

many people's minds. Naomi Klein, in her book *This Changes Everything*, names capitalism as being responsible for climate change, which is important, yet she backs off this insight with too many qualifications and ultimately recommends primarily reformist solutions. Rather than addressing how capitalism is inherently an anti-ecological social and economic force, she blames "unregulated capitalism" and leaves the reader believing that a Green capitalism is a possibility; that reforms can solve the problem. It is this type of muddled, misdirected thinking that the organizers of the Wall Street Action sought to counter. We need to talk about how climate politics really does change everything, and just how profound a restructuring of society is required.

We can learn much from the experience of the Youth Greens, and the Earth Day Wall Street Action. The politics they advanced, based in directly democratic process, is now common among radicals. The Youth Greens' understanding of the interconnections between various forms of oppression, and that the ecological crisis stems from the crisis in society, is widespread. But how do we translate that into a sustained movement to transform society? How do we maintain our movements when people stop showing up? How do we build institutions to weather the inevitable lulls in activity? How do we go on, despite the odds, and the pulls of needing to survive, to pay the bills, in a society that leaves so little room for devoting oneself to working for change? These are some of the questions we need to address and that today's movement against police violence, for example, must answer.

One thing we can draw from the experience of the Youth Greens is the importance of forming study groups. Study groups can help organizers to develop

collective understandings and political cohesion, while countering isolation and despair. Study groups can also lay the basis for growing into political collectives that can take action together, and confederate and work with other collectives.

The Youth Greens lasted about four years, but we need to develop political organizations that can continue when movement activity dies down. Between upsurges, it's important to have groups of radicals and revolutionaries that have a common analysis, and can act together when people begin to mobilize. Having revolutionaries in organizations can have a positive influence on the development of new insurgencies.

The Earth Day Wall Street Action, like the later Seattle protests against the WTO, the Occupy movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement, demonstrates the way in which militant direct action can influence public consciousness. In the case of the Wall Street Action, the following morning newspapers across the country proclaimed thousands of people turned out to indict capitalism for environmental problems, and helped counter the corporate attempt to Greenwash Earth Day.

Today, we need an ecological movement against capitalism even more than we did 25 years ago. Looking back at the Wall Street Action, we can look forward to the future.

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## After Ferguson, We Must Ask:

# Who Owns the Streets?

by Brentin Mock

There's been much discussion about whether the ill-fated encounter between the teenager Michael Brown and Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson was the result of racism, police brutality, Brown's own rebelliousness, or some combination thereof. There's been less discussion about whether Wilson ever needed to approach Brown to begin with.

According to Wilson's grand jury testimony, he was driving his police-issued Chevy Tahoe down Canfield Drive, where the speed limit is 25 mph, when he rolled up on Brown and his friend Dorian Johnson walking in the middle of the road. The young men told Wilson they were close to their destination, a Canfield Green apartment.

For many people, this defiant act of jaywalking alone puts Brown and his friend in the wrong. But given the tragic outcome — Wilson killing Brown after a reported altercation between the two — it's worth unpacking why

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## Before the car became king, streets were for all users

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walking in the street was ever seen as a crime or a threat at all.

Of course, duh, public safety. Confining foot activity to the sidewalks is standard law in most cities and states, and understandably. But that doesn't totally explain Wilson's first encounter with Brown in those streets — not on a 25 mph road in an apartment complex.

The fact is that these kinds of traffic and public space regulations have been abused in America for a long time, and for two main reasons: To grant supremacy to those who can afford to drive, and to criminalize people and activities deemed undesirable.

It raises the question: Just whom do these streets belong to, anyway?

On the first point, car supremacy, it wasn't always this way.

"Before the car became king, streets were for all users," planner Matt Johnson wrote in a blog post in 2014 on the history of jaywalking. "Pedestrians could just stride right out into the street. Traffic on the street, horses, streetcars, and motor cars moved at very slow speeds."

Peter Norton, a history professor at the University of Virginia, also wrote about how jaywalking came about in his book, *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City*. "If you

ask people today what a street is for, they will say cars," Norton told Sarah Goodyear for CityLab. "That's practically the opposite of what they would have said 100 years ago."

Both Norton and Johnson explain that traffic laws originally worked to protect pedestrians, even as foot traffic shared street space with car traffic. Meaning, the burden was on drivers not to hurt walkers. But as more cars hit the road, people drove faster, mowing down pedestrians in the process.

Instead of finding ways to calm road rage, however, the auto industry launched a campaign called "Motordom" that faulted pedestrians for getting themselves hit by cars. Johnson writes that a public relations guru named E. B. Lefferts came up with the concept — "a radical idea: don't blame cars, blame human recklessness." We still get whiffs of this today: Guns don't kill people. People kill people.

It's from that logic that we get jaywalking, a term used early on to describe country gawkers fumbling through city streets while fawning at city buildings. The term was enshrined in Cincinnati, after the auto industry defeated a citizen-led petition in 1923 to put 25 mph caps on car speed in response to rising vehicular killings of pedestrians. Car companies, helped along by the American Automobile Association, convinced the city to instead make it a crime for people to walk in the streets.

In an interview, Norton said the auto industry was allowed to redefine what "the street" meant, producing winners and losers in the process.

"The people in the immediate neighborhoods were the losers, and the outsiders driving in with their cars were the winners," said Norton. "They got

to say to people living in the neighborhoods, 'Hey, the streets are ours, stay out of them.'"

The creation of jaywalking laws was not so much about public safety as it was about handing the streets over to the growing Chevy empire. It's been ingrained in our heads ever since that the streets belong to the have-wheels, not the have-nots.

When I called the Canfield Green apartments in Ferguson, where Wilson stopped Brown, the property manager (who elected not to share her name) told me, "The thing is, [the Brown killing] didn't happen on our property. We don't own the street, we just own the buildings on either side."

