlessly, all of the above things would help. But none of them, nor all of them in combination, would get rid of the underlying cause of this killing, or the hundreds of killings like it. I do not say this to be unhelpful or needlessly critical while sitting from the armchair—all of the above suggestions should happen, as their consequences are, again, doubtlessly an improvement over the current state of affairs. But the objectively violent conditions that brought about the murder of George Floyd and the resulting response started far, far before May of 2020, and fixing them is likely beyond the capabilities of the system we inhabit.

The city of Minneapolis, despite being in the state of Minnesota where slavery was abolished at the outset, has a deeply racist history. In the Jim Crow era, the laws on the books in Minnesota were progressive, especially for the time: discrimination in public places was outlawed and black men could vote before it was guaranteed nationally. Yet, as Tom Weber mentions in *Minneapolis: An Urban Biography*, Minnesota was far from devoid of discrimination and racism in daily life at this time, despite its historically progressive record:

> Discrimination was officially banned in public places, including hotels and schools. But blacks were still denied service in daily life. Housing on the university's campus was reserved for white students. Covenants restricted home purchases. … In abolitionist, ethnically homogenous, Republican Minnesota, racial discrimination was still okay and thrived. (Weber, 2020, 83)

Structural forms of segregation, such as redlining through race-restrictive covenants, were extremely prevalent in Minneapolis during Jim Crow, and never fully disappeared. Race-restrictive covenants prevented people of color from buying or leasing homes, and even when these restrictions were made unlawful by the Fair Housing Act of 1968 (and legislation passed in 2019 made it possible to renounce these covenants), many

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of the affected housing deeds (potentially over ten thousand) still had racist restrictions as of 2017 (Furst, 2017). While this was particularly pronounced in Minneapolis, this was not uncommon nationwide, in terms of the legacy of post-reconstruction segregation.

A large part of why Minneapolis continues to be one of the most segregated cities in the United States is due to civil mismanagement, misaligned priorities, and a focus on remaining an economic hub rather than an investment in their population. From urban renewal plans that demolished the housing and livelihoods of poor black Americans (Figure 5), to the creation of freeways acting as a blunt tool of segregation literally built on top of poor minority neighborhoods (Figures 2,3), Minneapolis' civic leaders have historically failed to place the needs of their citizens above economic development that, more often than not, does not end up meeting the desired targets for growth.

Looking at the original HOLC (Home Owners Loan Corporation) residential security map (Figure 1), one can begin to see how these projects were so disastrous for the minority communities of Minneapolis. Areas deemed the least valuable are denoted in red, which are not coincidentally the areas that disproportionately housed black, brown, and Jewish residents of the city (Susaneck, 2024); comparing maps of the city where the residential security map is overlaid on overhead images of the city, simply looking at where the freeways were constructed clearly shows the primary victims of these projects (Figure 4). Homes were demolished and replaced with these freeways, which also served as dividing lines in the increasingly economically unequal Minneapolis (Figures 2,3). It is not hard to see why these freeways were built where they were: the government had designated certain areas, where thousands of people lived, low-value. Urban renewal and prosperity projects, such as those under the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan

Development Act, had a target for improvement that, in practice, entailed the demolition

of thousands of homes (Figure 5).

Figure 1. 1934 Home Owners Loan Corporation Residential Security Map
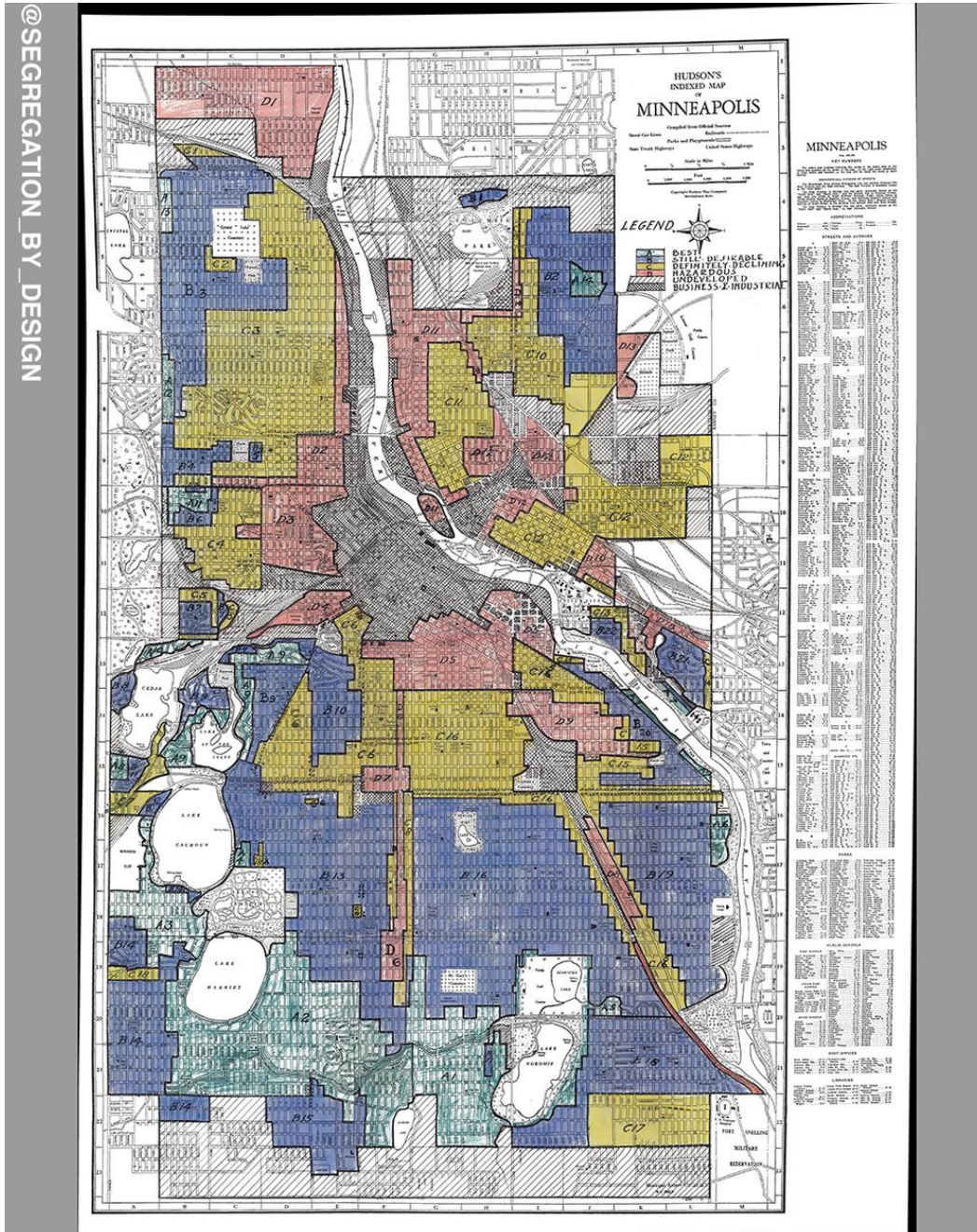
1934 Home Owners Loan Corporation Indexed Residential Security Map. In order of increasing
value according to the HOLC: red areas designate a high population of black, brown, and other
non-white minorities; yellow indicates working class areas; blue designates areas with white-collar

workers; green indicates areas with mostly wealthy businessmen. Susaneck, Adam Paul. 2024. "Segregation by Design." *TU Delft Centre for the Just City*, 2024. Accessed March 31 2024 via https://www.segregationbydesign.com/

