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INTERVIEW WITH KRISTIAN WILLIAMS

By Justin Taylor

Our Enemies in Blue (Soft Skull 2004) is a sweeping, vitriolic work of scholarship. As studied as it is incendiary (100 pages of footnotes and bibliography make this perfectly clear), Kristian Williams opens with “a call for skepticism.” He urges his readers to critically re-assess the discourse that surrounds the institution of police: their purported role in society, patterns and trends in police brutality, the historical use of police against organized labor, and so on. *Our Enemies in Blue* is a comprehensive, controversial history of policing; as well it is a theory-meets-practice study of power relations and models of resistance. I went to Portland, Oregon's economically depressed north side to see Williams speak to a standing-room only crowd of scruffy unwashed punks, older folks from the community, and even some children. A skinny, bookish guy with wire-frame glasses and a set-your-watch haircut, he was the last person in the room I expected to hear speak about active resistance and the importance of Copwatch. He spoke for about an hour, first reading from his book and then taking questions. Always, the focus of the talk was directed toward strategies of survival and a cop-free vision of the future. In no uncertain terms, Williams was arguing not just for an end to police violence, but an end to *policing*. Later, I had the opportunity to talk to Williams about his book, his philosophy, and how punk was what got him thinking.

Your bio in *Our Enemies in Blue* says you were drawn to anarchism when you were young, largely by the Richmond, VA punk scene. How young?

I started going to shows when I was fifteen. That sounds impossibly young to me now, but at the time it felt like I was getting a late start. I was always a nerdy kid—awkward and bookish and painfully shy. When I got into punk, I realized that there could actually be an advantage to not fitting in, that social life didn't have to depend on making yourself as bland as possible. I suddenly saw that there were a lot of people every bit as weird as I was and who just didn't give a fuck. There's probably no way to translate into adult terms how liberating that was. But it made a big difference in terms of my self-esteem and overall quality of life. ¶ Of course, the content of the songs also pushed me in that direction, especially once I started listening to the Dead Kennedys and Seven Seconds and the Tom Robinson Band. The Richmond scene was heavily politicized at that time, not really in terms of any sort of organized action, but just in terms of what people were talking about. It's easy to look back on that now and dismiss it as a lot of posturing, bands making speeches from the stage as though they thought it would end racism or something. But really, we were just a bunch of kids trying to figure out what we thought, what was wrong with the world and what could be done about it. Given how little we had to go on, and how little encouragement we got, I think we did pretty well.

What were some of the bands you used to go see?

The first show I went to see was Four Wall Falling. That was in, I think, 1989. I must have seen hundreds of bands by the time I left Richmond in 1992, mostly local groups whose members were just a little older than I was. There were all-ages shows all over the place back then, practically every week. Most of the bands were short-lived projects, whose songs have surely been lost to history. They had names like Painted Richard, Five-Finger Discount, the Inquisition, Sewn-Up-Eyes, and Grip (which I think is probably the best band to come out of that scene). The most notable, of course, was Avail. It's funny, I didn't even realize what a big deal Avail was until years later when I moved to Portland and all kinds of kids had Avail patches on their backpacks.

The 1996 Democratic National Convention was another big turning point for you.

The convention was in Chicago—which was just fucking insulting, considering the history there. So local anarchists decided to organize a counter-convention called Active Resistance. I think they realized that protests were inevitable and saw Active Resistance as a way to organize an anarchist contingent and also build skills that could help sustain a movement after the demos were over. I was just out of college, had lots of free time, and saw this as an opportunity to learn some organizing skills and sort of get serious about politics. I'd been cooking with Food Not Bombs for several years at that point, and was increasingly dissatisfied with that level of activity, feeling like we were doing important work but there wasn't really any strategy for turning the free meal into real social change. ¶ The level of repression in Chicago really blew me away. Cops were always skulking around the conference buildings, they ran helicopters overhead. By the end of the week, they'd raided the meeting space and broken up a perfectly innocent little parade. It was like nothing I'd seen before, though now sadly it's pretty much what I've come to expect. ¶ Those events really sharpened my thinking and gave me fuller incentive to get serious about organized political work—not least because I went home from the conference on crutches and was charged with battery of an officer. I was eventually acquitted, but that whole set of experiences proved important for me personally. It also turned out to be pretty important politically, because the legal wrangling afterward resulted in court decisions that greatly expanded police powers. I tell this story in more detail in *Our Enemies in Blue*, but it was really a major step toward dismantling the post-Watergate safeguards against government spying—in 1996, remember, years before September 11. Pretty much the first thing I did when I got back to Portland was join Copwatch.

Rose City Copwatch [RCC] seems unique, inasmuch as it explicitly makes police obsolescence one of its long-term goals. Other Copwatch groups I've seen (including the one I was a member of in Gainesville, FL) frame their publicity in terms of ending police violence, facilitating positive police/public interactions, and so on. Agree with the position or not, the frankness of RCC is striking, maybe even alienating to some of your potential supporters.

