

Diversity of Tactics, and more

A Response to Peter Gelderloos

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This is a response to the text "Misrepresentations, but Substantial Differences as Well" (accessible on various activist forums online), written by Peter as a response to Gabriel's review of Peter's book The Failure of Nonviolence, entitled "Violence Sells... But Who's Buying?"

Peter, sure, let us continue the discussion with less formality...

There's a lot in your response about misreadings and misrepresentations. I guess the reasons for misreadings and misinterpretations can be readers reading sloppily, authors not expressing themselves well, or a mix of both. I also think that a reviewer's task is not reduced to grasping the author's intentions, but to look for implications of what's being said (and how it is said) beyond those intentions and for the effects of what's being said (and how it is said) in broader public debate. Needless to say, this never excuses distortions or inaccuracies. I'd be more than happy to look at all the examples you've listed in detail if we ever get the chance, but I think addressing them in this essay would imply the risk of too much personal chatter and, possibly, nit-picking. I think it is easy enough for interested readers to look at your book, my review, and your response in order to draw their own conclusions. The same goes for some of the more philosophical questions of our discussion, for example which terms belong to whom or when it is useful to speak of something as a "thing".

Therefore, I want to focus on the topics that seem most relevant for activist debate, that is, the issues related to movement building, strategy, and revolutionary politics. In this context, I will try to answer some of the explicit questions you have asked (for example, how a diversity of tactics plays out in the German context) and to address the issues you've identified as our "substantial differences" (among them, our respective understanding of unity and strategy).

Once more: Violence and Nonviolence

If I try to identify the common ground we have, then I think it is, first of all, that neither of us advocates nonviolence. There also seems to be common ground in – very broadly speaking – distinguishing a dogmatic and authoritarian nonviolent camp (with whom attempts to reconcile are probably fruitless) from a camp that consists of what you call "pacifists who see theirs as an exclusively personal practice they do not expect of others" (and whom we can possibly work with). The differences I see are the following:

1. You want to reserve the term "nonviolence" only for the dogmatic and authoritarian camp, as nonviolence "defines itself as a rejection of everything beyond itself that makes up the diversity of tactics". Since none of the self-identified nonviolent activists I know defines nonviolence in such a way, it remains difficult for me to relate to this definition, but, in the end, it is a matter of words and I am therefore happy to follow your choice of terminology for the purposes of this text – this also applies to the term "combative".
2. You think that the ideology of nonviolence poses a serious threat to social movements worldwide. I don't. I know that you've provided numerous examples that you think should have convinced me, but they haven't. Our perceptions simply differ here. Whether this is the result of being active in different political environments or of an overall different

perception of social struggles seems impossible to establish. My guess would be that it's a combination of both.