Figure 2. 1947 Overhead Map of Minneapolis
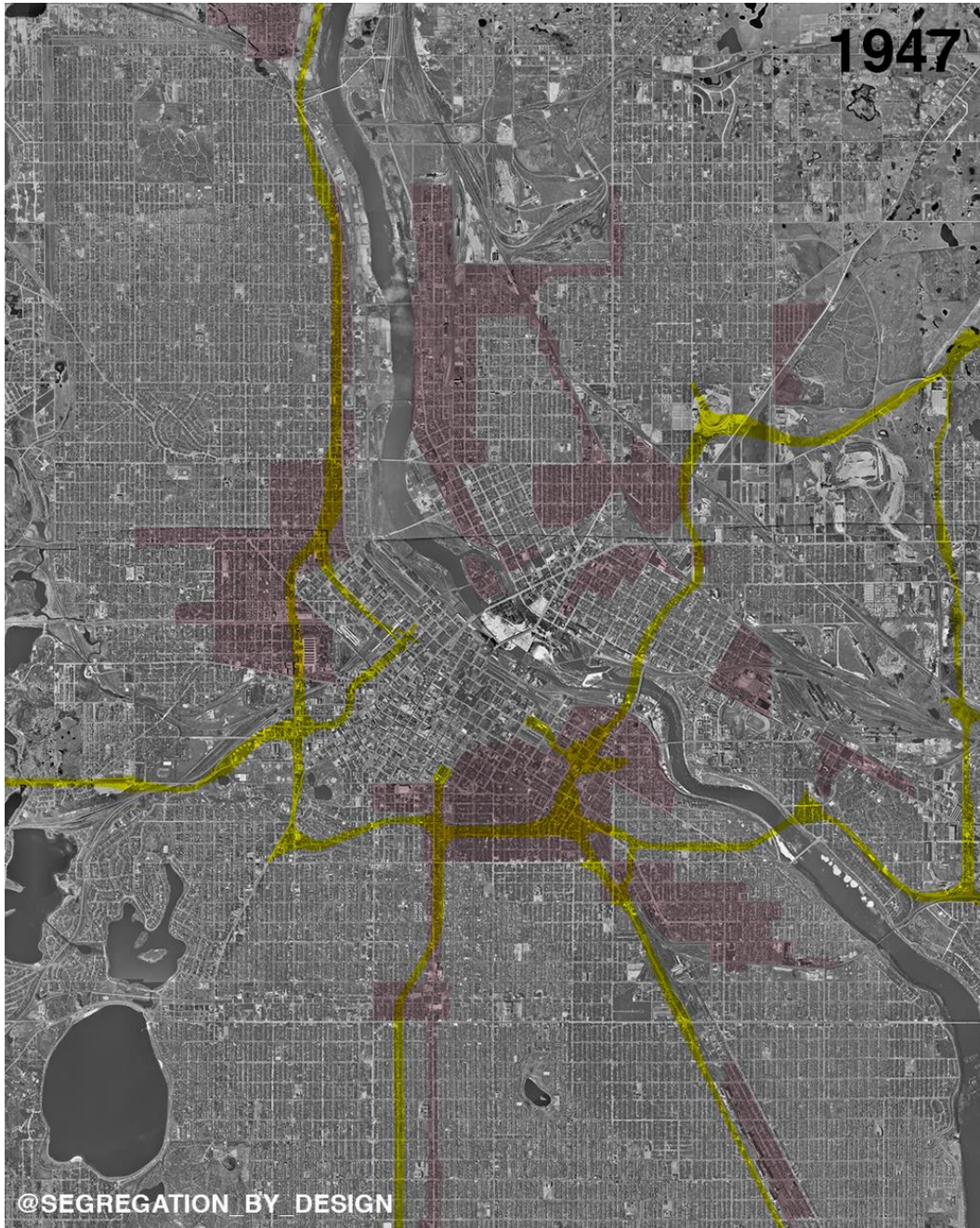
1947 Overhead Map of Minneapolis. An overhead map of Minneapolis in 1947; red areas are those colored red in fig. 1, and the yellow overlay indicates where freeways and interchanges would be built. Susaneck, Adam Paul. 2024. "Segregation by Design." *TU Delft Centre for the Just City*, 2024. Accessed March 31 2024 via https://www.segregationbydesign.com/

