POLITICS PROTESTS *June 1, 2020*

America's cities can't police their way out of this crisis

By Sommer Mathis

Police deployed tear gas during anti-racism demonstrations in Los Angeles over the weekend. (Mario Tama/Getty Images)

As protesters took to the streets across the United States over the weekend to express their anger at police killings of unarmed black Americans, it was hard to miss the hypocrisy coming from local authorities – including the otherwise progressive, left-leaning officials who are in power in most major American cities.

Many US mayors and their police chiefs had issued public statements over the past week that seemed – only briefly, as it turned out – to signal a meaningful shift in the extent to which the Black Lives Matters movement is being taken seriously by those who are in a position to enact reforms.

The sheer depravity of the most recent high-profile killing had left little room for equivocation. George Floyd, 46, died last Monday under the knee of white Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, while three additional officers helped to hold Floyd down, doing nothing to aid him as he begged for them to stop and eventually lost consciousness. The officers had been attempting to arrest Floyd on suspicion of having used a counterfeit $20 bill at a deli. All four have since been fired, and Chauvin was arrested Friday on charges of third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter.

"The lack of compassion, use of excessive force, or going beyond the scope of the law, doesn't just tarnish our badge—it tears at the very fabric of race relations in this country," Los Angeles Police Chief Michel Moore told the *Washington Post* in response to the Floyd case. Meanwhile Moore's boss, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, on Friday claimed that he understood why his city, which is no stranger to police brutality, was protesting. "We absolutely need as a nation, certainly as a city, to voice our outrage, it's our patriotic duty to not only stand up for George Floyd but for everybody who has been killed unnecessarily, who's been murdered for the structural racism that we have in our country," Garcetti said.

Normally, US police chiefs and mayors tend to ask citizens to withhold judgment on these types of cases until full investigations can be completed. But a 10-minute video recording of Floyd's killing had made what happened plain. Police chiefs across the country – and even the nation's largest police union, which is notorious for defending officer abuses – similarly condemned the actions of the Minneapolis officers, in a rare show of moral clarity that, combined with the arrest of Chauvin, offered at least a glimmer of hope that this time things might be different.

As the events of the weekend have since shown, that glimmer was all too fleeting.

In city after city over the past three days, US mayors and their police chiefs made a series of the same decisions – starting with the deployment of large, heavily armed riot units – that ultimately escalated violent confrontations between officers and protesters. Images widely shared on social media Saturday and Sunday nights made it clear that members of law enforcement were often initiating the worst of the violence, and appeared to treat protesters as enemy combatants, rather than citizens they were sworn to protect.

In New York City, two police SUVs were seen plowing into a crowd of protesters, while elsewhere an officer was recorded pulling down a young protester's coronavirus mask in order to pepper spray his face.

In Louisville, the city where Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old black woman was fatally shot by police on 13 March, state police in riot gear were captured confiscating and destroying protesters' supplies.

In Minneapolis, forces opened fire with nonlethal rounds on residential streets, much to the shock of homeowners standing on their own front porches.

Images of police pushing or shoving peaceful protesters were almost too numerous to count, including, in Salt Lake City, an elderly man with a cane.

In many places, police also targeted journalists who were covering the protests, firing at clearly identifiable media crews with rubber bullets, injuring and even arresting reporters.

Some protesters did commit acts of vandalism and looting, and the leaders of cities where that happened generally responded in the same ways.

First, they blamed "outside agitators" for the worst protester behaviour, a claim that harkens all the way back to the civil rights era and for which the evidence is murky at best.

Next, they enacted sudden curfews with little to no warning, which gave law enforcement an excuse to make mass arrests, in some cases violently.

In a pair of widely criticized moves, Garcetti of Los Angeles closed the city's Covid-19 testing centers and suspended the entire mass transit system Saturday evening, stranding essential workers on their way home from daytime shifts. Late Sunday night in Chicago, the city's public school system halted its free meal distribution service for low-income children, citing "the evolving nature of activity across the city".

Governors in at least 12 US states, in coordination with city leaders, have since called in National Guard troops to "help".

At this point it's clear that the leaders of America's cities are in desperate need of a radically different playbook to respond to these protests. A heavily armed, militarised response to long-simmering anger toward the heavily armed, militarised approach to American policing is more than ironic – it's ineffective. Granting police officers wider latitude to make arrests via curfews also seems destined to increase the chances of precisely the tragic, racially biased outcomes to which the protesters are reacting.

There are other options. In places such as Flint, Michigan, and Camden, New Jersey – both poor cities home to large black populations – local law enforcement officials chose to put down their weapons and march alongside protesters, rather than face off against them. In the case of Camden, that the city was able to avoid violent clashes is in no small part related to the fact that it took the drastic step of disbanding its former police department altogether several years ago, replacing it with an entirely new structure.

America's cities are in crisis, in more ways than one. It's not a coincidence that the country has tipped into chaos following months of emotionally draining stay-at-home orders and job losses that now top 40 million. Low-income Americans of colour have borne a disproportionate share of the pandemic's ravages, and public health officials are already worried about the potential for protests to become Covid-19 super-spreading events.