3. You think that "pacifists who see theirs as an exclusively personal practice they do not expect of others" should disassociate themselves from the authoritarian and dogmatic non-violent activists (in your words, they should "clean house", which, admittedly, I find an unfortunate metaphor). The reward would be that, in this case, "we could talk about revolutionary nonviolence" – well, "perhaps", you add. Whatever your final decision, I don't feel comfortable demanding acts of disassociation from anyone (I think it's rather degrading), nor do I feel comfortable daring anyone to prove their revolutionary worthiness by actions that I suggest, for example pieing Gene Sharp or Bob Geldof. Truthfully, I'd consider the latter to be mainly a waste of time, but I understand that you feel different. However, I'm not sure about the argument regarding people maintaining "convenient alliances" with, for example, careerists. What are "convenient alliances"? For example, we both like to travel. I use an Austrian passport to haul my privileged self around the world, I assume you use an American one. Wouldn't this make a better example for maintaining a "convenient alliance" with something that we reject (a nation state, no less) than using a label that some careerist might also use? And don't anarchist careerists exist as well? My point is: I don't feel like we're in a position to make the kind of demands you're making.
4. Perhaps as a result of our general differences in perceiving social struggles, we also seem to perceive specific ones differently, or, to be more precise, the discussions surrounding them. You write in your response: "I know that in Sweden, which is certainly not out of your ken, Gabriel, such crypto-pacifist responses to the various immigrant riots in the last four years have been sadly common." To be honest, I wonder how you know this. Those responses must have passed me by. If we take the most recent wave of such protests, the Stockholm riots of May 2013, which received unprecedented international media attention, I'm really not aware of anyone in the autonomous/anarchist/radical/extra-parliamentary-left milieu who offered a "crypto-pacifist response". In fact, hardly any soft-left circles did. The "Open Letter to a Nation on Fire: Trying to Understand the Hand that Throws the Rock at the Police", written by the Gothenburg community group Pantrarna (Swedish for "The Panthers", an explicit reference to the Black Panther Party), is available in English at libcom.org and widely hailed as important commentary on the riots among radicals. The letter was originally published in *Aftonbladet*, Sweden's biggest daily with historical ties to the Social Democratic Party. Perhaps there were some liberal and conservative pundits offering "crypto-pacifist responses", but I don't think these are the people we are talking about as potential allies, are we? Of course, it might also be that we simply have a different understanding of what constitutes a "crypto-pacifist" response. Perhaps for you it suffices to cast doubts on "violence [as] a suitable method for achieving social change" or to state that one is "as upset as everyone else about the destruction of our own neighborhoods". If this is the case, however, groups like Pantrarna or their Stockholm sister organization Megafonen would also be suspicious crypto-pacifists, as it is them I quote (the first quote is from the Pantrarna text, the second from a text by Megafonen also published in *Aftonbladet*). I suppose you could accuse these groups of heading towards "choosing ... unscrupulous

political bedfellows, and ... dishonest ways of silencing other radicals”, but, to put it mildly, I’d consider that a very daring move.

Unity and Strategy

At one point in your response, you launch a passionate broadside against the ”legalistic project” after detecting that I have a ”legalistic mind”, apparently because I asked for clarifications regarding your ”basic minimums” for common struggle. Rest assured: I am not in favor of a ”legal code”, I do not demand ”a clear set of boundaries, in abstract and in advance, to give clarity to every eventuality”, I have no ”obsession with some perfected framework”, and I am not championing ”a clear list of bylaws that tells us what is right and what is wrong”. Instead, like you, I am all for ”an ethic we discuss, not ... a new law” and for ”suggesting how people can find ... answer[s] for themselves”. I also agree that we need ”responses to specific situations” and that these must be the result of a ”never-ending process”. So, even if this might surprise you, we are still on common ground here. However, there are certainly differences in our respective understanding of unity and strategy. I will try to identify the main ones.

1. You think that the term ”unity” has been discredited by deceitful and authoritarian political tendencies to the point where it is no longer possible to evoke it. I don’t share this sentiment. However, once again we’d be entering an argument over words, which I find unnecessarily distracting, so I’d be happy to adapt to your preferred terminology here as well – the only problem being that I’m not sure if there is any word you’d find acceptable for my idea of unity, or if, for that matter, you find my idea of unity acceptable at all. Let me at least spell it out: When I speak of a need for more unity, I mean a stronger effort to find a common base of core values that we can rally around in our struggles despite of our differences, allowing us to use these differences as an inspiration to collectively advance in dialogue rather than to split into various factions content with ignoring each other. Let me also add that there is nothing moralistic about this. I don’t think we all need to love one another, I can’t stand hippiesque rituals, and, to be honest, I don’t even necessarily enjoy the pinnacle of activist collectivity, the communal meal. Yet, whether we like it or not, we are social beings who can only exist in relative collective happiness by not ignoring each other but by recognizing and acknowledging the needs and interests of others and trying to reconcile them with our own to the best degree possible. If we as a revolutionary movement don’t start heading in this direction, what kind of a revolution are we promising?¹

