

Concerning the violent peace-police

An open letter to Chris Hedges

David Graeber

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I am writing this on the premise that you are a well-meaning person who wishes Occupy Wall Street to succeed. I am also writing as someone who was deeply involved in the early stages of planning Occupy in New York.

I am also an anarchist who has participated in many Black Blocs. While I have never personally engaged in acts of property destruction, I have on more than one occasion taken part in Blocs where property damage has occurred. (I have taken part in even more Blocs that did not engage in such tactics. It is a common fallacy that this is what Black Blocs are all about. It isn't.)

I was hardly the only Black Bloc veteran who took part in planning the initial strategy for Occupy Wall Street. In fact, anarchists like myself were the real core of the group that came up with the idea of occupying Zuccotti Park, the "99%" slogan, the General Assembly process, and, in fact, who collectively decided that we would adopt a strategy of Gandhian non-violence and eschew acts of property damage. Many of us had taken part in Black Blocs. We just didn't feel that was an appropriate tactic for the situation we were in.

This is why I feel compelled to respond to your statement "The Cancer in Occupy." This statement is not only factually inaccurate, it is quite literally dangerous. This is the sort of misinformation that really can get people killed. In fact, it is far more likely to do so, in my estimation, than anything done by any black-clad teenager throwing rocks.

Let me just lay out a few initial facts:

1. Black Bloc is a tactic, not a group. It is a tactic where activists don masks and black clothing (originally leather jackets in Germany, later, hoodies in America), as a gesture of anonymity, solidarity, and to indicate to others that they are prepared, if the situation calls for it, for militant action. The very nature of the tactic belies the accusation that they are trying to hijack a movement and endanger others. One of the ideas of having a Black Bloc is that everyone who comes to a protest should know where the people likely to engage in militant action are, and thus easily be able to avoid it if that's what they wish to do.
2. Black Blocs do not represent any specific ideological, or for that matter anti-ideological position. Black Blocs have tended in the past to be made up primarily of anarchists but most contain participants whose politics vary from Maoism to Social Democracy. They are

not united by ideology, or lack of ideology, but merely a common feeling that creating a bloc of people with explicitly revolutionary politics and ready to confront the forces of the order through more militant tactics if required, is, on the particular occasion when they assemble, a useful thing to do. It follows one can no more speak of “Black Bloc Anarchists,” as a group with an identifiable ideology, than one can speak of “Sign-Carrying Anarchists” or “Mic-Checking Anarchists.”

3. Even if you must select a tiny, ultra-radical minority within the Black Bloc and pretend their views are representative of anyone who ever put on a hoodie, you could at least be up-to-date about it. It was back in 1999 that people used to pretend “the Black Bloc” was made up of nihilistic primitivist followers of John Zerzan opposed to all forms of organization. Nowadays, the preferred approach is to pretend “the Black Bloc” is made up of nihilistic insurrectionary followers of The Invisible Committee, opposed to all forms of organization. Both are absurd slurs. Yours is also 12 years out of date.
4. Your comment about Black Bloc’ers hating the Zapatistas is one of the weirdest I’ve ever seen. Sure, if you dig around, you can find someone saying almost anything. But I’m guessing that, despite the ideological diversity, if you took a poll of participants in the average Black Bloc and asked what political movement in the world inspired them the most, the EZLN would get about 80% of the vote. In fact I’d be willing to wager that at least a third of participants in the average Black Bloc are wearing or carrying at least one item of Zapatista paraphernalia. (Have you ever actually talked to someone who has taken part in a Black Bloc? Or just to people who dislike them?)
5. “Diversity of tactics” is not a “Black Bloc” idea. The original GA in Tompkins Square Park that planned the original occupation, if I remember, adopted the principle of diversity of tactics (at least it was discussed in a very approving fashion), at the same time as we all also concurred that a Gandhian approach would be the best way to go. This is not a contradiction: “diversity of tactics” means leaving such matters up to individual conscience, rather than imposing a code on anyone. Partly, this is because imposing such a code invariably backfires. In practice, it means some groups break off in indignation and do even more militant things than they would have otherwise, without coordinating with anyone else—as happened, for instance, in Seattle. The results are usually disastrous. After the fiasco of Seattle, of watching some activists actively turning others over to the police—we quickly decided we needed to ensure this never happened again. What we found that if we declared “we shall all be in solidarity with one another. We will not turn in fellow protesters to the police. We will treat you as brothers and sisters. But we expect you to do the same to us”—then, those who might be disposed to more militant tactics will act in solidarity as well, either by not engaging in militant actions at all for fear they will endanger others (as in many later Global Justice Actions, where Black Blocs merely helped protect the lockdowns, or in Zuccotti Park, where mostly people didn’t bloc up at all) or doing so in ways that run the least risk of endangering fellow activists.