Figure 3. 2015 Overhead Map of Minneapolis
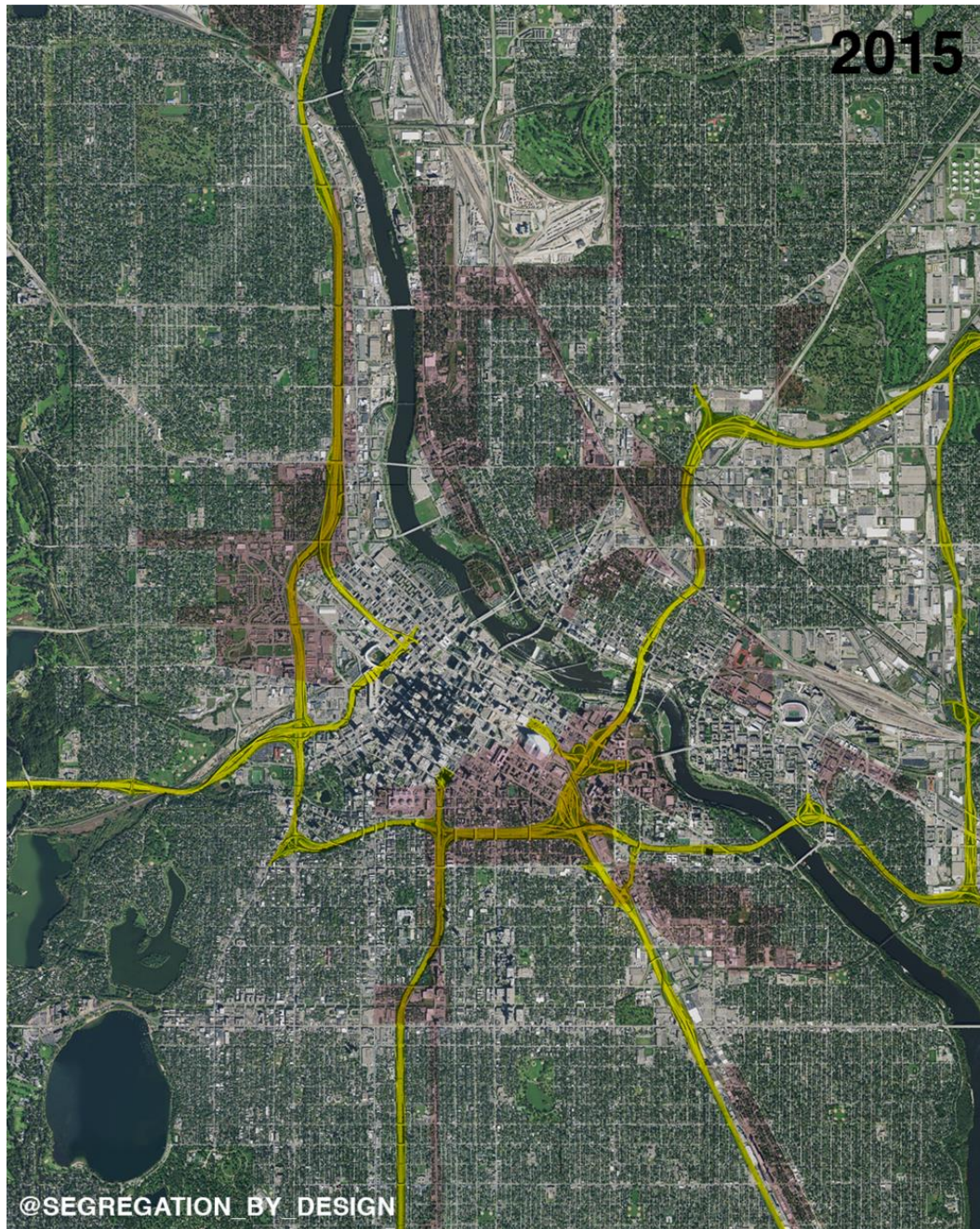
2015 Overhead Map of Minneapolis. An overhead map of Minneapolis in 2015; same red and yellow overlays as in fig. 2, but one can more clearly see how the construction of freeways helped break apart pre-existing neighborhood and geographically s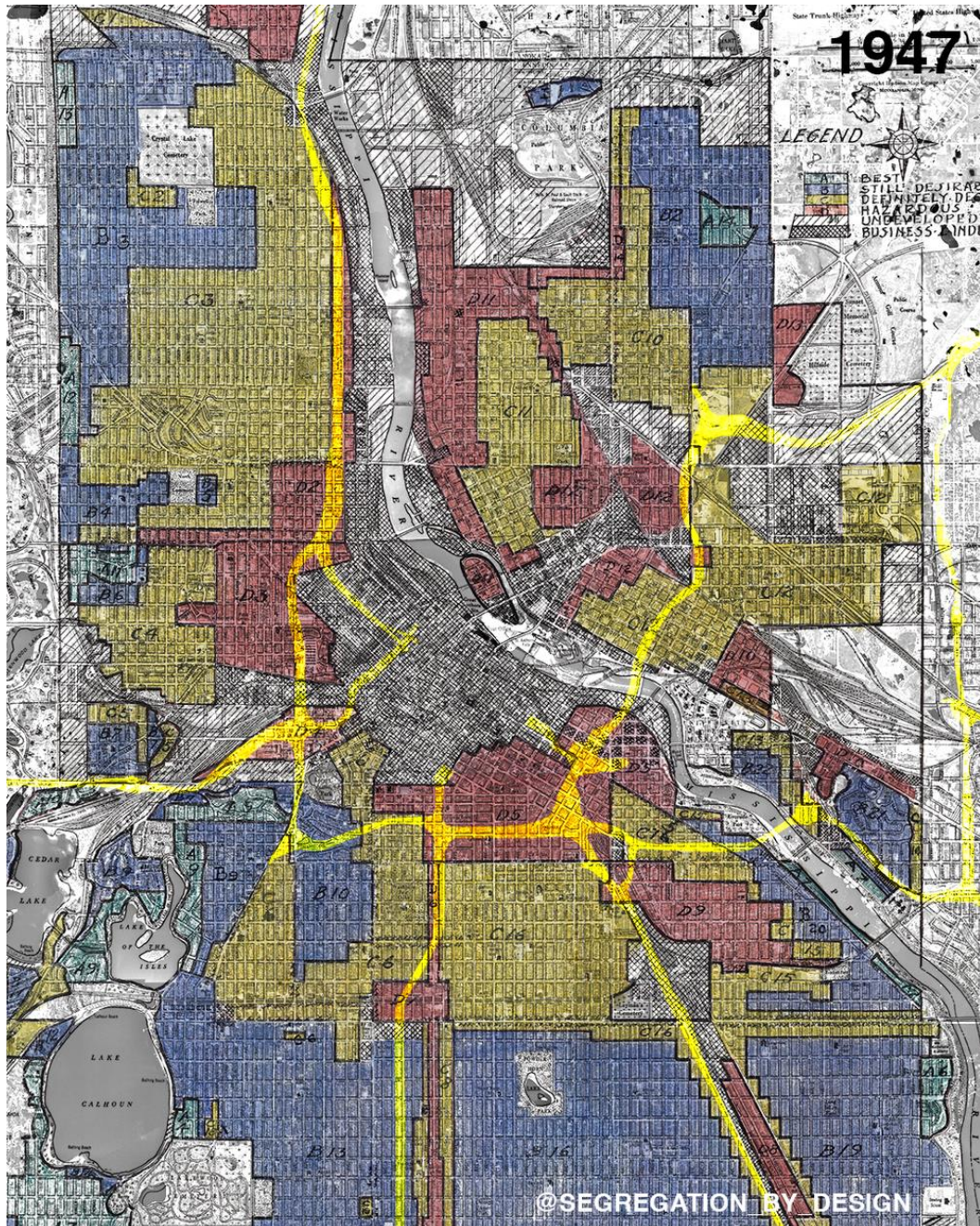egregate Minneapolis. Susaneck, Adam Paul. 2024. "Segregation by Design." *TU Delft Centre for the Just City*, 2024. Accessed March 31 2024 via https://www.segregationbydesign.com/

Figure 4. Freeways Overlaid onto 1934 HOLC Residential Security Map

Freeways Overlaid onto 1934 HOLC Residential Security Map. The map from fig. 1, with the freeways seen in fig. 3 overlaid on top. One can see how the HOLC's map informed the placement of freeways in the ensuing decades. Susaneck, Adam Paul. 2024. "Segregation by Design." *TU Delft Centre for the Just City*, 2024. Accessed March 31 2024 via https://www.segregationbydesign.com/

Figure 5. Freeways and Urban Renewal Overlaid onto 1947 Overhead Map
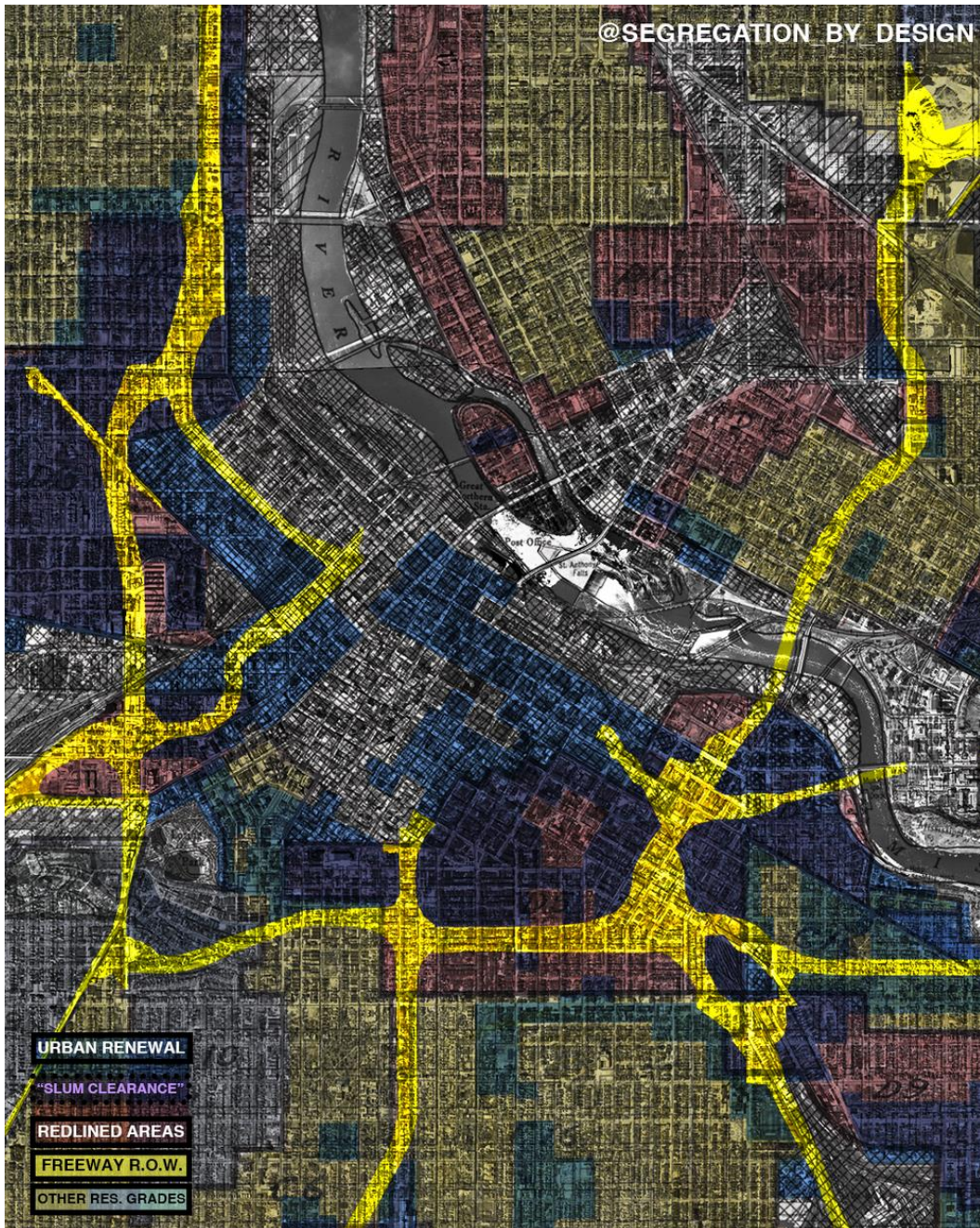
Freeways and Urban Renewal Overlaid onto 1947 Overhead Map. A map similar to that of fig. 4, but with the other grades from fig. 1 included, as well as urban renewal projects and slum clearance projects colored in blue and purple respectively. Susaneck, Adam Paul. 2024. "Segregation by Design." *TU Delft Centre for the Just City*, 2024. Accessed March 31 2024 via https://www.segregationbydesign.com/