¹ I must perhaps clarify at this point that when I speak of unity, I speak of unity among revolutionaries/radicals. I assumed this would be clear, but maybe it’s not. Ideally, unity will spread with the radical movement, but it’s in radical circles where revolutionary unity begins. I want to clarify this not least because you mention in your response that you would ”be interested in discussing how harshly or gently we should criticize comrades or potential allies when we perceive them to have done some pretty horrible things (i.e. things that would make us no longer consider them comrades, like working with the police)”. In fact, I think you already give the answer in the way you pose the question: if ”working with the police” means to aid the police in the persecution of other radicals, then I don’t think we are dealing with comrades or potential allies. To me, that is the crucial thing; how harshly or gently we criticize these folks seems secondary. Personally, I find talks of ”betrayal” often overly dramatic and notions of ”payback” worrisome, but comrades are affected by the actions of police collaborators in different ways and hence the reactions they deem

2. I find it a little difficult to pin down our substantial difference regarding strategy. On the one hand, I entirely agree with your call for a "positional, relational, and contingent vision of strategy directed towards a goal that is constantly reenvisioned on the basis of an evolving present struggle, a goal that is utopic or horizontal, as in constantly receding, rather than a fixed destination we can presently define and expect to reach in the future". Like you, I think that "reality is ... complex" and that "things aren't that simple". But I suppose this is the very reason why, in your book, I would have hoped for more than four lines of outlining basic minimums for common struggle. I am not asking for "an end to the debate", I am merely asking for what I would see as a stronger commitment to cooperation even when it becomes difficult.
3. It seems to me that we have different tolerance levels when it comes to collective discussions about tactics. You write: "The framework I am using to criticize you is the following: one in which people seek out relationships with others in struggle, communicate and debate especially with those who are different from them, but decide on a case by case basis whether to work together or to pursue their own line of attack." To me, this is simply not enough, as such a model will never allow us to form any alliance beyond, well, a certain case, which, to me, is a main characteristic of reformist politics: you form an alliance to tackle a certain case, then the alliance dissolves (no matter whether it was successful or not), then a new case appears, you build a new alliance, and so forth. I understand that this can be fun, easy, and to a certain degree satisfying, but it will never get us anywhere near building a revolutionary movement, as calling a movement revolutionary can only be meaningful when it refers to a potential of fundamentally changing the economic, political, and social order. I'm afraid that given the complexity of our lives, such a change inevitably demands working with people "we can't even possibly know", a notion that seems to infuriate you. I find calls for "mass movements" rather hollow in times when we are so far from them, but for the sake of the argument I would say that there can't be revolutionary change without a mass movement because we live in a mass society. Unity, therefore, is nothing I see as "obligatory", simply as necessary. And it is not about forming "some larger coalition to give [people] permission to act" either, but simply about accepting that the revolution is larger than our precious petty right to do what we want on any given day (I know that's not what you are saying, I'm just trying to make a point). There are only two other options of fundamental change: limited ones (relevant for a few people) and vanguardist ones (relevant for many people but introduced by a few). I don't think either corresponds to anarchist visions of revolutionary change.
4. The following is a guess, but I'm assuming that what I have written above confirms to you that my understanding of unity and strategy is dangerously leftist. I know you've challenged me to present something different. However, it's a challenge that I don't accept, because I find anti-leftist rhetoric rather tiresome. I see it as nothing but confusing a necessary critique of authoritarianism and centralism with giving up indispensable revolutionary principles. Of course it's tempting to react to the left's historical failure to deliver on its promise of a classless and stateless society by abandoning it altogether. I wouldn't

adequate will differ, too. The exact form these reactions will take will depend on the discussions that comrades have under the given circumstances – akin to the forms of decision-making that I think we both agree on.

even have a problem with it if this was also just a matter of words. But the anti-leftist critique seems to go further than that, for example to suspecting Trojan horses every time someone even raises the question of revolutionary struggle beyond temporary alliances and spontaneous uprisings. I simply recognize no revolutionary promise in such reflexes. If we don't dare tackle the infamous bigger picture, I'm really not sure why anyone should put their trust in anarchism as something actually promising a better life. I am not talking about blueprints for anarchist societies and the ways to get us there, but simply about serious and engaging collective debate that will make people feel confident to engage in experiments of self-management to begin with. As I said, I assume this won't find your approval. Perhaps it is one of our most substantial differences.