All this is secondary. Mainly I am writing as an appeal to conscience. Your conscience, since clearly you are a sincere and well-meaning person who wishes this movement to succeed. I beg you: Please consider what I am saying. Please bear in mind as I say this that I am not a crazy

nihilist, but a reasonable person who is one (if just one) of the original authors of the Gandhian strategy OWS adopted—as well as a student of social movements, who has spent many years both participating in such movements, and trying to understand their history and dynamics.

I am appealing to you because I really do believe the kind of statement you made is profoundly dangerous.

The reason I say this is because, whatever your intentions, it is very hard to read your statement as anything but an appeal to violence. After all, what are you basically saying about what you call “Black Bloc anarchists”?

1. they are not part of us
2. they are consciously malevolent in their intentions
3. they are violent
4. they cannot be reasoned with
5. they are all the same
6. they wish to destroy us
7. they are a cancer that must be excised

Surely you must recognize, when it’s laid out in this fashion, that this is precisely the sort of language and argument that, historically, has been invoked by those encouraging one group of people to physically attack, ethnically cleanse, or exterminate another—in fact, the sort of language and argument that is almost never invoked in any other circumstance. After all, if a group is made up exclusively of violent fanatics who cannot be reasoned with, intent on our destruction, what else can we really do? This is the language of violence in its purest form. Far more than “fuck the police.” To see this kind of language employed by someone who claims to be speaking in the name of non-violence is genuinely extraordinary. I recognize that you’ve managed to find certain peculiar fringe elements in anarchism saying some pretty extreme things, it’s not hard to do, especially since such people are much easier to find on the internet than in real life, but it would be difficult to come up with any “Black Bloc anarchist” making a statement as extreme as this.

Even if you did not intend this statement as a call to violence, which I suspect you did not, how can you honestly believe that many will not read it as such?

In my experience, when I point this sort of thing out, the first reaction I normally get from pacifists is along the lines of “what are you talking about? Of course I’m not in favor of attacking anyone! I am non-violent! I am merely calling for non-violently confronting such elements and excluding them from the group!” The problem is that in practice this is almost never what actually happens. Time after time, what it has actually meant in practice is either a) turning fellow activists over to the police, i.e., turning them over to people with weapons who will physically assault, shackle, and imprison them, or b) actual physical activist-on-activist assault. Such things have happened. There have been physical assaults by activists on other activists, and, to my knowledge, they have never been perpetrated by anyone in Black Bloc, but invariably by purported pacifists against those who dare to pull a hood over their heads or a bandana over their faces, or, simply,

against anarchists who adopt tactics someone else thinks are going too far. (Not I should note even potentially violent tactics. During one 15-minute period in Occupy Austin, I was threatened first with arrest, then with assault, by fellow campers because I was expressing verbal solidarity with, and then standing in passive resistance beside, a small group of anarchists who were raising what was considered to be an unauthorized tent.)