The property manager might be technically correct, in that the city regulates and maintains the street(s). But the idea that the Canfield residents

have no ownership claim in the tar-paved surfaces of their neighborhoods unless they have a vehicle brings a whole new icky meaning to the great American phrase "Don't tread on me."

"Too often, roads that function as communities' main streets are fast-moving and lack adequate pedestrian infrastructure such as wide sidewalks,

frequently spaced crosswalks, and pedestrian refuges," Mary Luran Hall of the Alliance for Biking and Walking told me. "These are characteristics that we often see in neighborhoods that face a historic lack of investment."

She pointed to the case of Raquel Nelson as an example of car supremacy gone completely awry. Nelson, an African-American woman, was charged with homicide after a driver on a road in an Atlanta suburb killed her son in 2013. She was crossing with her son to get to a bus stop on the other side of the street.

"Who was really at fault here," asked Hall, "a mom trying to get to the bus, or a transportation network that is not designed to keep families safe?"

The Nelson case is an example of the other major abuse of public traffic/space that I referenced:

The criminalization of those whom society has deemed undesirable.

For much of the 20th century, police used jaywalking and loitering laws to jail or remove marginalized people from

public spaces under the arbitrary precept of "vagrancy." It was often wealthy whites who pushed police to enforce these vagrancy codes to get immigrants, women of the night, African Americans, hippies, and the homeless out of their sight.

Today, in many cities, planners and developers are building neighborhoods with the optimization of walking and biking freedoms in mind. According to Hall, this is partially in response to the over-criminalization of petty crimes like jaywalking.

"Nationally, we're seeing increased attention to mass imprisonment and along with it, some states are passing measures that redirect police attention from small, nonviolent crimes," Hall added. "As our

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transportation landscape shifts — and as public officials hopefully place a higher priority on keeping walkers safe — walking advocates are increasingly encouraging police departments to punish the behavior that is the most harmful to human safety.”

Walking down a neighborhood street would not qualify as a “most harmful” activity.

Geoff Anderson, president of Smart Growth America, points to Hawaii as a state where people still share the streets with cars, and it works fine, mainly because the speed limits there are really low.

Smart Growth America’s annual “Best Complete Streets” reports offer solutions for how cities can “break down the traditional separation between highways, transit, walking, and bicycling, and instead focus on the desired outcome of a

transportation system that supports safe use of the roadway for everyone.”

Which is all to say that Michael Brown did not have to die, because Officer Wilson did not need to stop him.

When viewed in the racial and historical context of vagrancy laws and even present-day stop-and-frisk policies, Wilson’s approach looked less like protecting and serving, and more like abusing and overpowering. The encounter didn’t have to end the way it did, and it didn’t have to begin as it did, either.

Brentin Mock is *Grist*’s justice editor. Follow him on Twitter at @brentinmock.

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## McDonald’s in Old Havana?

by Marce Cameron

“I want to see Cuba before everything changes,” is how many reacted to Barack Obama’s surprise December 17, 2014, announcement that he would restore diplomatic relations with Cuba—severed by the US in 1961—and urge Congress to lift the US blockade.

Seeing Cuba for oneself can only be encouraged, but those who fear that it will soon be transformed by American tourists, US corporations and commercialism need not rush to book flights.

Hordes of American tourists and a hotel boom to accommodate them may well be inevitable, but a US corporate invasion is not. Fears or hopes that Obama’s new Cuba policy will unleash a US corporate take-over and cultural recolonization are unfounded. These fears and hopes are based on the dubious assumption that what holds back the tide of capitalist restoration on the Cuban archipelago is, ironically, the US blockade.

Were this assumption to hold water, we would have to credit the US blockade with Cuba’s tenacious independence and dogged commitment to socialism. That would be absurd: the blockade is a gross violation of Cuba’s right to self-determination.

It has succeeded in undermining, distorting and stunting Cuba’s socialist project.

This is why Cuba’s socialist government has always demanded the lifting of the blockade.

In reality, what holds back the tide of capitalist restoration that presses in from outside (and wells up from within) is not the US blockade. It is the Cuban Revolution.

### Obama’s stance

Obama knows this, which is why he pledged that lifting the blockade—which, he pointed out, has failed to bring US-style “democracy” to Cuba—will be accompanied by US efforts to subjugate Cuba by other, less confrontational means. One such means is co-opting the emerging small business sector.

Whether Obama’s new approach to undermining the Cuban Revolution turns out to be more effective than the policy of siege and isolation

remains to be seen. As Havana University’s Jesus Arboleya argues, it is far from inevitable that the owner of a pizza shop, a flower stand or a beauty salon will abandon their commitment to Cuban independence, social justice and solidarity for the siren song of US imperialism. They are natural allies of the working class and can make a positive contribution to Cuba’s socialist transitional economy.

What is clear is that restoring US-Cuba diplomatic relations and lifting the blockade will not, in and of itself, allow US corporations to dominate Cuba once again. Nor will it trigger a wave of privatizations of Cuba’s socialist state property or an end to Cubans’ constitutional right to health care and education at all levels free of charge.

That would require the demolition or degeneration of two institutional pillars of the revolution: the Cuban

Communist Party and the socialist state it leads. That is precisely what the blockade has failed to achieve.

The failure of the blockade to destroy the revolution—and Obama’s decision to act on the recognition of this failure—should be seen for what it is: a triumph of Cuba’s working people over half a century of brutal siege by the mightiest empire in history. Rather than recognize this inconvenient truth, Obama repeated the myth that the blockade has failed to bring about Iraq-style regime change because it has “provid[ed] the Cuban government with a rationale for restrictions on its people.”

The myth that the revolution is propped up by the blockade is widespread among both liberal

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