When we started Rose City Copwatch, we put a lot of thought into what our goals should be and how we should present them. A lot of us were coming out of other groups that had taken a more moderate stance, usually "we're not against police, just police brutality." I'd grown increasingly frustrated with that position. It seemed to lend itself to sort of absurd predicaments where people who are individually very radical wind up forming an organization that is really very tame. I

think a lot of times that's tempting as a way to appeal to "the middle," but I haven't really seen any evidence that such an appeal works. ¶ Cops, and the people who support them, won't trust that sort of moderation, and tend to treat even tepid criticism as overt hostility, anyway. On the other side, people who know from their own experience that the police are a problem just get frustrated with weak demands and the half-measures. And that includes me. I know I felt like there was this weird gap, where we had really radical critiques of what was wrong with policing but the only solution we could offer was trying to prop up the civilian review board—it was just pathetic. ¶ So when we formed Rose City Copwatch we asked ourselves, "What is it we want?" The answer was "we either want to erase this entire institution, or at least change it so drastically that no one will even recognize it as the same thing." Along with that, we decided it was time to direct our efforts not toward convincing people that there's a problem with the police, but toward finding the people who already know there's a problem but don't know what to do about it. We don't do much lobbying or making demands from City Hall.

What does RCC do?

We organize people to take steps that directly affect what cops do and how they do it. That can be as simple as training people about what their rights are and giving them the chance to practice asserting them. Or it can be more involved, like our hanging up posters showing the names and faces of killer cops. Probably our most involved project has been joining with the Portland Community Liberation Front to run a sustained community patrol against police brutality. None of that requires us to mince words or try to downplay our radical politics, because we're appealing to the community, not to elites. We're willing to loan support to reform efforts, but ultimately what we want is a shift in power. And there's just no point in trying to be polite about that.

Your book adheres to that same philosophy, right from the title.

It really seems to get under people's skin. At almost every interview or talk I've given, people have asked me about it. Sometimes the question starts off, "How dare you?" Sometimes it's more like, "Aren't you afraid of alienating readers?" But I can't help wondering if we'd even be having the conversation if I had called the book something friendlier, like "The Cops: A History." I think a lot of the reason it's gotten whatever attention it has is that the title is confrontational. And I think that's good. The book is intended as a challenge—why not start with the title? If your politics are conflict-based, you might as well admit it.

You've been touring for *Our Enemies in Blue* with Bring the Ruckus. Who are they and how did you come to work with them?

Bring the Ruckus is a revolutionary anti-capitalist organization. I'm not a member myself, but some of my friends are. They prioritize anti-prison and anti-cop work, and I guess they liked my book. So they offered to arrange the west-coast end of my tour, which I very much appreciate.

I've heard your next book is going to be about torture.

My next book will be about torture. I still don't have a title for it, but it is now in the hands of the

editor and I'm waiting to see what she has to say. If all goes well, it should be in stores in January 2006. ¶ The torture book is really very different than *Our Enemies in Blue*. It's not a history, or not the same kind of history. Instead, it's an analysis of present circumstances and how our government uses torture, both here and abroad. I start by talking about the Abu Ghraib scandal, first in narrow terms—what the pictures show, what the military investigations revealed—then in a bigger context, relating the use of torture in Iraq to that in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay and showing how these related to policy decisions made at the highest levels. Then I broaden the context again, discussing the "war on terror" in terms of a larger imperial project. So I talk about the bigger pattern of funding and training repressive regimes, and that sort of thing. In the second half of the book, I bring the discussion home, and make some pretty damning comparisons between our government's atrocities overseas and the operations of domestic police and prisons. Along the way, I examine the ethical and legal debates about torture, make some observations about the way gender shapes the current practices of torture, and offer an analysis of its overall social function. Obviously, some history comes into play here and there, but I haven't tried to repeat the approach I used with *Enemies*.

Let's try and finish where we started—with punk rock. It helped to politicize you. Do you think it still does that for people?

I think that punk is more of a cultural force than a political force. I mean, there's a political element to it, but I think the real weight of it has less to do with the lyrics than with sheer d.i.y. audacity. Punk, to me, is fundamentally an attack on all forms of complacency. And that's an ethical attack, a challenge to be a participant, to take responsibility. It lends itself to a culture that is anti-consumerist, politics that are anti-authoritarian, and an overall outlook that is basically skeptical. It won't necessarily translate into a leftist agenda, or collective action of any kind, but it is deeply resistant to the work-and-shop-and-watch-TV lifestyle that we're all trained for since birth. The music can be co-opted, and the "look" is not really very shocking anymore anyway—but the underlying attitude, the basic ethic—it's like poison to capitalist ideology. Or rather, capitalist ideology is a poison and punk is an antidote.

Resources

RCC: <http://www.rosecitycopwatch.org/>

Bring the Ruckus: <http://www.agitatorindex.org/>