This situation often produces extraordinary ironies. In Seattle, the only incidents of actual physical assault by protesters on other individuals were not attacks on the police, since these did not occur at all, but attacks by “pacifists” on Black Bloc’ers engaged in acts of property damage. Since the Black Bloc’ers had collectively agreed on a strict policy of non-violence (which they defined as never doing anything to harm another living being), they uniformly refused to strike back. In many recent occupations, self-appointed “Peace Police” have manhandled activists who showed up to marches in black clothing and hoodies, ripped their masks off, shoved and kicked them: always, without the victims themselves having engaged in any act of violence, always, with the victims refusing, on moral grounds, to shove or kick back.

The kind of rhetoric you are engaging in, if it disseminates widely, will ensure this kind of violence becomes much, much more severe.

Perhaps you do not believe me, or do not believe these events to be particularly significant. If so, let me put the matter in a larger historical context.

If I understand your argument, it seems to come down to this:

1. OWS has been successful because it has followed a Gandhian strategy of showing how, even in the face of strictly non-violent opposition, the state will respond with illegal violence
2. Black Bloc elements who do not act according to principles of Gandhian non-violence are destroying the movement because they provide retroactive justification for state repression, especially in the eyes of the media
3. Therefore, the Black Bloc elements must be somehow rooted out.

As one of the authors of the original Gandhian strategy, I can recall how well aware we were, when we framed this strategy, that we were taking an enormous risk. Gandhian strategies have not historically worked in the US; in fact, they haven’t really worked on a mass scale since the civil rights movement. This is because the US media is simply constitutionally incapable of reporting acts of police repression as “violence.” (One reason the civil rights movement was an exception is so many Americans at the time didn’t view the Deep South as part of the same country.) Many of the young men and women who formed the famous Black Bloc in Seattle were in fact eco-activists who had been involved in tree-sits and forest defense lock-downs that operated on purely Gandhian principles—only to find that in the US of the 1990s, non-violent protesters could be brutalized, tortured (have pepper spray directly rubbed in their eyes), or even killed, without serious objection from the national media. So they turned to other tactics. We knew all this. We decided it was worth the risk.

However, we are also aware that when the repression begins, some will break ranks and respond with greater militancy. Even if this doesn’t happen in a systematic and organized fashion, some violent acts will take place. You write that Black Bloc’ers smashed up a “locally owned coffee shop”; I doubted this when I read it, since most Black Blocs agree on a strict policy of not

damaging owner-operated enterprises, and I now find in Susie Cagle's response to your article that, in fact, it was a chain coffee shop, and the property destruction was carried out by someone not in black. But still, you're right: A few such incidents will inevitably occur.

The question is how one responds.

If the police decide to attack a group of protesters, they will claim to have been provoked, and the media will repeat whatever the police say, no matter how implausible, as the basic initial facts of what happened. This will happen whether or not anyone at the protest does anything that can be remotely described as violence. Many police claims will be obviously ridiculous – as at the recent Oakland march where police accused participants of throwing “improvised explosive devices”—but no matter how many times the police lie about such matters, the national media will still report their claims as true, and it will be up to protesters to provide evidence to the contrary. Sometimes, with the help of social media, we can demonstrate that particular police attacks were absolutely unjustified, as with the famous Tony Bologna pepper-spray incident. But we cannot by definition prove all police attacks were unjustified, even all attacks at one particular march; it's simply physically impossible to film every thing that happens from every possible angle all the time. Therefore we can expect that whatever we do, the media will dutifully report “protesters engaged in clashes with police” rather than “police attacked non-violent protesters.” What's more, when someone does throw back a tear-gas canister, or toss a bottle, or even spray-paint something, we can assume that act will be employed as retroactive justification for whatever police violence occurred before the act took place.

All this will be true whether or not a Black Bloc is present.

If the moral question is “is it defensible to threaten physical harm against those who do no direct harm to others,” one might say the pragmatic, tactical question is, “even if it were somehow possible to create a Peace Police capable of preventing any act that could even be interpreted as ‘violent’ by the corporate media, by anyone at or near a protest, no matter what the provocation, would it have any meaningful effect?” That is, would it create a situation where the police would feel they couldn't use arbitrary force against non-violent protesters? The example of Zuccotti Park, where we achieved pretty consistent non-violence, suggests this is profoundly unlikely. And perhaps most importantly at all, even if it were somehow possible to create some kind of Peace Police that would prevent anyone under gas attack from so much as tossing a bottle, so that we could justly claim that no one had done anything to warrant the sort of attack that police have routinely brought, would the marginally better media coverage we would thus obtain really be worth the cost in freedom and democracy that would inevitably follow from creating such an internal police force to begin with?

