

On the Question of Violence and Nonviolence As a Tactic and Strategy Within the Social Protest Movement

An Anarchist Perspective

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“Let us remember that every great step forward in history has not come into fruition until it has first been baptized in blood.”

- Mikhail Bakunin

Introduction

Militancy and direct action are not only necessary tactical tools for the anarchist left, but, when correctly implemented, they are also the facilitators of inspiration and motivation for both those involved with the act in question and those who observe the act in question. It is such activity that helps draw numbers into the movement by creating an outlet for the venting of frustration and alienation. In short, militancy and direct action, by challenging the entrenched power of the wealthy ruling class and state, fosters a sense of empowerment upon those who partake, while also furthering creative aspirations by hinting at what a revolution toward a non-oppressive society might feel like.

Of course, militancy and direct action do not carry the inherent qualification of being violent or nonviolent in and of themselves. The slashing of management's car tires during a labor dispute, as well as erecting of barricades and subsequent rioting against the forces of the State during a pro-working class demonstration are both clearly militant actions, but so too is a non-violent workers' factory occupation during a strike as well as occupying major city intersections and shutting down of financial districts during a protest against neoliberalism.

Clearly there are many circumstances in which non-violent tactics are not only advisable, but also the only effective course possible. Furthermore, tactical nonviolence is always the preferred course of action when its outcome can bring about the desired objective and subjective results more effectively or as effectively as a violent act. Such practices should be encouraged and taught throughout the anarchist and leftist movement generally in order to maintain a moral superiority over the forces of capital and the state, who of course practices both overt and covert violence with little discrimination on a consistent basis. This commitment to nonviolence is fundamentally based on pragmatism and revolutionary ethics, while finding its material existence through the implementation of tactics. However, nonviolence should, under no circumstances, be understood as a strategy in and of itself. When nonviolence is used as a strategy it transcends its existence as a descriptive term and defines itself as an idea, a noun, as “pacifism”; it becomes an ideology.

When nonviolence is used correctly, as a tactic, it is a most useful tool in the popular struggle. The reason for this is because such a display of resistance is indicative of an underlying threat of violence. For if people are willing to put themselves on the line for the sake of liberty, and if these people are willing to risk bodily harm in such an action, it displays a level of commitment, which, if turned in a violent manner, could manifest itself in the form of a future insurrection; an insurrection where if critical mass is attained could threaten the foundation of state power; that of the ruling class and the underlying anti-culture.

Ironically the victories of the Civil Rights Movement in the South during the 1950's and '60's owes a lot to the inherent threat of violence. In this case, the southern leadership, embodied in Martin Luther King Jr., expounded upon the need for nonviolence to be utilized as a strategy. However, this movement did not take place in a vacuum. Parallel to the happenings in the South, a movement for black liberation was being launched in the North, and elsewhere, as embodied in the Nation of Islam, later in an autonomous Malcolm X, and then in the Black Panther Party

(BPP), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, a group which formally rejected strategic nonviolence while under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael. This aspect of the movement displayed signs of extreme militancy and was not pacifistic in rhetoric or in character. To the government this represented the logical alternative to which the movement as a whole would turn if certain terms were not ceded to the pacifistic element in the South. The much trumpeted success of the Southern Civil Rights Movement's pacifistic strategy has, despite itself, much to thank to the threat of violence

In the following essay, I will elaborate on the above theme. First, I will discuss situations where political violence is not only necessary, but ethically justifiable. Second, I will discuss the natural disjunction between strategic nonviolence and the poor and working classes, and finally, I will discuss the contemporary bourgeois roots of pacifism as an ideology of the status quo.

When Violence is Necessary

The fact is that there are times when the only way to effectively advance a movement is through the use of violence. Sometimes, this necessity is clearly in reaction to particular act of state violence, other times it is due to more general circumstances. Either way, justifiable acts of leftist/working class violence are always fundamentally an act of self-defense insofar as the very institutions of the capitalist state inherently constitute continuing physical and psychological violence against the great mass of its people.

“Once the State moves to consolidate its own power, peace has already been broken.”

- Che Guevara

More concretely, violence can be understood as absolutely necessary during certain phases of popular struggle.

