

No Justice, No Peace

Against Slavery Then; Against Racism Today

Sean Alan Cleary

2021

a review of

Prophet Against Slavery: Benjamin Lay, A Graphic Novel by David Lester, author and artist, with editors, Paul Buhle and Marcus Rediker. Beacon Press 2021

Sean-Michel Basquiat's 1984 painting *Created Equal* might be the first time the phrase "NO JUSTICE NO PEACE" was documented in that exact language, though its sentiment was a familiar one. A decade before, Pope Paul VI declared at a World Peace Day in 1972 that for a world dealing with colonial exploitation, "If you want peace, work for justice."

But while Paul VI's statement, and even the earlier Martin Luther King Jr. statement, in 1968, that "there can be no justice without peace," in their language, hold kernels of policy positions of nonviolence, the more ambiguous—and unpunctuated—phrasing of Basquiat offers a looming conditional threat on the part of the oppressed.

Basquiat undergirds this interpretation of the phrase by pairing it in the painting with another since popularized phrase that he turns on its head. Above a black figure, flanked by chains, he has written in his trademark scrawled hand "FREEDOM IS NOT FREE." I'm not under the impression the artist's statement carries a "Support Our Troops" sentiment.

It happened that the phrase, No Justice; No Peace that Basquiat included in his work became popularized in the late 1980s and early '90s in response to racist killings by police in New York and Los Angeles, when the threat of anti-police and anti-property rioting gave teeth to the threat of the statement. It might be more of a convergence of mass sentiment than of a lineage.

One of the earliest threads of that mass sentiment is the story of Benjamin Lay, the 18th Century Quaker abolitionist and the subject of Marcus Rediker's excellent biography *The Fearless Benjamin Lay*, now transformed and adapted into the graphic novel *Prophet Against Slavery* by David Lester, supported by Rediker and fellow historian and activist Paul Buhle.

Lay, a notorious troublemaker, exiled from Quaker meeting after Quaker meeting in England as well as the American colonies for rabblousing against slavery and other sins against justice, is presented in Lester's work as an early thread in American liberation movements.

Lester makes the connection more prominent—he wants to draw the comparison—when Lay, being dragged out of yet another Friends Meeting for shouting loudly the hypocrisy of slave holding among the meeting, shouts to the congregants, "NO JUSTICE NO PEACE." The words are rendered in a Basquiat-esque scrawl of a shout.

Lester's artwork in *Prophet Against Slavery* makes this connection as well, with evocative dark-lined sketches often overlaid on scenes, offering the reader contrasting images of peaceful, free colonial Quakers and the violent oppression that undergirded their freedom.

As Basquiat said in his painting, "Freedom isn't free." Lester's images might look to some readers like a riff on the flat evocative style of 18th Century American folk art, but to others as decidedly modern, its dark lines and careful scene-making reminiscent of post-impressionist work.

Some of the most memorable scenes occur as Lay disrupts Quaker meetings, where Lester is tasked with illustrating both the shock of the gatherings, and the violence Lay attempted to bring to light. A hard task of simultaneity that Lester works to represent through those dark-lined sketches overlaid on the scenes.

The main thrust of Lester's art and adapted story, if we follow these threads, is a common one, but one that needs repeating: the moral injuries and violent oppression inherent to capitalist exploitations, enslavement chief among them, have been there from the beginning. And, so has the opposition to it. That the opposition today has to ask the same questions as it did in the 18th century might be a depressing prospect.

As Lester presents him, Benjamin Lay seems caught between being a representation of the long tradition of the American Jeremiad, long texts where the faithful are called back from their ways of moral decay, in this case, the enslavement of humans, and someone like John Brown who called for the end of peace until there was justice. Both might be considered radical abolitionists as the marketing copy of *Prophet of Slavery* calls Benjamin Lay, but can they both be sat comfortably above that same moniker?

The crux of the matter might be the sticky phrase—No Justice; No Peace—and what exactly might be meant by the conditional second half. For Benjamin Lay, disrupting the peaceable meetings of the Society of Friends with his theatrical displays meant to tug on the moral conscience of the comfortable Quaker elite, the notion of peace did not extend toward violence, or toward the forcible overthrow of the colonial regime.

Lay's lifetime, though, was punctuated by violent rebellion. As the historian Gerald Home shows in his works focusing on the same period in which Lay lived (both in *The Counter Revolution of 1776* and *The Dawning of the Apocalypse*), and Marcus Rediker himself has written about as well, the American and Caribbean colonies of the 17th and 18th centuries were places riven by fear of revolt.

Lay's arrival in Barbados in 1718 came at the midpoint of the violence of enslavement on the island, a violence contested again and again by the rebellion of the enslaved leading to Bussa's Rebellion in 1816 and ultimately the emancipation of 1833.

In the year before Lay made his way to Pennsylvania in 1731, in nearby Chesapeake Bay Colony, hundreds of slaves forcefully fled their captors on the rumor of a royal emancipation edict that had been ignored by the English planters. In Lay's time, the hope was long coming, but it was there.

Ultimately, the question asked back at the book by the statement "no justice; no peace" is whether or not Lay's understanding of the phrase and sentiment—as presented by Lester—is a thread of liberation for our times, as perhaps *Prophet Against Slavery*, and any book about a contemporarily relevant historical figure, might posit.

In Lay's voice, "no justice no peace" at times lacks the same conditional threat as it might have had in the voices of mass protesters in the summers of 2020 and 2021. But that depends on who you ask.

Prophet Against Slavery ends by recalling its beginning. Benjamin Lay holds up a book we know is filled with red juice meant to mimic blood he will shower on the Quakers present at the meeting. It's the start of a spectacle of guilt we've come to know is Lay's trademark. The ambiguity lies in Lester's drawing of the book Lay holds aloft, the one filled with fake blood, which Lester labels "Horrors of Slavery"

When Lay strikes the book splattering with red blood-like pokeberry juice on the slave-holders present, the image asks us to think of the violence inflicted on the enslaved. Blood is on the hands of the elite Quakers, the image says. But what Lay says in the meeting that day paints a rather different threat.

The looming threat is not one of conscience. Lay says, "thus God shall shed the blood of those persons who enslave their fellow creatures." It's this statement—violence not toward the oppressed, but the oppressor—that echoed across the centuries as Lester's final image turned over again and again in my mind.

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Fifth Estate #410, Fall, 2021

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