

## On the Use of Force

CHESTER HIMES

INTRODUCTION BY  
DIEGO A. MILLAN

### Introduction

IN THE MID-1960S, THE UNITED STATES WITNESSED INCREASING SOCIAL UNREST: STUDENTS LED PROTESTS AGAINST THE VIETNAM WAR, AND many black Americans expressed disillusionment over piecemeal gains of the civil rights movement. Whereas history remembers the antiwar rallies mostly as protests, official records often code black demonstrations in Boston, Cleveland, Buffalo, and the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles as riots. In response to two so-called riots in Newark, New Jersey, in July 1967, Chester Himes wrote “On the Use of Force” for the 24 July 1967 issue of the weekly Gaullist magazine *Le nouveau Candide*, where it was published in French translation (French version). The essay, never before published in English, offers timely thoughts concerning police brutality and is sure to be valuable for Himes scholarship, the story of black Americans in Europe, and the history of race and violence.

The French translation of “On the Use of Force” appeared with no title, under the section heading “Le cauchemar américain,” or “The American Nightmare.” An English-language typescript with Himes’s handwritten revisions, where the title “On the Use of Force” originates, is in the Ohio State University Libraries Special Collections, and a copy is also in the Amistad Research Center’s Chester Himes collection, in New Orleans. Himes drafted the essay in English before it was translated into French, a common practice for the expatriate writer whose later works often appeared first in translation. Because of his transatlantic status and the popularity of his crime fiction, he enjoyed renown as a public intellectual among members of his French literary audience in matters concerning America’s race relations.<sup>1</sup> After doing an interview with *Adam* magazine on whose cover his photo appeared, he even referred to himself as “the best known black in Paris” (*My Life* 291).

“On the Use of Force” condenses many of the social and political questions Himes explored throughout his career, such as the politics of police aggression and the interrelatedness of sexual and racial violence. He begins with a familiar image: the enduring invisibility of black people. He then traces the racialization of violence to American slavery, which he argues required the infantilization of black people so that society could justify

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various disciplinary structures. Since these punishments often turned physical, Himes concludes, “[T]here is no other race of people on earth as sensitive to physical abuse.” He credits this relation between physical violence and discipline (generally perpetrated by “a white policeman”) as the root cause of race riots in the United States.

Despite its straightforward argument that police violence is endemic to black lives, Himes’s essay offers more than an analysis of historically entrenched racial tension; the essay refutes scholarly presumption that Himes was out of touch with the daily struggles affecting black people the world over. Connecting his discussion of the political moment in the United States to liberation activities around the world, he recodes the policing of black bodies using terms related to global decolonization movements (“in accordance with all the ideologies of all nations,” resistance “is right and just”). Resisting police could justifiably take the form of armed counterviolence, which Himes explored in writing through the idea of black revolution (Fiorelli 127).<sup>2</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the British journalist Philip Oakes referred in 1969 to Himes as “a founding father of the Black Power movement” (qtd. in Himes, “Man” 18), a designation Himes “clearly relished,” according to the biographer Michel Fabre (xi). Himes certainly echoes facets of 1960s black political critique throughout the essay; his claim that black people consider their bodies “inviolable” complements calls to reject assimilationist practices and promote black autonomy during the rise of the black power and black arts movements, while the emphasis on touch underscores affinities between intimacy and violence that his work often explored.<sup>3</sup>

Despite conceptual and aesthetic shifts across Himes’s fifty-year career, “On the Use of Force” represents a combination of Himes’s writing. We encounter the hard-boiled, naturalist writing style of *If He Hollers, Let Him Go* (1945), as well as imagery and language recycled from more surrealistic texts, such as *Plan B* (1993) and another lesser-known essay published by *Présence africaine*, “Harlem: An American Cancer” (1963). This continuity makes sense when we consider that Himes found generic distinction pointless, remarking once that *The End*

*of a Primitive* (1955) was “in many respects a crime novel” and that his more “‘mainstream’ novels are set in a world that is just as violent and obscene as the world of my domestic thrillers” (“Chester Himes Direct” 136). Even while acknowledging that the formulaic nature of crime fiction limited his approach, he asserts that this formula “didn’t prevent me from saying whatever I wanted” (136). Indeed, readers of “On the Use of Force” will find it reminiscent of both Himes’s mainstream novels and his crime fiction.

