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Armed Resistance in Providence

How the Rhode Island John Brown Gun Club is preparing for an armed future

By Jaya Sundaresh

Etienne Roussel is showing me a video on his cell phone.

I watch the screen. It shows a shaky, handheld scene; a group of left-wing protestors are affecting nonchalance as a man in a Make America Great Again hat screams at them.

“Fuck you bitches!” the MAGA guy screams at them, shaking with anger, as the women (they are mostly women) shake their signs in his direction. They bend over with laughter, as they taunt the man.

I look up at Roussel, and he is furious.

“You see that? *Anything* could have happened. These people are fucking idiots,” he says, angrily. Roussel adjusts the brim of his baseball cap and sighs. We watch the video until it runs out.

It’s not the MAGA guy that Roussel is mad at.

“He could have done anything to them. He could have been armed. They had no security. These people have no sense of security culture,” he says, jabbing his finger as he speaks.

We’re sitting in an otherwise sparse living room that is festooned with Soviet memorabilia; the communist flag of Soviet Russia hangs directly above where we are sitting, a gaudy red that pierces the beige surroundings.

Dan interjects. He is big and burly, with a messy, unkempt strawberry blonde beard. He wears a t-shirt that says “arm the working class,” and he speaks softly. It is his living room we are in.

“Look, I get why some liberals think of this as LARPing” — or live action role playing — “but it’s like, if you actually look at history, and you look at the scene that we’re in now, now is the time to be preparing. Now is the time to be getting trained. You can’t wait hoping that magically everything’s going to work out fine and you won’t need it.”

I’m with the Rhode Island John Brown Gun Club (RIJBGC), a group of leftist activists who live in and around Providence, Rhode Island. This chapter is one of nearly 30 similar chapters, loosely organized under the banner of an organization called [Redneck Revolt](#), an “anti-racist, anti-fascist community defense organization”. Dan, Roussel, and about ten others regularly

organize for community self-defense, organize mutual aid patrols, and train at shooting ranges in the area.

Left-wing gun activism has had a minor resurgence in America, since 2016. There's Redneck Revolt, but there's also the Socialist Rifle Association (SRA), which aims to create an alternative social and cultural space for gun owners on the left. (The organization that most gun owners in America belong to, the National Rifle Association, is [thought](#) to be deeply right-wing by most on the left. (As one JBGC member put it to me over the phone: "gun culture in America is full of toxic man babies.") SRA, which emerged on the national stage in 2018, stays away from militia work or community self defense (although, according to their [website](#), they "stand in solidarity" with those who engage in antifascist action.)

The Rhode Island JBGC has no similar compunctions.

Members of JBGC feel an urgency that is prompted by the perilous political moment, when self-proclaimed fascist and white supremacist organizations are gaining a foothold in cities and towns across America. White supremacists affiliated with the "alt-right" movement have been emboldened by Donald Trump's ascendancy to the presidency. A 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia [shocked the nation](#) with scenes of tiki-torch wielding, khaki-clad white supremacists marching through a college campus. According to the [testimony](#) given by the Southern Poverty Law Center to Congress last year, white supremacy "presents a distinct and present danger to this country and its institutions."

The members of the RIJBGC I spoke to felt the threat from white supremacists in an intimate way.

"We live in a pretty progressive area, generally speaking, but just like with other progressive or liberal areas, like Portland or Seattle, right outside that area you have a large concentration of reactionaries who are also armed and who are willing and able to inflict damage, or at least intimidate," says Roussel.

The realization that his friends (who are mostly in the Providence branch of the Democratic Socialists of America) were in danger led Roussel towards organizing with the RIJBGC. The thought of someone hurting other activists "keeps him up at night," he says. "We have a lot of very public, very open meetings," he says. "And it always pissed me off that we didn't have any plan put in place or anyone that was dedicated to physical security for those meetings and events."

Nora, another member of RIJBGC, nods. "In other parts of the country, reactionary elements have walked right up to that line of going to unsecured leftist events, harrassing people and making threats. It's something that concerns us."