This occurs when:

1. Nonviolent options have been explored yet no ostensible victory has been reached.

In the face of exploitation and oppression, inaction is akin to no action, and hence is tacit acceptance and support of those evils. In addition, the continued implementation of proven ineffectual tactics in the face of these evils must be considered akin to inaction, in that ineffectual tactics translates into the same end result; continued exploitation and oppression of the poor and working class by the hands of the ruling class, bourgeoisie and their lackeys. Thus, it would follow that there may arise circumstances, after the exploration of peaceful options, where the only ethical course available to a movement, or individual, is of a violent kind.

2. Whenever State oppression becomes violent, to the point where the movement itself or large segments of the population or the premises on which the people subsist are threatened with liquidation.

The physical self-defense of a people, a movement, or the premises upon which they subsist, is a self-evident right, obvious in the natural world. To claim otherwise is to deny the bravery, justness and dignity of Sitting Bull and the Lakota of the 1870's, the Jews of Warsaw during the Nazi occupation of the 1940's, the Cuban's defense at the Bay of Pigs in the early 1960's, the man who vanquishes the would-be murderer of his child, and the woman who manages to physically fight off a would-be rapist. To allow for otherwise is nothing but a neurotic self-denying tendency and an unnatural will to suicide.

3. Violence must be understood as a looming fact once the critical mass necessary to seriously challenge a ruling class and state power is domestically reached.

To believe that the state will voluntarily relinquish its power in the face of a moral challenge is as childish and absurd as it is dangerous. History, without exception, has shown that a parent state will react to any legitimate or perceived threat to its domestic power with a ruthless violent suppression of the threat. If that means the murder of large sections of its own population, so be it. Pacifism in the face of such repression translates into no more than the eradication of the insurrectional movement through the means of murder to the sum of absolute death. Once the state finds itself backed into the proverbial corner, it can be expected to act by animalistic instinct; in short, it will fight for its life and will not relinquish until either itself or all of its foes are dead. Let us not forget the 30,000 fallen heroes of the Paris Commune whose blood will forever stain the consciousness of modern France.

Some would argue that the above claim is proven false by the historical fact of Mahatma Gandhi's pacifistic movement; a movement which did succeed in liberating India from direct British imperial rule. However, such a line of argument does not apply in this case, as that particular case did not occur inside a primary capitalist nation. Rather it occurred on the edges of a crumbling empire. The response of the British government would have differed radically if the movement had occurred inside one of its perceived, primary domestic provinces, or if it were a general domestic movement against the state apparatus itself. The former of which is born out in the fact that the present situation in Northern Ireland has its contemporary roots in the 1960's nonviolent Catholic Civil Rights Movement.

Therefore, if the goal of the anarchists and the left generally is not self-eradication through a violent counter reaction and the subsequent consolidation of oppressive forces, it will recognize nonviolence for what it is; a tactic, not a strategy.

Pacifism as Foreign to the Poor and Working Classes

One must also question the ability of a nonviolent movement to generate the critical mass necessary to substantially challenge the entrenched fundamental power structure of the nation/state. Since the death of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, pacifism has failed to attract any significant numbers outside of the upper middle and wealthy classes. The reason for such failure is that pacifism does not commonly attract members of the working and sub-working class because it bears no resemblance to their experience of reality or their values and shared history of struggle.

If one's goal is to aid in the building of a serious revolutionary movement, one must be sure that movement is inclusive to those classes that inherently possess revolutionary potential. Thus, it is necessary to construct a movement which is empirically relevant to poor and working class reality. This not only means agitation on their behalf, but also utilizing a strategy which is consistent with the developing/potential class consciousness of such a constituency. If a movement fails to do such, it will fail to draw the necessary critical mass from those classes and in turn will fail to achieve its supposed goals. Furthermore, such failures are probably indicative of the co-option of that movement by ideological prejudices imported from the bourgeoisie; most likely in the form of upper-middle class activists present in the left. Nonviolence, as a strategy is a perfect example of such counterproductive prejudices.

I have often heard discussions among upper-middle class activists about the need to stay away from violent confrontations with the state at demonstrations in order to “not turn people off”. The fact is the only people who are likely to be automatically turned off by legitimate acts of self-defense are upper middle class and wealthy types who will most likely never be won over to the side of revolution anyway. On the other hand, it is common that folk from within the poor and working classes are inspired by the direct and unobstructed confrontations with the forces of the status quo. These communities appreciate the honesty, dignity, and bravery that popular self-defense demands. These are the future agents of revolution and they are not as easily turned away by the truth that real struggle entails. Violent self-defense on behalf of, and through a constituency emanating from their class, is a more pure expression of their collective frustrations brought on from alienation and made objective through their continuing poverty or sense of slavery through accumulated debt.