With over 7,000 homes demolished and roughly 25,000 displaced (35% of which were non-white, despite only being 3% of the city's population by 1960), redlining is responsible for concentrating many non-white people into high-rises by the interstate or into poorer areas, keeping them in poverty (Susaneck, 2024). Most of these hazardous areas, redlined ninety years ago, are still lower-income today, and are predominantly minority neighborhoods now (Mitchell, 2018). Beyond just mere prejudice, decades of deliberate political and economic choices have not only deprived the minorities of Minneapolis of equal opportunity, but have actively concentrated them in poorer areas while whites flee to the suburbs.

Even as the fifties saw the end of segregated schools and the sixties saw the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Minneapolis struggled to bridge the structural barriers to integration and equality; even when legal segregation was abolished, it was still rare to see more than a handful of students of color at formerly white-only schools (Weber, 141-145). The seventies and eighties saw "above-average" growth for Minneapolis and Minnesota; a not insignificant part of the then-burgeoning computer industry nationwide had its place in Minneapolis, and broader economic growth in the region led to a strong, interdependent and diversified economy. However, underneath the facade of prosperity was the lingering and ever-present inequities that would only grow with the arrival of several non-white groups into the city from various places: Somali refugees fleeing the Somali Civil War, African-Americans from prominent urban areas in the Rust Belt, and several other East African and Southeast Asian immigrant groups (Weber, 163-167). What fair housing policies were

implemented during this time were gradually dismantled starting in the eighties (Orfield, 2015, 14).

In more recent memory, half-hearted attempts to address one of the greatest education disparities in the nation (Grunewald and Nath, 2019) ends up achieving the opposite effect of exacerbating those very same disparities, often to levels expected of cities back in Jim Crow:

> Driven by political and governmental apathy, the well-meaning but misdirected efforts of housing developers, school reformers, and the proliferation of organizations and groups with a firm financial interest in maintaining segregated living patterns, our state has slowly reversed its civil rights heritage (Orfield, 7-8).

The growth of a "privatized poverty 'industry'" makes attempts for lasting integration much harder; potentially well-meaning attempts to give students and parents "school-choice" by promoting single-race charter schools end up, unsurprisingly, deepening segregation. Affordable housing projects are good at uplifting the impoverished and should be built in poorer neighborhoods, but "you just shouldn't build all of it [there]" (Callaghan, 2015). These factors concentrated poverty, and thereby violent crime, in Minneapolis's minority communities, earning the city the name "Murderapolis" (Weber, 173).

Whether it be profiling, promoting charter schools, or offering affordable housing almost exclusively in lower-income communities, all attempts—whether half-hearted or sincere—failed to desegregate Minneapolis. This was the result of a combination of willful ignorance, simple incompetence, profit-seeking behavior, and genuine mistakes. Every economic crisis, from the Great Depression to the Great Recession and onwards, hits those without wealth far harder than those with plenty of it—and in Minneapolis,

where families of color rarely own their homes and make less than half of the average white family in the city, these business cycles make holding wealth for future generations extremely difficult. With all of this in mind, it only makes overcoming these disparities more difficult when, at the end of the day, getting a house in the suburbs across the freeway is even more impossible than being able to buy the house you currently live in. The effects of redlining on Minneapolis were and are *brutal* for the city's minority population.

Add to all of this the deep history of police misconduct and brutality in the city, and the increasing desperation of Minneapolis's non-white population becomes even clearer. As with many cities across the United States, Minneapolis's history of racially-motivated police violence stretches back decades (Ajasa and Beckett, 2021). In recent memory, the killing of Jamar Clark on November 15th, 2015 in Minneapolis prompted a fifteen-day long protest by Black Lives Matter outside the MPD fourth precinct station. In the end, insufficient evidence was found to press charges against the two officers: Mark Ringgenberg and Dustin Schwarze. The next year, some policies were put in place to address police misconduct, namely the duty-to-intervene and changes to police hiring practices.

A list of similar shootings of black men and women in Minneapolis would ultimately add little to an already belabored point, and would ultimately draw an inappropriate level of attention away from the focus of this chapter: the background that made the 2020 riots in Minneapolis possible. The murder of George Floyd occurred contemporaneous to the largest global health pandemic since the Spanish flu, and beyond provoking a universal unrest and stress among all Americans, COVID-19 hit people of

color especially hard. Systemic racism in healthcare, from disparities in health access to improper diagnosis due to persistent myths about black physiology, greatly exacerbated negative health outcomes from infection to COVID-19. Hospitalizations, infections, deaths—all negative health externalities from the pandemic disproportionately affected African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, and Native American communities (Romano, Blackstock, and Taylor, et al. 2021). The systemic inequalities in relation to healthcare access, treatment, and rate of infection were laid bare with such a large number of infected.

This was and is true of Minneapolis, as well; while Minneapolis at first appeared to be in line with national averages, the reality was likely far darker: due to the fact that census data (including race and ethnicity) are self-reported, the state was unaware of the race of about one in five Minneapolis citizens who had contracted the virus. The scale of the problem in communities of color was made even worse by the lack of comprehensive testing for them (Evans and Walsh, 2020).

The year of 2020 proved to be a breaking point for the black community in Minneapolis. In one of the most deeply segregated cities in the United States, they witnessed failed attempt after failed attempt to address the massive gaps in home ownership, education access, and wealth in the city—with some of those attempts never having aspirations beyond making profit off of their poverty. In the midst of a global pandemic that was already hitting non-white people especially hard, Minneapolis struggled to even get tests out to minority communities to calculate exactly how hard they were being hit. In a city that has seen acts of police brutality gone unsettled, unanswered, or unprosecuted for decades, the murder of George Floyd was the most flagrant, cruel,

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and brutal event that catalyzed a months-long outcry for *recognition*: borne out of the intense and intolerable weight of frustration—at the health of their families, at the deaths of members of their communities, and at the long-standing inequities that keep them poor. The dispossessed communities of color of Minneapolis reacted.