All of this has of course been spurred on by the US president, who in addition to calling Sunday for mayors and governors to "get tough" on protesters, has made emboldening white nationalists his signature. Notably, Trump didn't call on officials to get tough on the heavily armed white protesters who stormed the Michigan Capitol building over coronavirus stay-at-home orders just a few weeks ago.

US mayors and their police chiefs have publicly claimed that they do understand – agree with, even – the anger currently spilling out onto their streets. But as long as they continue to respond to that anger by deploying large numbers of armed and armored law enforcement personnel who do not actually live in the cities they serve, who appear to be more outraged by property damage and verbal insults than by the killings of black Americans at the hands of their peers, and who are enmeshed in a dangerously violent and racist policing culture that perceives itself to be the real victim, it is hard to see how this crisis will improve anytime soon.

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TRANSPORT CYCLING *July 10, 2020*

Cycling on London's Euston Road is still a terrifying experience

By Jonn Elledge

Cyclists on the Euston Road. Image: Jonn Elledge.

The New Road, which skirted the northern boundaries of London's built up area, first opened in the 1750s. Originally, it was intended to link up outlying villages and provide a

route to drive sheep and cows to the meat market at Smithfield without having to pass through the congested city centre.

As with bypasses and ring roads the world over, however, it increasingly became congested in its own right. Today, you won't often find livestock on the route, which is now Marylebone, Euston and City roads. But you will find up to six lanes of often stationary buses, cabs, and private vehicles. In a city whose centre is largely free of multi-lane highways, London's northern ring road has long been the sort of abomination that you avoid at all costs.

But now, somewhat surprisingly, the road is seeing yet another new use. Earlier this week, the first phase of a temporary cycle lane opened on the Euston Road, the middle section of the route which runs for roughly a mile. As London rethinks roads throughout the city, this addition to the cycling map falls solidly into the category of streets that didn't seem like candidates for cycling before the pandemic.

It is, to be clear, temporary. That's true of many of the Covid-led interventions that Transport for London is currently making, though those in the know will often quietly admit to hoping they end up being permanent. In this case, however, the agency genuinely seems to mean it: TfL emphasized in its press release that the road space is already being allocated for construction starting late next year and that "TfL will work with local boroughs to develop alternate routes along side streets" when the cycle lane is removed.

At lunchtime on Friday, I decided to try the lane for myself to understand what an unlikely, temporary cycle lane can accomplish. In this case it's clear that the presence of a lane only accomplishes so much. A few key things will still leave riders wanting:

It's one way only. To be specific, eastbound. I found this out the hard way, after attempting to cycle the Euston Road westbound, under the naive impression that there was now a lane for me in which to do this. Neither I nor the traffic I unexpectedly found myself sharing space with enjoyed the experience. To be fair, London's cycling commissioner Will Norman had shared this information on Twitter, but cyclists might find themselves inadvertently mixing with multiple lanes of much, much bigger vehicles.

It radically changes in width. At times the westbound route, which is separated from the motor traffic by upright posts, is perhaps a metre and a half wide. At others, such as

immediately outside Euston station, it's shared with buses and is suddenly four or five times that. This is slightly vexing.

It's extremely short. The publicity for the new lane said it would connect up with other cycle routes on Hampstead Road and Judd Street (where Cycleway 6, the main north-south crosstown route, meets Euston Road). That's a distance of roughly 925m. It actually runs from Gower Street to Ossulton Street, a distance of barely 670m. Not only does the reduced length mean it doesn't quite connect to the rest of the network, it also means that the segregated space suddenly stops:

The junction between Euston Road and Ousslston Street, where the segregated lane suddenly, unexpectedly stops. Image: Jonn Elledge.

It's for these reasons, perhaps, that the new lane is not yet seeing many users. Each time I cycled the length of it I saw only a handful of other cyclists (although that did include a man cycling with a child on a seat behind him – not something one would have expected on the Euston Road of the past).

Though I hesitate to mention this because it feeds into the car lobby's agenda, it was also striking that the westbound traffic – the side of the road which had lost a lane to bikes – was significantly more congested than the eastbound. If the lane is extended, it could, counterintuitively, help, by removing the unexpected pinch points at which three lanes of cars suddenly have to squeeze into two.

There's a distinctly unfinished air to the project – though, to be fair, it's early days. The eastbound lane needs to be created from scratch; the westbound extended. At that point, it would hopefully be something TfL would be keen enough to talk about that cyclists start using it in greater numbers – and drivers get the message they should avoid the Euston Road.

The obvious explanation for why TfL is going to all this trouble is that TfL is in charge of the Euston Road, and so can do what it likes there. Building cycle lanes on side nearby roads means working with the boroughs, and that's inevitably more difficult and time consuming.

But if the long-term plan is to push cyclists via side roads anyway, it's questionable whether all this disruption is worth it. A segregated cycle lane that stops without warning and leaves you fighting for space with three lanes of buses, lorries, and cabs is a cycle lane that's of no use at all.

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