To further illustrate this all one has to do is look at the various strikes, demonstrations, protests, riots, etc., of the past two years to see how those from within the poor and working classes have conducted themselves when confronted with state violence and restraint. Here we can observe the violent uprising of the poor and working class black folk within Cincinnati (April 2001), the anti-capitalist riots of the Quebecois youth A20 (anti-FTAA demo, Quebec City, April 2001), the numerous Black Bloc anti-capitalist actions throughout North America and Europe (Seattle, 1999, through Genoa, 2001) the armed peasant uprisings from Bolivia to Nepal, the massive militant protests of the Argentine working class against the neoliberal policies of the capitalist government (summer, 2001), the violent union strikes within South Korea, as well as countless other examples of poor and working class resistance the world over.

Compare these developing mass movements composed of persons squarely within the more oppressed economic classes to the relatively impotent and groundless protests of strictly nonviolent upper middle class “reformers”. Two decades of liberal dominance within the left, from the late 1970’s through the later 1990’s, resulted in little or no tangible victories, and often resulted in isolating left wing politics from its supposed mass working class base. These liberals, democratic socialists, non-government organizations (NGO’s), etc., failed to deliver a mass movement of an oppressed constituency. All they did manage to deliver was countless boring protests, which rarely even received media coverage of any kind, and Walter Mondale, as the losing alternative to Ronald Reagan in the 1984 U.S. Presidential election.

The basic fact is, the strategy of nonviolence is foreign to the poor and working classes, and any grouping which places such an ideology ahead of the real desires and inclinations of the masses of exploited people will inevitably remain marginalized, isolated, and ineffectual. Here they become no more than the would-be mediators of continuing alienation and oppression, if only with a dash more of welfare programs and workplace safety boards.

Pacifism is foreign to the social reality of the workers. For example, few of us who grew up without the privilege of gross excess capital did so without learning the value of knowing how to fight. Unequivocal nonviolence in grade school would have earned us the same thing it does in the political arena; further bullying, further oppression. An early lesson for many of us was the effectiveness of “standing up to the bully.” Such an act always carried with it the threat of violence, if not the implementation of violence. To take such a stand without such a commitment would have resulted in nothing more than a black eye. It is from this early age that the more oppressed classes learn the value of violence as a tool of liberation.

Historically, violence has proven to be politically relevant through union struggles and neighborhood fights against the exploitation of the poor and working class. The history of the labor struggle is a history of blood, death, and dignity. From the Pinkertons to the scabs, to the police, army, and National Guard; from lynching to fire bombings the U.S. Government, acting as the political ram of the ruling class, more often than not has forced the working class to defend itself through its only proven weapons; class-conscious organization and self-defense, when need be, through violence. This is a historical fact that is apparent in the social underpinnings of working class community, if not always consciously remembered by its inheritors.

In addition, the more advanced elements of the poor and working class has, for 150 years, been exposed to and has autonomously developed ideologies of liberations which not only map the current state of affairs and predict future trends, but also prescribe the justified use of violence as a necessary element of their own liberation. In turn, these ideologies, although often greatly flawed, have been a consistent traveler through the trials and tribulations of these workers since the dawn of the industrial age. When successes were found, these ideologies were also present. Although it is true that much leftist ideology is becoming a dinosaur of the past within primary capitalist nations (i.e. those espousing the various forms of authoritarian communism) it must be recognized that in and of itself it has been responsible for its own transcendence. It is part of the common history of struggle and even with its passing it reserves a place of prestige within the social unconscious of the past and present revolutionary struggle. You tell me how willing the more self-conscious elements of the poor and working classes are to deny this history.

Of course, violence should not be canonized. These same communities implement violence upon themselves in a destructive manner as well. Domestic violence, murder, and armed robbery of members of their own class is a reality in many poor and working class neighborhoods. But, these forms of internal violence can be attributed to alienation as experienced in an oppressive society. Thus, crime rates have historically plummeted in such neighborhoods during times of class autonomy (i.e. Paris 1871, Petrograd 1917-1921, Barcelona 1936-39). Of course, we should condemn such negative forms of violence and work toward their eradication, but we should do so without throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Violence, both of a positive and negative sort, is an element of poor and working class culture. Violence is also a proven tool of liberation in poor and working class ghettos, both in relation to the personal and the political. And finally this reality is further validated by ongoing world events and historical fact.