For a long time, it was common to talk of Minnesota and Minneapolis in terms of the "Minnesota Paradox"—Minneapolis was a rich city, with a high life expectancy, great cultural output, and a large corporate presence. In terms of lines on a graph, it was prosperous. But it was never prosperous for the non-white denizens of the "hazardous" areas constantly undergoing renewal project after slum clearance, having their neighborhoods cleaved in two by the construction of new freeways, and who year after year lose family members and friends to crime and police violence that city officials fail to address beyond a bludgeon or a bandage. Hearing that Minneapolis was a bastion of high-minded progressivism was *always* a disturbing case of selective blindness, where blame was given not to the underlying problems in Minneapolis, but to the incoming people of other urban cores (Myers, 2020). This could be shifting blame to avoid confronting the city's past, or it could be a product of how these objectively violent conditions blend into the background of what is seen as normal.

Yet, many cannot resist the impulse to think of the "summer of racial reckoning" as something unprecedented and unique in the history of movements for social justice, and why should they not? The confluence of several factors made much of what happened in Minneapolis very difficult to anticipate. How might we come to understand the 2020 riots in Minneapolis beyond describing the long-standing undercurrents of objective violence?

Here is where I finally return to Slavoj Žižek. When one looks at the 2020 riots in Minneapolis as the violent result of the confluence of several events that exacerbate existing inequalities, we can already see Žižek's typology at work: the focus on the 2020 riots in Minneapolis as this difficult-to-anticipate outburst of unprecedented scale matches what Žižek identifies as one of the key difficulties of grappling with violence: in examining one kind of violence (subjective or objective), the other is temporarily obscured in some way—one cannot analyze subjective violence in detail without obscuring the underlying objective violence, just as dispassionately examining objective violence obscures the traumatic authenticity of subjective violence. In speaking of redlining, segregation, urban renewal, and housing development projects, it is too easy to conceive of all of these problems as abstract causes, when very real suffering is involved in their implementation and perpetuation. Analyzing George Floyd's murder as both a result and a catalyst for future change re-conceptualizes his death far beyond the gritty reality a nine minute and twenty-nine second video can directly show. It is difficult to keep both realities in mind at the same time, but *even in the attempt* one would still not find any kind of lasting solution.

In "A Blood-Dimmed Tide Is Loosed," Žižek mentions an event that shares many of the features with the 2020 riots in Minneapolis: the French suburban riots of 2005, which "saw thousands of cars burning and a major outburst of public violence" (Žižek, 74). For some background, local police were called on the 27th of October, 2005, to investigate a break-in at a construction site. Several youths, returning from a football game, saw the local police nearby and scattered, seeking to avoid the common occurrence of youths in the area—who are predominantly of North or sub-Saharan African descent—

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being stopped or detained for hours for identification purposes. Three youths hid in a

power substation, and only a few minutes later, two were fatally electrocuted: Zyed

Benna and Bouna Traoré. The third, Muhittin Altun, was hospitalized with injuries

(Crampton, 2005). Shortly after this incident, riots broke out and quickly spread to

several other suburbs in France, and eventually to all large urban areas (*aires urbaines*).

While analysts and media figures commented on causes of this outrage—be it high

unemployment, police brutality, or a lack of integration—Žižek offered a novel view:

> The parallels with May '68 make clear the total absence of any positive utopian prospect among the protesters: if May '68 was a revolt with a utopian vision, the 2005 revolt was just an outburst with no pretence to vision... There were no particular demands made by the protesters in the Paris suburbs. There was only an insistence on *recognition*, based on a vague, unarticulated *ressentiment*. Most of those interviewed talked about how unacceptable it was that the then interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, had called them "scum." In a weird self-referential short-circuit, they were protesting against the very reaction to their protests. (Žižek, 75)

> Žižek argues that the Paris suburban riots demanded nothing. Doubtlessly, many

things *could* have been demanded rather specifically—and indeed, many intellectuals and

analysts tried to understand the riots in the context of ongoing social problems that should

be addressed. Žižek here cautions against what he calls the "hermeneutic temptation": the

impulse to search for a deeper or hidden meaning in these outbursts of subjective

violence. Rather, he argues that it is precisely these outbursts' *meaninglessness* that is

worth note. Referring to Jacques Lacan's *passage à l'acte* (transl. "acting out")—an

untranslatable impulsive act defined by an intolerable sense of frustration—Žižek argues

that these riots demonstrate not only the impotence of the rioters, but more importantly

"the lack of what cultural analyst Fredric Jameson has called 'cognitive mapping,' an

inability to locate the experience of their situation within a meaningful whole" (Žižek,

76). Part of what indicates the lack of cognitive mapping Žižek mentions is how the riots of 2005 in France and of 2020 in Minneapolis precisely played out: the protestors burned, destroyed, and damaged property that was overwhelmingly their own, or belonged to their community—not to the richer neighborhoods or to the state. It is one thing for an outraged group of protestors to mass graffiti banks and stock exchanges, and set fire to wealthy day-traders' cars—where one could infer the *meaning* and purpose of the act from its targets. It is quite another for a dissatisfied group of protestors to burn their own businesses, homes, and vehicles. Rather than trying to untangle the perplexing question of why they would burn their own stuff, Žižek echoes Marshall McLuhan in positing that the medium itself is the message: hence why he concludes that the particularity of the riot of 2005 resulted from directionless frustration, from a desire to be *recognized*.

This is why answering *why* these riots happened is rather difficult, or at the very least requires an extreme amount of detail—it is not as simple as some titanic event of injustice, or the material and social force of ideology motivating mass protest and uprising. These are spontaneous *passages à l'acte* (lit. "passage to the act") which destroy the underlying social bond between the subject and *the symbolic* (law, social norms, language). These are not only riots, but riots born out of a flat *rejection* of what they riot against, a rejection of an integration system that otherizes those who are not French citizens, and the rejection of a justice system which continues to fail non-white Americans. The ambient objective violence that greatly fueled the rioters' frustration and anxieties may very well catalyze the "passage" between the rioters' underlying frustrations and the eventual violent "act."

In Lacanian terms, these events are aggressive departures from the big Other (the symbolic order) to the dimension of the Real (subjective reality): a lack of cognitive mapping—of understanding precisely why you are "acting out"—involves this retreat from the broader symbolic place of one's self and one's actions, to the immediate and simple subjective reality. If you cannot situate your actions in symbolic terms, in its social, political, or cultural meaning, then the passage between the intention and the action is not mediated by the symbolic, or indeed any kind of mentalization (the understanding of *why* you are acting). The action becomes an act of blind frustration, and if only for a moment, the subject *becomes* an object as the distance between their intention and its corresponding action collapses.

To put it in more conventional language, these riots are more than just over-boiling frustration: they are *rejections* of the system that is the cause of their anxiety. In France, part of the riots' cause was not merely the lack of integration of these suburban communities, but the underlying "exclusionary normativeness" of the model itself. As Žižek notes, the French government distinguished citizens from "indigenes," suggesting a "primitive part of the population not yet mature enough to deserve full citizenship." This is why the rioters' cry for recognition "also implies a rejection of the very framework through which recognition takes place. It is a call for the construction of a new universal framework" (Žižek, 78). That framework of recognition is the big Other that the subject categorically rejects, and the subject—having rejected the very language and law used to describe them—acts blindly, almost as if in a psychotic break. This is what is meant by the subject becoming an object: their act is not mentalized—rationalized as an act with a precise cause—so they act without thinking, going only off of their frustration. One

might think of this logic as one's intentions being filtered or molded by the symbolic, and then given real form in the action. So what happens when the symbolic filter/mold is rejected? This is the distance between the intention and act collapsing, the result of which is this *shattering* perturbation of the status quo. Frustration, rather than being channeled through challenges *within* the symbolic order, *within* the boundaries of law or sociocultural norms, is instead channeled directly.