“I think what we do is make space for other groups,” explains Drew, another member of RIJBGC. Each member of the RIJBGC is guided by a firm commitment to a leftist ideology. But they’re not the ones holding the signs and leading the chants. RIJBGC is an organization that exists to protect other left organizers and marginalized people.

“We’re not out for us,” says Drew. “We’re out for whoever asked us to be out.”

The RIJBGC doesn’t advertise. It doesn’t push left or liberal organizations that might be uncomfortable with guns to accept its security services — instead, they wait for organizations to come to them.

“We’re kind of like demonstration and protest vampires,” explains Roussel. “We only go where we’re invited.”

And it is a touchy subject, whether or not to invite a group like the RIJBGC to guard one of your demonstrations. Members of the group know what they look like. With the exception of Roussel who is Black and male, and Nora, who is white and nonbinary, the vast majority of members are white, bearded, and male. They know what a bunch of armed white guys showing up to a protest look like to most left-liberals: right wingers. The last thing the RIJBGC wants to do is to alienate the people they’re trying to protect.

That’s why they’re careful to always wear a red bandana when they are on actions. “It’s a very, very obvious visual signifier,” says Nora. “It’s very helpful to have that visual distinction that says, ‘hey, we are this group. We are not these, you know, right wing militia groups that may look somewhat similar to the untrained eye. The bandanas make it more obvious to the community who we are.”

The red bandana might be a very convenient, easily recognizable symbol — you can pick one up at nearly any drugstore — but that’s not the only reason it is worn by the club. There’s a storied history to the little square cloth. During the Battle of Blair Mountain of 1921 — which was the largest armed insurrection in the United States since the end of the Civil War — striking mine workers wore the bandana around their necks — literal “rednecks”.

Along the way, Dan tells me, as we drive in his car towards the shooting range, where we are going to target practice, and where I will shoot a handgun for the first time, “redneck” became associated with a white person, a worker, who labored in the sun, whose neck would turn pink with burn.

“The term redneck is very much associated with whiteness, white folk, white culture, but the rednecks of the labor uprising era were a multiracial coalition,” says Dan, nodding. “It’s not an exclusively white term, and that bit of the history has been left out of the telling, which is kind of a shame.”

But the fact that “redneck” has a dual meaning is one of the reasons that Redneck Revolt so actively chooses to reclaim the term, according to Dan. “The idea that rednecks” — he is referring here to the red-necked white laborer — “are not as worthy because they’re doing crappy or harder jobs, that’s wrong. Anyway, most of the people using ‘redneck’ in a pejorative way, they’re performing jobs that are far less directly necessary to society than those laborers. It’s a word that’s used to denigrate the working class.”

Redneck Revolt’s website similarly lays the blame for the negative meaning of “redneck” at the feet of “upper class urban liberals,” who they believe have “gone out of their way to dehumanize working class and poor people.”

“I’d probably affectionately call them a liberal sort,” says Ryan Ferguson, chair of the Maine JBGC, describing his encounters with the city-dwelling, “very privileged,” largely pro-gun control demographic in Portland, which is the closest big city to him. “These liberals are kind of divorced from gun culture, and only see the negative aspects of it. And they’ve shirked all responsibility for defense onto the police,” he adds, in a scoffing voice.

The most significant action RIJBGC participated in was at a LGBTQ Pride march in Lewiston-Auburn, Maine, in 2018, which had been threatened by a white supremacist far-right organization that was based in the area. Several John Brown Gun Clubs from across New England joined the Maine JBGC’s chapter to provide security services, at the invitation of Ferguson and his friends.

“People in that community felt unsafe with police being at that event,” says Roussel. Maine’s a constitutional carry state; you can carry a concealed weapon without a permit, so they did.

We are at the shooting range in a more rural part of Rhode Island, and Nora is teaching me how to use a Glock handgun.

They position me, instructing me to move my legs and adjust my stance. I feel off kilter, as Nora wants me to lean more forward than I’m used to; I feel top-heavy, like one strong breeze would knock me over.