Nonviolence as a philosophic universal must be understood as the *negation* of the existence of the poor and working classes. And no, I do not solely mean their existence as an oppressed element; I mean their existence as a class which possesses a self-defined dignity through their ongoing struggle against alienation and exploitation.

Ideological nonviolence is the negation of their shared history of struggle. It denies their dreams of freedom by its sheer absurdity and stifles certain forms of their self-expression through its totalitarian and insanely idealistic demands. In a word, strategic nonviolence is the negation of class consciousness; it is irrelevant at best and slavery at worst. In itself, it represents the conscious and/or unconscious attempt of the more privileged classes to sterilize the revolutionary threat forever posed by a confident, self-conscious, and truly revolutionary working class.

Once again, it is conceivable that some would argue the contrary by pointing to poor and working class involvement in the nonviolent movement in Gandhi's India and/or Martin Luther King Jr.'s Civil Rights Movement. However, the extent to which non-violence was accepted as a

strategy by these classes is born out in the events which followed the initial successes of these respective movements. In India the same elements that partook in nonviolent actions quickly, and regrettably, fractioned off into two camps; the Hindu on the one hand and the Muslim on the other. Not long after, these factions had no qualms about mobilizing to fight successive wars against one another. Let us remember that both these factions today possess nuclear weapons, which are aimed at one another. In the southern U.S. many of the same persons who marched with King also adopted a decidedly non-pacifistic strategy in the later days of SNCC, the formation of BPP chapters, and the Black Liberation Army cells throughout the region. In addition, let us not forget the riots which occurred upon the news of King's assassination, turning the black ghettos across the U.S. into a virtual war zone. In the final analysis, both of these pacifistic movements must be recognized as only being such in the minds of their respected leadership. The masses of poor and working class people, which gave these movements their strength, never internalized nonviolence as a strategy; rather nonviolence was no more than a particular tactic to be used as long as its utility bore itself out.

Psychological Roots of Pacifism as a Bourgeois Ideology

So, if pacifism bears no resemblance to poor and working class reality and has no historical or sound philosophical base, what can its existence, as a strategy, be attributed to? The answer is: the deformed ideology of the progressive element of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie - in other words that of the classes composing the higher and lower levels of the wealthy privileged classes.

It is true that many individuals from these classes have become legitimate and outstanding revolutionaries through the process of becoming radicalized and declassed; Mikhail Bakunin, Karl Marx and Che Guevara to name but a few. And of course, there are many such individuals in our movement today. But, it is also true that many bourgeois elements present in the left still cling to their class privileges and prejudices as if a gilded crutch. They are oddballs in that they are bourgeois yet are driven by a self-loathing as facilitated by class guilt. On the one hand they wish to rectify the ills they feel responsible for, and on the other they are too unimaginative and weak of constitution to cleave themselves from their class privileges and the relative security that entails. Hence, they cling to the only political strategy which can, in their minds, both absolve them from their material sins and maintain the status quo of their class security; in a word, they become pacifists. In this move they reject the dialectical materialism of both anarchism and communism by subjecting themselves to an idea at the expense of concrete experience.

Pacifism lacks any sound material bases. A quick observation of nature will tell you that the natural world is not without violence and human beings are not outside the natural world. Life is violent. Everything from the eruption of a volcano, to the lion's killing of her prey, to human ingestion of a vegan meal, possesses a degree of violence. Think of all the weeds that were killed in the production of that tomato, or of all the living microorganisms that our body necessarily destroys through ingestion, or through the very act of breathing; that is violence.

Like the eighteenth century French philosopher Rene Descartes, these charlatans reject the fact of the body for the phantom of the mind. They create the idea of unconditional nonviolence and enslave themselves to it; instinct, lived experience, historical fact, be damned. Through their

ideology they become the same beasts of dualism that have tethered the human race from Plato to Catholicism.