The same goes for Minneapolis: it should be uncontroversial to claim that the riots were against racial injustice, ultimately—but to many, it was also a rejection of the system through which justice was, is, and could be delivered; a system that failed and still fails to combat racist objective violence—a system that *always* ends up failing America's minority populations in some way, even when you put better people in charge, change this or that law, or attempt this or that social program. The imposition of *difference*—the ways in which society, culture, and law *other*ize groups of people—is baked into the operatic structure of our symbolic order, a structure that these rioters rejected because it continues by its very design to not only fail them, but actively harm them.

Žižek reflects that riots like these take place in what Alain Badiou called a "worldless" social space: essentially a world without any organizing or central principles or points of engagement with greater meaning—no narrative ideology to structure views of the future, or a global "cognitive mapping" that helps one find a totalizing meaning in the occurrences of the world (Badiou, 2003). May '68 was an outburst with a utopian vision—the struggles of workers and students with a revolutionary fervor against an aging and repressive state sat squarely in the narrative ideologies of the twentieth century. The demands for a new, progressive socialist state was not just an aspiration of a few

motivated individuals but a legitimate political threat to the French government,

motivated by thousands of deeply ideological people who saw within their protests an act

of deeply meaningful purpose. But in a worldless space, the only form protest can take is

that of meaninglessness, because there is little possibility of creating some kind of

narrative meaning, by locating one's struggle as part of a whole (e.g., May '68 as part of

the ideological conflict with capitalism) (Žižek, 79).

One might be tempted to argue that the 2020 riots in Minneapolis *did* have

demands informed and organized by some project of greater meaning: police reform,

anti-police brutality, etc. Strictly speaking, this is not untrue—there were several protests

in the summer of 2020 that demanded several things: the prosecution of Derek Chauvin,

the end to no-knock warrants and qualified immunity, the end to racial inequality

generally, and so on. But these demands were not the motivating force behind the

burnings of local businesses in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, less than a day after George

Floyd's murder, nor would the existence of these demands beforehand have quelled the

frustrated outcry that ignited so many buildings. The *passage a l'acte* is impulsive,

defined by the weight of frustration more than reason. Perhaps the act is mentalized post-

hoc, but in the moment of the act itself, it is blind.

So what should we conclude from the particular *meaninglessness* of these riots?

Our first solution, as Žižek notes, is to recognize both the standard stock conservative and

liberal analyses as insufficient: the riots of 2005 or 2020 are not *merely* because of law

and order, cultural incompatibility, or lack of respect for authority, nor is it *merely*

because of a lack of investment, failed integration, or ailing social programs. Rather,

there is something far more fundamental at work in the process by which these riots'

causes are not being addressed: the enforcement of difference, of drawing and re-drawing

the line between yourself and the encroaching, threatening Other, whether that be race,

culture, nationality, and so on.

To examine this, Žižek criticizes problems with "liberal tolerance" as a solution to

social problems, as a way of demonstrating that this problem requires something

fundamentally different. He asks,

> Why are so many problems today perceived as problems of intolerance, rather
> than as problems of inequality, exploitation, or injustice? Why is the proposed
> remedy tolerance, rather than emancipation, political struggle, even armed
> struggle? The immediate answer lies in the liberal multiculturalist's basic
> ideological operation: the "culturalisation of politics."...The cause of this
> culturalisation is the retreat, the failure of direct political solutions such as the
> Welfare State or various socialist projects. Tolerance is their post-political ersatz.
> (Žižek, 140).

To Žižek, tolerance was supposed to be a kind of solution to the imposition of

difference, which is at the heart of his notion of violence. The conflict with the Other—

with that which is not me—might be mediated by *tolerating* the Other, by acknowledging

it on equal footing, so to speak. You can see that which is different from you—a person

of a different race, gender, creed, or a place or object that evokes this feeling of

queerness—and rather than trying to fight it or run away from it, you merely

acknowledge its existence. However, such a solution only ends up reinforcing the

difference between me and the Other; to tolerate it is to draw a line in the sand, which the

Other must respect—the difference between me and the Other must remain clear. It is this

very line that delineates me from the Other; tolerance thus *sustains* the difference

between us, rather than bridging it. If the Other crosses the line (if it becomes

intolerable), then I have to *enforce* that difference and redraw the line. How else would I

do so without violence? "In short, the Other is just fine, but only insofar as his presence is not intrusive, insofar as this Other is not really other..." (Žižek, 41).

The result of tolerance is a kind of step-in-place, with only the appearance of progress. The nominally post-ideological age we live in still separates us by difference, but moreso on the grounds of culture than ideology or nationalism: hence, the "culturalization of politics," or "the politicization of culture." Liberalism elevates culture and privatizes it as one's personal beliefs and practices, rather than communal or social norms—but if it is indeed culture that defines difference in a post-ideological world, "the inevitable conclusion [of liberalism] is that the only way to overcome intolerance and violence is to extricate the core of the subject's being, its universal essence, from culture:" the subject has to become cultureless. To put it another way, liberalism conceives of the subject as universal, of being capable of stepping outside one's personal, cultural, and social roots and "asserting his full autonomy and universality." This cultureless assertion of the self is "precisely a 'multicultural' experience of how one's own tradition is no better than what appears to us the 'eccentric' traditions of others" (Žižek, 142). It is the means by which the liberal individual comes to ostensibly regard other cultures as not inherently inferior. Many of us have had a thought not unlike this: "if I was in *their* shoes, what would change about me?" If this process intrinsic to the liberal cultureless subject is the only way to overcome intolerance *of other cultures*, then how would a non-liberal culture overcome intolerance?

It is not difficult to see the problem with liberalism here: if tolerance emerges from this view of the universal subject as cultureless—despite being a Western cultural invention—then the only means to enforce tolerance is through ontological violence, of

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establishing the dominance or hegemony of the liberal universal subject over others. "Liberalism itself thus privileges a certain culture: the modern Western one" (Žižek, 144). Difference is imposed not through the form of violent subjugation or segregation, but instead through the form of tolerance. In the simplest terms, one needs only think of how someone would feel if one walked up to them and said, "I tolerate the difference between you and me, inasmuch as it does not threaten me." When the Other threatens liberal tolerance, it becomes a target of destruction by its very incompatibility, i.e., liberalism's defense of tolerance requires the violent enforcement of the difference between it and everything else.

We can see this play out today, in deceptively simple ways. In San Francisco, an overwhelmingly blue Democratic city, voters nonetheless helped pass and support traditionally conservative "tough-on-crime" policies, like increasing penalties for drug and property crimes, screening welfare recipients for drug use, and policies designed to displace or move the homeless (Demko, White, and Beeferman 2024). These Democrats claim they do not hate the poor, the homeless, or those who use drugs—they just do not want to see them in public. What could be a better exemplar of the failure of liberal tolerance than this? When the Other starts living in a tent, or publicly using drugs, the tolerant liberal says "not in my backyard!" and demands they get out of view. It is their visibility that reminds the liberal that they are surrounded by and saturated with violence: if they are out of sight, however, then they are out of mind. When the Other cannot extricate themselves from public society entirely, the liberal embraces violence: arrest and imprison them, screen them for drugs, deny them public aid—in essence, "get them

out of my backyard." What else would people crave aside from *recognition* if they are ignored for far too long?