The Amistad Research Center has updated its Himes collection to include expanded descriptions and online search tools, increasing opportunities for reevaluating the breadth of Himes’s contributions. “On the Use of Force” is an important document for this future scholarship because it reminds us that, at its core, Himes’s work addresses the politics of antiblackness, police aggression, and the lived experiences of people who “are never seen until they lie bloody and dead from a policeman’s bullet on the hot dirty pavement of a Ghetto street.”

## NOTES

1. For more on Himes’s literary relation to France, see Eburne.

2. Julie Fiorelli situates Himes’s novel *PI*, which we know Himes was working on at the time of the essay, among a “proliferation of novels by African-American” writers exploring similar themes of revolution during the late 1960s (127).

3. The French title of Himes’s *Une Cas* (1963) similarly presents this relation between violence and sex, and one must wonder whether Himes had it in mind in his use of “inviolable” here.

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## On the Use of Force

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND ANYTHING ABOUT the riot in Newark, New Jersey, one must approach it from the position of total ignorance. One must dismiss every preconception, such as the "objective" reportage of all the world's press, along with the actual sight of American Negro tourists walking down the Champs Elysee, eating in expensive restaurants, living in expensive hotels, seemingly intelligent, educated, prosperous, looking happy and satisfied.

Because the black people who are rioting in Newark, along with those who rioted in Watts in 1965 and those who rioted in Cleveland in 1966, and those who rioted in Cincinnati, Boston, Buffalo and in other American cities earlier this year, are invisible. They are never seen until they lie bloody and dead from a policeman's bullet on the hot dirty pavement of a Ghetto street. No one knows that they exist. They suffer abuse, poverty, hunger, unemployment, malnutrition, rejection, every indignity which can be imposed on human beings, unseen, unheard of, with less identity than the ghosts of any graveyard. And yet they compose the majority of the American blacks. For every well dressed, seemingly happy and satisfied American Negro seen walking down the Champs Elysee, there are one million of these invisible blacks living in slums so foul even the rats are nauseated, so hot their brains fry in summer, and so cold in winter their joints freeze.

One should not be an authority on information from the capitalist press, or the communist press, or from preconceptions one has

formed by the sight of the Paris correspondent for *Ebony* magazine, an American Negro, driving his Buick *Riviera* about the streets. The angry, hungry Americans living in their fetid slums, brains baking in the heat, resentments swelling and exploding in their overheated minds, or those lying dead in their own blood from a white cop's bullet, are the only authorities in Negro life in the United States.

Only the dead blacks lying in the dirty Ghetto streets know what it is like to be a black man in America.

So let us, black and white alike, who are still alive, wellfed, clothed, sheltered, protected and secure, try to understand a modicum of what these dead blacks know.

First, there are more blacks living in Newark, New Jersey, than whites. The way of life there is shockingly similar to that in the large cities in South Africa. The black majority lives in a ghetto, illhoused, illfed, illeducated, with an unemployment rate ten times higher than their white neighbors.<sup>1</sup> Because it is accepted by the white power structure, the city and state governments, and the systems of free enterprise, that the black majority will resent this situation, a large force of heavily armed white policemen are employed to keep them in their place.<sup>2</sup>

It is admitted by the white authority of the United States that these black people living in these fetid, overcrowded ghettos present a problem. It is a problem the whites wish they didn't have.<sup>3</sup> They wish this problem would go quietly away.

The majority of white Americans feel they didn't make this problem. They didn't bring these black slaves over there;<sup>4</sup> they didn't hold them in bondage; they didn't benefit from their slavery. Inwardly they resent being faced with a problem they had no part in making.

That, of course, is as nonsensical as the German people rejecting all responsibility for the Nazi's extermination of the Jews. For all their seemingly political naiveté, social irresponsibility, and overall stupidity, American whites know this. They have a problem which they can not dismiss, can not keep hidden, and do not wish to solve. The only thing left to them is to kill it.

With a mentality shockingly similar to the Nazis, to the white Americans the final solution of the Negro Problem, as all their other problems, is to kill it.<sup>5</sup> If the white police can't kill it with their municipal weapons, call out the state militia or the federal soldiers and shoot it dead.

"A dead nigger is a good nigger," is their conviction.

As history will demonstrate, white America has always relied on force as the solution of all problems. If enough force is applied the problem will disintegrate, the agitators will be quieted, the injustices will be neutralized.