Pacifism is fundamentally at odds with anarchism in its view of the state. Pacifism functions by the maxim that the tacit and active perpetrators of oppression (i.e. the state through the ruling class) possess an inherent ability to rectify themselves if the true appalling nature of that oppression is unmasked to them. Hence, it is also assumed that the ruling class possesses the ability to make such an observation and that it will display the desire to make such change. Anarchism contends that the very existence of a state apparatus insures the continuing oppression of the exploited classes. This is due to the inherent tendency of power to corrupt those who possess it; and those who possess power seek to consolidate that power. The state apparatus tends to safeguard itself from such possibilities through the creation of bureaucratic institutions which entail a codified dogma specifically designed to maintain the status quo. With this development class oppression becomes an irreversible fact, within the statist paradigm, even in the unthinkable unlikelihood that large elements of the ruling class were to desire its radical reforming. In this sense the state is a self-propelling evil that is no more capable of eradicating class oppression than it is of eradicating itself; Frankenstein's monster resurrected. Therefore, pacifism is fundamentally at odds with anarchism. Either the state is potentially a vehicle for liberation, or it is an institution of slavery. Plain and simple.

Bourgeois pacifists become modern ideologues of a confused status quo. They adhere to pseudo-rebellion, and in doing so they serve the function of bolstering the state through the implementation of a strategy that acts as an abstracted semblance of insurrection; a false, non-threatening insurrection squarely within the parameters of the predominant anti-culture. And here they defuse the revolutionary potential of any movement they touch by acting as the unconscious arm of the expanding anti-culture apparatus of false appearances and mundane stability. For as long as their strategy lacks any real potential to fundamentally challenge class bias and status quo; as long as such a strategy is devoid of the true ability to deconstruct the economic and cultural system that allows for the establishment of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie; as long as this strategy takes on a language of righteous and pious revolution, these self-loathing activities of a physical comfort can go to sleep at night both feeling redeemed through their rebellion and secure in knowing their tacitly oppressive luxury will be there for them again, tomorrow.

What further makes these pacifists oddballs, is the fact that through their pseudo-revolutionary activity they incur an alienated relationship with the less analytical elements of their own class, who in their ignorance constitute the class majority. These elements mistakenly view them as class traitors. This is ironic because nothing could be further from the truth. These people stand fundamentally in solidarity with their roots. And, if their activity has any ostensible effect on the larger movement, it is to prolong the day of insurrection, not to expedite it.

If left to their own delusions they would not deserve such discussion, but they, like Christian missionaries, seek to spread their neurotic illusion to new populations; in this case the poor and working classes. And in doing so they have infiltrated the leftists and anarchist movements and even now threaten to rob it of its pressing relevance by divorcing it from its learned experience.

The poor and working classes are naturally not drawn to pacifism. If pacifism becomes the prime mode of operation for leftists and anarchists organizations, these organizations will cease to have any legitimate tie to their natural constituents. Although it would be ignorant to contend that such an ideology will fail to gain a certain degree of reluctant converts among naturally opposing classes. If such irrationalities never occurred in society, Italian and German fascism

would never have manifested themselves with the power that they did. In short, aspects of the poor and working classes can be expected to adopt a self-denying ideology if that ideology claims to offer liberation and if that movement in which it is contained appears to be the most prominent in the field. This is not to say that the true movement will be abolished through such a scenario, any more so than it denies the ultimate historical relevance of dialectical materialism, it is only to say that it will prolong the day of reckoning by robbing the oppressed classes of their truly revolutionary organizations.

Conclusion

Perhaps the best way to have repelled Franco's fascist invasion of Spain in 1936 would have been for the C.N.T. and F.A.I. to hold a peaceful sit-in? Maybe Adolph Hitler would have reversed his genocidal policies and instead made strides towards a free society if enough Jews and gentiles would have peacefully marched in Berlin. If non-violence was the strategy of the Devil, he'd probably be ruling heaven right now... no.

In the end analysis, just as there is a place for tactical nonviolence, there is also a place for violence during certain phases of a popular movement. This can manifest as a tool of self-defense or as the midwife of state disembodiment. On the other hand, pacifism, as an ethical system of action, is nothing but an absurd dilution born out of resentment and fear and projected upon the struggles of the poor and working classes by oddball elements of the bourgeoisie. As long as such a strategy is allowed to occupy a prominent role among the ranks of the left, the left will equal the total sum of the socially inept ruling class.

In summation, nonviolence can be used in many circumstances as an effective tactic, but it is irrelevant, irresponsible, and utterly ridiculous to even consider it as a strategy. So yes, nonviolence should be utilized as a tactic where pertinent, and in turn pacifism, as an ideology and a strategy, must be purged from our movement.

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