“That’s it, good for you,” they tell me approvingly, as I cautiously squeeze off a round. The reverberation shakes me, and though Nora did their best to prepare me for the sensation, I’m not all that ready for the sharp recoil.

“How do you feel?” asks Nora, grinning.

I step back and think about my answer.

“Good, I think.” I tell them, carefully. “Strange feeling. New feeling. But I think good.”

I’m not lying. The sensation of shooting the handgun is incredibly weird, but I feel powerful. I look at the target, which was brought very close to me indeed — it’s a novice’s prerogative to be allowed a larger target — and see a hole, caused by the bullet I just fired, on the edge of the paper. I hit nowhere near the bullseye, but I feel pride snake through me at the thought that I hit the paper target at all.

Nora tells me that they also enjoy training, that shooting is a very fun sport. But they’re cautious to tell me that even though this is a fun activity, members of the RIJBGC take this work very seriously.

“I’m training with my tools when I come here. I’m doing work for the movement.”

There’s another bit of revolutionary history that the RIJBGC has associated itself; that of John Brown, their namesake. John Brown is the radical abolitionist who, in 1859, led a raid on a military arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, in order to seize weaponry. The intent was to kick off an armed slave rebellion. It didn’t work out that way; Brown was executed for his insurrection a few months later. Brown is venerated as a legendary race-traitor by members of Redneck Revolt, as he took matters into his own hand when faced with the extraordinary evil of chattel slavery.

It’s probably fair to say that the members of the RIJBGC are less combative than their namesake. JBGCs across the country consider themselves an above-ground organization, unlike “antifa,” the street brawlers who often wear masks while wreaking violent havoc during political demonstrations. Above-ground means that members of the club attend rallies unmasked and are thereby identifiable, though, out of an abundance of caution, Roussel has chosen to use a pseudonym (or “nom de guerre,” according to him) and every other member of RIJBGC interviewed chose to only use their first names for this story.

“John Brown Gun Club does not engage in street battles,” explained Peter, a member of the antifascist editorial collective [It’s Going Down](#), an important source of news for members of the antifascist community — one that also occasionally doxes members of far-right organizations as white supremacists, with the intent of getting the right-winger fired or in some way socially condemned for their political activities. (Peter also chose to go by a pseudonym.) It’s Going Down has reported on JBGCs extensively from a far-left perspective. “They are called on to do security at events, and that sort of thing needs to be done. I’m glad groups like that are around,” he says.

Not everyone shares Peter’s bullish outlook on groups like the JBGCs.

“I don’t believe guns will get you what you want politically,” says author and philosopher Firmin DeBrabander, author of *Do Guns Make Us Free?*, and a critic of gun culture in America. I spoke to him over the phone. “I’m not a fan of antifa, I don’t believe that’s how you handle right-wingers,” he said.

DeBrabander points out that the presence of armed people at rallies — on the left or the right — inherently chills the prospect of free speech. While he does acknowledge that JBGC members are not out initiating violence with the far-right, he’s still skeptical of the potential for free discussion to happen in a context where there are armed people.

“Any kind of repression or even censorship of the right has not worked. It’s even emboldened some. I think we need to consider other options,” he told me.

But the RIJBGC counters that they are simply providing support to left organizers and marginalized people in situations that are already charged and potentially violent — and not because of their own doing.

“You’re going to have violent armed opposition that is only going to get more extreme, the closer any left project gets to power. We threaten the power base of those in charge,” explained Dan of the RIJBGC. “Even if everything was to go great for the left in the immediate future, you’re still going to have these armed groups that exist that have already committed a ton of violent actions against the left as well as people of color, and LGBT folks.”

He’s not wrong that violence is on the upswing. The disastrous events in Charlottesville, during which left-counterprotester Heather Heyer was murdered, represent a fraction of the explosion of hate crimes that have taken place since 2016. Twenty-two people were murdered (and 24 injured) in a mass shooting in an El Paso Walmart, carried out by a white supremacist who targeted Latinx immigrants for being outsiders. Eleven were murdered and six were wounded at morning Shabbat services in Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue, the deadliest attack on an American Jewish community ever. The SPLC reports that the number of hate groups rose by 50% in 2018. While there are [some](#) claims that the alt-right has been forced underground after the nationwide backlash to the events in Charlottesville, the JBGC members I spoke to firmly believe it’s only a matter of time before violent white supremacists establish a united, national profile again.