If the black agitators don't shut up, they will be made to shut up. If black citizens don't realize they are better off than they were in slavery, better off than they would be in the Congo bush, then apply the final solution—kill them! New Jersey governor Richard J. Hughes said the race riot in Newark was a "criminal insurrection", which gives the white law enforcement officers every legal right to kill the black citizens who are rioting. If these black people want to make a problem out of their oppression, the white people will kill the problem, like shooting a hare.

But there are two main reasons why this can not work with the "Negro Problem" in the united states. There are too many white Americans abandoning the concept of force as the solution of problems. Too many white Ameri-

cans have become opposed to the practice of this concept in Viet Nam, that if the United States applies sufficient force the problem of communist infiltration will disintegrate. Too many Americans have suffered. "And to what purpose?" they are asking themselves. The concept of the final solution has become abhorrent to too many white Americans.

At home, in the United States, too many white Americans have rejected the theory that the "Negro Problem" can be eliminated by beating the blacks into submission.

The other reason is the American black's attitude toward physical abuse. Paradoxically, the one and only thing an American black holds inviolable is his person. It is a hangover from slavery. The greatest indignity to a slave's manhood was physical abuse; a house slave to be slapped, a field slave to be whipped. The slave accepted it, they had to. But when they were freed it was finished. For the freed slave, the most important factor of their freedom was freedom from physical abuse. Freedom from punishment. This habit of physical punishment, more than anything else, revealed the white master's attitude. To all white slave owners, their families and overseers, black slaves were regarded as children. Slaves resented this attitude as one of the most despicable factors of their enslavement. This is the one strongest resentment they brought out of slavery, to be regarded as children and punished as such.

It remains today as one of the strongest emotions in a black person's soul. Since slavery black people have endured every other imaginable indignity. But their person is inviolable. Black people in the United States have been known to accept every imaginable form of insult and abuse, along with all the known injustices, with the one exception of physical abuse.

Which brings us down to this important question, in fact the principle question; what is it, exactly, that precipitates a race riot in the United States?

The answer is physical abuse by a white person, usually a white policeman.

This statement calls for a review of the theory of force as a solution of the "Negro Problem" held by white authority in the United States.

As American blacks' resentment toward being treated as children and punished as such was an inheritance from slavery, white Americans inherited the theory that physical punishment is the only means of keeping black people in their place. The Ku Klux Klan employed it first. And white law enforcement officers ever since.

Until recently all American law enforcement officers were white. Blacks were regarded as children, to be kept in their place by stern language and punished physically if they disobeyed. With their inherited resentment against this particular attitude, docile blacks who accepted every other type of condescension and abuse, became as dangerous as rattlesnakes. If you have ever seen a rattlesnake you know it will run from an advancing human, but if it is touched it will coil and strike too rapidly for the eye to follow. American blacks have this violent, instantaneous reaction to being touched in punishment. A common expression of American black people is; "Just so long as he didn't lay a hand on me." They will accept anything, no matter how great their resentment, *just so long as the white man doesn't lay a hand on them*. There is no other race of people on earth as sensitive to physical abuse. They have been abused enough without this crowning injury. This they will not accept.

Opposed to this are the white law enforcement officers who seriously believe there comes a time when only physical punishment can control disobedient and rebellious blacks. No American black person, no matter his station in life, his position, his wealth, his white friends, escapes this attitude of white policeman. A white policeman will get out of his police car and start beating on a black citizen who might very well be a United States senator or Supreme Court Justice, if he has not been informed in advance of the black man's position. The black man of important position is less likely to retaliate violently to the white

policeman's assault than a black taxi cab driver, prize fighter, or ordinary pedestrian.

Black people interpret any and all physical gestures applied to their person by white policemen, no matter the nature or the cause, as acts of police brutality; and all their violent physical retaliations are supported by righteous justification. They not only feel right, but noble, in resisting a white policeman's action of force with violence.

In fact, in accordance with all the ideologies of all nations, this is right and just. Because the obedience and conformance of the blacks of the United States are imposed by force, theoretically blacks have the right to resist.

This force has been applied by various means in different parts of the country. Southern sheriffs have always had their method of "handling their niggers," which is now so well known in the world as to need no elaboration. But the white police in the northern industrial ghettos, like the ones in Newark, New Jersey, had their own method of curing the black man's problems. No matter the nature of the black's complaint, wife trouble, landlord trouble, hunger, resentment, aching feet, or just plain stomach poisoning from methyl alcohol or rotten food, the cure was to take him to the basement of the precinct station and beat the black off of him with leaded hose.