Žižek identifies, correctly in my view, that tolerance is part of the matrix of violence: it is the assertion of difference. A salve for difference, then, is not found in tolerating the Other. The justice that has yet to be realized for the minority communities of Minneapolis and the broader United States is not going to be achieved through only the formal freedom granted to non-whites by law and policy, but by an insistent and riotous commitment to functional equality-liberty: *égaliberté*. Just as the liberal universal subject reinforces difference through tolerating the Other, the act of providing dead-end charter schools and urban renewal projects is the means by which the liberal state pretends to mediate difference between the people the state has failed and dispossessed, and all it results in is the reinforcement of that very difference. When the minority communities and their allies then riot and start setting things on fire, they represent too strong of a threat to the tolerant minds of the liberal state, and need to be pacified by force. The liberal abhors these riots because it reveals the "true locus of trouble:" the deeper objective and symbolic violences that tolerance helps sustain (Žižek, 10). Hence why our attention is always drawn towards subjective outbursts of violence—it creates this feeling of immediacy and urgency of needing to deal with these threats so that things can return to their calm, peaceful, and *profoundly violent* normal. Yet, things will seem perfectly fine in my backyard, as long as the violence and reminders of its existence are out of sight, for that makes it much easier to tolerate.

This is why protests in the post-ideological age necessarily take on this form of meaninglessness. Protest is unable to obtain a cognitive mapping that permits any threat

to civility and tolerance, despite the violence imposed on the protestors by the very "functioning of our economic and political systems" (Žižek, 2). Any subjectively violent perturbation of what is viewed as the zero-level normal state-of-affairs will obscure the objective violence the liberal system is categorically incapable of fixing, because the true mediation of difference cannot be done in the hands of such a system committed to ignoring or isolating the violence rather than addressing its causes. Even in the hands of well-meaning people, they would rather try to hide or obscure the Other's intrusion into their reality then embrace Otherness and attempt to dissolve the difference between them.

It would not be strange to ask what one could do in the face of such a conclusion. To that question, Žižek endorses a possible way out of our ideologico-political predicament: *divine violence.*

CHAPTER III: VIOLENCE AS THE DOMAIN OF LOVE

Firstly, what is *divine violence*? What makes an act of violence *divine*? Žižek borrows the term from Walter Benjamin, who in his "Critique of Violence" discusses the "mythic violence" inherent to the preservation of law and the "divine violence" which can overcome it. Benjamin uses the word divine because he at first means it literally; God's awful power *annihilates* completely, and without warning—leaving not even blood behind—as with the company of Korah, all of them consumed by the heavenly fire of their incense pans. Yet, this is not retributive violence done only to punish, for God spares their souls, and expiates them by accepting their sacrifice (Benjamin, 250).

Yet the precise significance of the concept of divine violence can only be understood by contextualizing it in Benjamin's broader critique. He first asks, of violence in the context of legal theory, why the state is so interested in maintaining its monopoly on violence, arguing that it "is explained not by the intention of preserving legal ends but, rather, by the intention of preserving the law itself" (Benjamin, 239). In other words, it is not necessarily that violence in the hands of non-state actors threatens the state's goals, rather, it threatens the very institution of law itself. The state wants its monopoly on the legitimate use of force not so that it can achieve its goals unimpeded, but so it can maintain its very legitimacy.

Strikes are a good (and perhaps still the only) example of an instance of someone other than the state being permitted to exercise legitimate violence, under specific conditions the state permits. Hence, when a strike is not being committed "as intended" by the right to strike, the state can take emergency measures to end the strike and reassert its monopoly on violence. Perplexingly, these strikes do not need to be literally, directly

violent for the state to feel as though their monopoly on violence is threatened. Rather, the state abhors the idea of its own impotence, and so seeks to preserve the law.

Violence outside of the state, potentially like that of the strikers, is not law-preserving, but is rather lawmaking: "[t]he strike shows, however…that it is able to found and modify legal conditions, however offended the sense of justice may find itself thereby" (Benjamin, 240). Lawmaking is, beyond literally drafting and passing law, the imposition of rules or legal conditions that should be honored. Because the state desires legitimacy, inasmuch as the state desires anything, it will not permit any lawmaking that genuinely threatens its monopoly on the legitimate use of force. The state is of course capable of lawmaking with unchallenged legitimacy; the actions of police are a good example of this. "[T]he 'law' of the police really marks the point at which the state… can no longer guarantee through the legal system the empirical ends that it desires at any price to attain. Therefore, the police intervene 'for security reasons' in countless cases where no clear legal situation exists" (Benjamin, 243). Both the preservation and making of law is in the hands of the state. As Benjamin states, "all violence *as a means* is either lawmaking or law-preserving[,]" and in the state's case, it is a means of maintaining that monopoly and thereby its legitimacy.

Building from law-preserving and lawmaking violence, Benjamin introduces *mythic violence*, a violence that "is not a means but a manifestation[,]" a sign of God's power and existence (or, less allegorically, a sign of the state's/powerful people's power and existence). While mythic violence *can* be a manifestation of the *will* of God (Power, writ large), it is most often simply the threat inherent to his existence, and of the existence of his law. Benjamin elucidates this with the myth of Niobe as written in the

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Iliad, where her prideful boasting to Leto of her many children causes Apollo and

Artemis to slay all fourteen of them; Niobe tempts fate, and fate responds by violently

asserting itself around her, yet leaving her intact. It is this manifestation of fate that drives

Niobe mad with grief and guilt, causing her to flee to Mount Sipylus where she turns to

stone and weeps, for all time. Mythic violence is that kind of lawmaking violence where

"at [the] very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end

unalloyed by violence but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of

power" (Benjamin, 248). This is the mythical-legal violence the state employs on the

strikers, where the demonstration of the state's capacity for violence is not a means as

much as it is the very point of the act. It is a demonstration that the state is

insurmountable, like fate or God. The means of state violence is its own end;

alternatively, one might say that the medium of violence is also its very message.

 With this in mind, how does one conquer the state, fate, or God? Through divine

violence, a *law-destroying* violence—a redemptive cataclysm that destroys, yet shrives of

sin. As Benjamin writes,

> If mythic violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former
> sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at
> once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the
> latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood…
> Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence
> is pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice;
> the second accepts it (Benjamin, 249-250).

 Divine violence's domain is that of sovereignty, "the domain within which killing

is neither an expression of personal pathology…nor a crime…nor a sacred sacrifice. It is

neither aesthetic, ethical, nor religious[.]" The divine strikes at the guilty—the truly

guilty—purifying them not of their guilt but of law, for law is the domain of "mere life,"

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of that base and unremarkable material condition of humanity (in contrast to something more transcendental about humanity, such as a soul). Law "cannot reach beyond life to touch what is in excess of life, what is more than mere life" (Žižek, 198). This is what is meant when God expiates Korah and his company of *law*; He renders them beyond mere life into that of divinity, and thus beyond mortal law. Divine violence does not seek to punish anyone for their sins, transgressions, or the injustices they may have created; "it is just the sign of the injustice of the world, of the world being ethically 'out of joint.'" (Žižek, 200). Divine violence is an *event*, where all of the injustices suffered over decades or even centuries break open a dam, letting loose the blood-dimmed tide of violent redemption.