It’s a hot summer day in Providence. We’ve gathered to meet at Fortnight Wine bar, a worker-owned cooperative. The members of the RIJBGC are assembling, one by one. They are dressed more or less identically, with shirts that declare their affiliation, with backpacks that are stuffed with MRE packs, water bottles, Narcan and condoms. They wear comfortable hiking boots, and are well equipped with sunscreen and bug spray.

They look as if they are ready to go hiking, not wander into one of New England's most urban settings, distributing supplies to a shadow world of folks who are homeless and criminalized, to folks who use drugs and sleep in parks. This might be the most intimate work that the group does; aiding the most vulnerable members of society by directly distributing life-saving supplies.

This is mutual aid.

Mutual aid, despite appearances, is not charity, which socialists understand to be the transfer of wealth from capitalists to the working class, usually at the price of buying their political complacency. Mutual aid is about the working class helping other members of the working class, in order to strengthen communities; in order to build solidarity within and amongst other workers. It's the central tenet of anarchism, also known as libertarian socialism, a leftist ideology that promotes a weak centralized government and strong communities. Nearly all RIJBGC members identify as libertarian socialists, with Dan being the sole communist in the club — which explains the Soviet memorabilia that festoons his living room. (Roussel gently ribs Dan for his authoritarian "[tankie](#)" tendencies, joking that if Dan were to ever be put in charge of the revolution, Roussel "would be the first against the wall".)

Those who are the beneficiaries of RIJBGC's largesse are grateful, and most meekly take the help that is proffered, although some recipients are downright excessive in their expressions of thanks.

Why is a gun club distributing supplies to the needy?

"Mutual aid is a component of community defense," Roussel tells me. "They're two sides of the same coin." He seems a little surprised that I'd ask. The connection makes sense, when you stop thinking of community self-defense in the way that right-wingers do — as an end in and of itself — and rather as a form of giving a service to a community that desperately needs it.

A few months after our patrol in Downtown Providence, I speak to Firmin DeBrabander, the liberal critic of gun culture. There's a part of my conversation with him that I can't shake from my mind.

"I think I think I get their intentions," he said, thoughtfully. "The John Brown people aren't trying to, you know, make change, by rattling their guns," acknowledging that they are trying to fulfill a security role. "But the problem is, when you present weapons in a public setting, during a protest, that adds the spectre of violence."

"But that's just the thing, right?" I interject. "The John Brown Gun Clubs aren't trying to make this society more civilized, at this point." I explain that the anarchists I spent time with in Rhode Island; they don't believe democracy has succeeded. They don't believe that the normal

processes of American democracy, civilization, society, will give proper voice to the marginalized, and that they're preparing for the society they have — a desperately violent one, where white supremacy has again surfaced — not the society they want.

DeBrabander cut in, immediately. "The people who are trying to make this a more civilized place, I'd be more interested in what they have to say, I'd like to hear their agenda."

I wonder at the small scale of the operation. Over the course of the Friday evening in Downtown Providence, RIJBGC only managed to distribute supplies to about 20 people in need. I wonder if resources could be dedicated in ways that reach more people. (It should be mentioned here that there is also a "free store" in Providence that distributes everything from food to furniture to members of the community who need it, that members of RIJBGC help run.) It also surprises me that Roussel doesn't take the time to politick. I'm surprised that this isn't seen as an opportunity to spread the good name of John Brown, or extoll the virtues of the left, or to even get anyone to come to any kind of meeting.

But helping the community isn't necessarily a means to an end, for these self-described comrades. It's the end in and of itself. The goal is building solidarity, not self-promotion. Helping a tiny number of souls; it's a whisper of good, which is good enough.