These are not hypothetical questions. Every major movement of mass non-violent civil disobedience has had to grapple with them in one form or another. How inclusive should you be with those who have different ideas about what tactics are appropriate? What do you do about those who go beyond what most people consider acceptable limits? What do you do when the government and its media allies hold up their actions as justification—even retroactive justification—for violent and repressive acts?

Successful movements have understood that it's absolutely essential not to fall into the trap set out by the authorities and spend one's time condemning and attempting to police other activists. One makes one's own principles clear. One expresses what solidarity one can with others who share the same struggle, and if one cannot, tries one's best to ignore or avoid them, but above all,

one keeps the focus on the actual source of violence, without doing or saying anything that might seem to justify that violence because of tactical disagreements you have with fellow activists.

I remember my surprise and amusement, the first time I met activists from the April 6 Youth Movement from Egypt, when the issue of non-violence came up. “Of course we were non-violent,” said one of the original organizers, a young man of liberal politics who actually worked at a bank. “No one ever used firearms, or anything like that. We never did anything more militant than throwing rocks!”

Here was a man who understood what it takes to win a non-violent revolution! He knew that if the police start aiming tear-gas canisters directly at people’s heads, beating them with truncheons, arresting and torturing people, and you have thousands of protesters, then some of them will fight back. There’s no way to absolutely prevent this. The appropriate response is to keep reminding everyone of the violence of the state authorities, and never, ever, start writing long denunciations of fellow activists, claiming they are part of an insane fanatic malevolent cabal. (Even though I am quite sure that if a hypothetical Egyptian activist had wanted to make a case that, say, violent Salafis, or even Trotskyists, were trying to subvert the revolution, and adopted standards of evidence as broad as yours, looking around for inflammatory statements wherever they could find them and pretending they were typical of everyone who threw a rock, they could easily have made a case.) This is why most of us are aware that Mubarak’s regime attacked non-violent protesters, and are not aware that many responded by throwing rocks.

Egyptian activists, in other words, understood what playing into the hands of the police really means.

Actually, why limit ourselves to Egypt? Since we are talking about Gandhian tactics here, why not consider the case of Gandhi himself? He had to deal with what to say about people who went much further than rock-throwing (even though Egyptians throwing rocks at police were already going much further than any US Black Bloc has). Gandhi was part of a very broad anti-colonial movement that included elements that actually were using firearms, in fact, elements engaged in outright terrorism. He first began to frame his own strategy of mass non-violent civil resistance in response to a debate over the act of an Indian nationalist who walked into the office of a British official and shot him five times in the face, killing him instantly. Gandhi made it clear that while he was opposed to murder under any circumstances, he also refused to denounce the murderer. This was a man who was trying to do the right thing, to act against an historical injustice, but did it in the wrong way because he was “drunk with a mad idea.”

Over the course of the next 40 years, Gandhi and his movement were regularly denounced in the media, just as non-violent anarchists are also always denounced in the media (and I might remark here that while not an anarchist himself, Gandhi was strongly influenced by anarchists like Kropotkin and Tolstoy), as a mere front for more violent, terroristic elements, with whom he was said to be secretly collaborating. He was regularly challenged to prove his non-violent credentials by assisting the authorities in suppressing such elements. Here Gandhi remained resolute. It is always morally superior, he insisted, to oppose injustice through non-violent means than through violent means. However, to oppose injustice through violent means is still morally superior to not doing anything to oppose injustice at all.

And Gandhi was talking about people who were blowing up trains, or assassinating government officials. Not damaging windows or spray-painting rude things about the police.

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