Žižek and Benjamin, and I suppose myself as well, are not writing abstrusely or poetically about divine violence just for fun; the very notion of divine violence, Žižek argues, is that of a sign without objective meaning, and we can only make sidelong glances at it. There are not objective conditions we can point to, such as the presence of physical injury, negative externalities, etc. to identify divine violence the way one can with Galtung or Bourdieu's notions of violence. "The risk of reading and assuming [violence] as divine is fully the subject's own." Divine violence is not the literal act of the divine punishing humanity for our sins, rather, it is the very demonstration *"of God's (the big Other's) own impotence"* (Žižek, 200-201). Divine violence happens when Power (state, God, the big Other, etc.), having insisted upon its own invincibility, quickly comes to realize that it cannot stand against a tide dimmed with the residue of sacrifice: blood, the sign of mere life.

To understand this better, we should return to the blind *passage à l'acte* we identified with France in 2005 and Minneapolis in 2020. That these events are blind—spurred by overwhelming frustration and anxieties until bursting with directionless rage—"bears witness to the impotence of the perpetrators," to their ultimate powerlessness in the face of mythical-legal violence (Žižek, 76). The gap between the rioters' intentions and their actions is not mediated by a cognitive mapping, so it *snaps* together like an elastic band in a mental break where intention and action become one. In the process, it is as though the rioters are childishly acting out, flailing at the fact that they are powerless, expressing their anxiety and anger as random acts of violence. These acts are close to possessing the feature of divinity, save for one crucial distinction: "All that changes between divine violence and a blind *passage à l'acte* is the site of impotence" (Žižek, 201). In the impotent *passage à l'acte*, there is only "reaction to a disturbing intruder," revealing how powerless one is in the face of intrusion. In contrast, the radical-emancipatory politics of those that seek *égaliberté* is the active, authentic political gesture which imposes and enforces a vision against a seemingly untouchable enemy like an act of God: *divine violence* as such (Žižek, 212). In simpler terms, the divinity of violence is experienced as one's violent impulse against injustice overcoming the strongest agents of the symbolic order (the state, culture, etc.), revealing their impotence in the face of the divine; in failure, it is the impotence of the rioter and the revolutionary that is revealed.

When Robespierre demanded the execution of Louis XVI, he said that peoples do not hand down sentences; they throw down thunderbolts. They do not condemn Kings, but instead toss them into the void. This kind of thunder-smiting void-tossing violence

becomes divine when it is motivated not by vengeance or petty envy, but by a sublime feeling of love. Hence why Žižek also mentions Robespierre's speech before his execution, where he proclaims that there exists in "feeling and pure" souls a "compassionate zeal for the oppressed, that sacred love for the homeland, that even more sublime and holy love for humanity," and in two passages by Che Guevara where he writes two seemingly contradictory statements: "the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love" and "a people without hatred cannot vanquish a brutal enemy." This is not, despite appearances, contradictory when one considers Che's motto which unites these two ideas: "one must endure, become hard, toughen oneself, without losing tenderness." Divine violence is thus, as Žižek says, in the domain of love (Žižek, 203). It is good, divine wrath violently destroying the law-preserving mythico-legal violence in favor of preserving that sacred, transcendental notion of humanity. I do not mean that in a religious or spiritual sense, though one might take it that way if they so choose—what I mean precisely is that this violence manifests as a cataclysmic destruction of injustice, undertaken to assert that humanity is more than "mere life," more than our basic material needs and desires: we are vibrant, brilliant, and capable of making our own choices, of revealing the secrets of the world, of creating incomparable works of art, of cooperating and joining together in celebration of our legacy and future. This radical domain of violence-as-love, what we might poetically evoke as the wrath of God, longs for humanity to be free, for the injustices that inhibit us to be torn down, and for absolute power to exist not for its own sake or in the hands of a repressive state. The divine terror of God longs for humanity to realize its potential, a potential which is unjustly restricted by the coercion of law, which exercises its power over mere life.

In much more practical terms, divine violence is an emancipatory violence which swiftly tears down injustice in a radical defiance of the law's power to coerce us, and in the process reveals the impotence of law, the potency of human will, and an unconditional, radical love of humanity. This does not mean that all legal systems worldwide are suddenly overthrown by the divine, nor does it even imply the transition to another lawmaking body—it is just the event where the violent come closest to the love that characterizes the divine, no matter how inconsequential or small. Žižek recalls a chaotic event in Brazil to help illustrate this:

> Recall, a decade or so ago, the panic in Rio de Janeiro when crowds descended from the favelas into the rich part of the city and started looting and burning supermarkets. This was indeed divine violence ... They were like biblical locusts, the divine punishment for men's sinful ways. This divine violence strikes out of nowhere, a means without end[.] (Žižek, 202).

The divinely violent crowds of Rio de Janeiro descending like biblical locusts are just like the rioters in France of 2005, or in Minneapolis of 2020, with one crucial distinction. Amidst a deep-seated frustration against injustice, protestors emerged so quickly and so unexpectedly to make themselves known by whatever means would make God meet their gaze—as if Niobe returned and rejected the fate imposed upon her, and forced Artemis and Apollo to look into her eyes so that they *could not pretend* she was not there. The difference is only that the attempts of 2005 and 2020 were ultimately impotent by the end, as if Artemis and Apollo humiliated Niobe by cutting out her eyes so she could no longer weep.

Even in their impotence, these happenings can at least teach us something about the kind of world that we live in, a world where our defiant assertions of a desire for human value and dignity in the face of an ailing justice system are met with repression

and law-preserving violence at its worst, and a failure to truly sit back and *think* at its

best. Specifically, the Minneapolis riots of 2020 can, as with other events which mirror

its queerness, teach us the three-fold lesson Žižek concludes *Violence* with:

Firstly, to claim that all acts of violence are, without exception, morally wrong, is

a profoundly ideological claim: "an ideological operation par excellence, a mystification

which collaborates in rendering invisible the fundamental forms of social violence"

(Žižek, 206). To claim that all the rioters' violence in Minneapolis was wrong is to

obscure the reality that violence saturates everything we touch in some way, and is

inherent even to our very language, contained within the locus of the big Other…the very

means by which we impose difference to make sense of the symbolic. Secondly, it is

rarer than one might think that a violent event truly disrupts society in such a way as to

"disturb the basic parameters of social life" by its very daring character. These rare

acts—perhaps *passages à l'acte* unto themselves—reach but never grasp the

emancipation of divine violence, because the instigators misconstrue the antagonisms and

contradictions of social or political life as the work of an Other: Jews, foreigners, traitors,

or any group of people one would wish to blame, thus losing sight of the true *divinity* of

divine violence, which is the domain of love. The true politics of radical emancipation

blame no one—it only strives to tear down injustice, born of a love for human potential.

When organized not as an affirmative project for human emancipation, but instead as a

reactive project designed to eliminate an apparent threat to it, real *égaliberté* becomes

unattainable. Finally, violence is not a property of actions that we do or do not undertake;

violence is "distributed between acts and their contexts, between activity and inactivity"

(Žižek, 213). Hence why violence "saturates" what we touch, literally or figuratively, and

comes to be seen as violent not because of its features, but because of everything around it. The state and its agents do not see their actions as politically motivated violence despite them sharing the features of the non-state violence that they *do* see as violent.

These insights do not provide a solution to all social and political problems, nor do they provide an actionable solution to the very existence of injustice—but they provide a notion of violence that is demystified, and critical of the very ways we conceive of and discuss violence. Žižek's typology of violence gives us a way of understanding the dynamics of violence in this particular post-ideological, postmodern time: cognizant and deeply critical of liberal tolerance as just another imposition of difference to be found within the matrix of violence, yet aware that, even in the very attempt to do *something* rather than nothing, insights can be found that may one day liberate us all. And with divine violence—with its sublime redemptiveness and emancipatory potential—there is at least some kind of conceivable *break* from this predicament, as hard as it may be to envision, and as terrible and *Other* its target must become.

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