This is known as police brutality. Police brutality toward black people in the United States is of such common usage and longstanding to have attained acceptance as proper behavior. The theory has always been that the way to treat black people is like children; that they have to be punished when they misbehave and make a nuisance of themselves, such as asking for their civil rights.

Every race riot in the United States has stemmed from the one single fact that a white law enforcement officer has committed a brutality against a black citizen. This is a flat statement of fact. There are no exceptions.

The brutality committed by the white law enforcement officer comes first.



Whether justifiably or not, whether offensively or in self defense, whether it was deemed necessary or gratuitous, is beside the point.

The point is that black citizens in the United States have been the victims of brutalities committed by white policemen from time immemorial. There is scarcely a black child in the United States who has not witnessed at least once the act of a white policeman striking, shoving, slapping, kicking, or threatening a black citizen.

The police brutality comes first! Always! The race riot is a consequence.

This does not mean that the emotion which sustains the rioting and the looting stems only from police brutality. Once the black citizens are moved to retaliate against a police brutality, all of their many resentments against "whitey" surge to the surface. They resent whitey because he takes the best and gives them the leftovers; because he has the best jobs, the best houses, his children go to the best schools. They resent whitey because they feel he has oppressed them, cheated them, segregated them, made fools out of them in every respect.

All of their resentments are released. They turn over whitey's automobiles, loot whitey's stores, set fire to whitey's tenements even though they live in them themselves; they get out their few weapons and began shooting at the white policemen from the safety of rooftops, from behind their tenement walls. They feel that if they could just hurt whitey enough where it hurts the most they will at least be more respected even though their problems remain unsolved.

But the police brutality is the catalyst. Always.

It is of no consequence whether the actions of white police are considered as brutal or necessary in the circumstances.<sup>6</sup> The only important factor is that black American citizens consider it as such.

One of the most unfortunate aspects of the Civil Rights Movement is there has been no legal apparatus formed to cope with this

problem. There is no Civil Rights Agency to whom black victims of police brutality, or imagined police brutality, can appeal for justice or damages. The only resort of black people is to retaliate with force.

Police brutality. Retaliation of blacks. Result. Race riots! That is the order of progression.

To my knowledge, the only race leader in the United States who realized the immediacy of this factor of the Civil Rights problem, was Malcolm X. Malcolm X was fully cognizant of the resentment of American blacks to being regarded and treated as children. He was aware that most American whites, "good" whites or "bad" whites, liberal whites or reactionary whites, advanced whites or stoneage whites, thought of black people as children. Some benignly. Some malignantly. But all with condescension. But Malcolm X was killed before he could take any action. He had been subjected to the final solution.

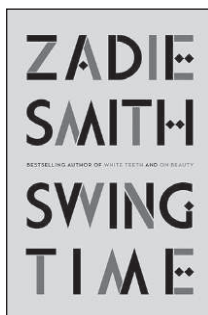
Until the American whites can accept the American blacks as grown people, capable of responsibilities and the forming of opinions, there can be no hope that the two races will live together amicably, in mutual respect and cooperation. I do not think there is any possibility of this being achieved until after all Americans who are now under twenty years of age have become old enough to assume control of all aspects of American life.

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## EDITOR'S NOTES

1. Himes added "white" in pen.
2. Here Himes began a new paragraph with the words "[i]t is admitted, as in all other great populated black ghettos, that the problem of black," but he typed *x*'s over the text.
3. The original read, "It is a problem it wishes it didn't have." Himes made the changes in pen; "it" would have indicated "United States" from the previous sentence. The revision sharpens his criticism and avoids implying that the United States is exclusively white.
4. Himes changed "here" to "there."
5. Himes changed "will be" to "is."
6. Himes added "or necessary" in pen.

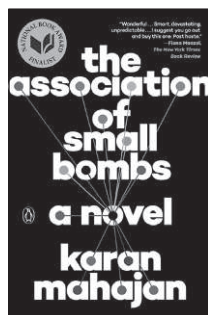
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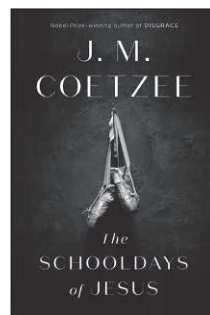
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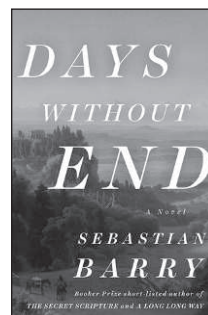
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