Diversity of Tactics

You suggest for me to "write a detailed account about what a diversity of tactics looks like among those who grew up in the German autonomous movement". Interestingly enough, you already seem to have a fairly clear impression of the outcome, since you state that "if a spontaneous popular movement were to appear in Austria or Germany, on the scale of Occupy or the plaza occupations, I would bet that you would suddenly come face to face with the same kind of authoritarian, unsolidaristic, reformist, and incoherent kind of pacifist that dominated the streets for a brief while in North America, the UK, and southern Europe." Honestly, I don't think so, although I concede that much depends on what exactly we are talking about. Will proponents of nonviolence raise their heads? Yes. Will some of them want to control the movement? Yes. Will they succeed? No. They will mainly be a nuisance – background noise.

I am not able to offer you a detailed account here of how a diversity of tactics plays out in the context of radical politics in the German-speaking world, but I will try to sketch a possible framework for such an account.

Let me start with an anecdote: After the 2007 anti-G8 protests in and around Rostock had kicked off with a fairly decent riot in conjunction with a march of about 50.000 people, the "alternative" German daily *taz* titled "Never Again!" and granted leading Attac members a platform to denounce the rioters as "troublemakers ... who have nothing to do with us". Two days later, the *taz* stall at the protesters' camp in central Rostock was smashed. And that was it. The newspaper's editors had violated one of the unwritten codes of a functioning diversity of tactics (don't worry, these codes are open to change and not enforced by a legal apparatus), namely, not to denounce other activists, and they paid a price for it. No scandal followed and no crack in the movement appeared. If anything, *taz* removed itself from the movement by firmly placing itself in the liberal camp, where it truly belongs anyway (briefly an interesting foray into daily newspaper publishing when founded in 1978, *taz* has, for the past thirty years, either been ignoring or vilifying autonomous/anarchist activists while acting as a mouthpiece for the German Green Party).

So, I am not saying that the violence/nonviolence debate is not affecting radical circles in Germany. Of course it does. There are heated discussions, there are folks trying to sell others a "consensus on action" when there is none, there is disappointment, anger, and all-around criticism. But, usually, none of this leads to the notorious unbridgeable chasms or irreconcilable differences.

The most important reason for this probably is, as simple as it may sound, an underlying sense of mutual respect and a common agreement on who the real enemies are. This is something people can always fall back onto. If we wanted a concrete example, we could point to the Wendland, a region in northern Germany, where, since the mid-1990s, tens of thousands of people have been gathering every year to protest, and try to stop, the transport of nuclear waste to a temporary storage site in the town of Gorleben. The methods used during the protests reflect the diversity of the people involved, ranging from manifestations and sit-ins to the sabotage of rail tracks and physical engagement with security forces. Tempers flare between the different camps – before, during, and after the event – but, year after year, they all return without any of them missing.

As I already mentioned, there exist unwritten codes that facilitate this. They include not denouncing other activists, dealing with conflict internally, and granting others the space they need for their actions. Of course, individuals can have a different sense for when these codes are breached, but – to use an example particularly relevant for anarchists – I would say that there hasn't been a single article in the nonviolent anarchist monthly *graswurzelrevolution* in the past few years that has given reason to concern. This doesn't mean that certain ideas or actions haven't been criticized. But if comrades don't have the right to criticize, we fall short of any useful debate.

Why a diversity of tactics seems to work relatively well in the German-speaking world, I'm not sure. German-speaking activists are certainly no more revolutionarily gifted than others. I have mentioned one possible explanation in my review: both a very strong nonviolent/pacifist current and a very strong combative current developed out of the German protest movements of the late 1960s; the strength of both made it impossible for either to deride the other as an insignificant minority or a gang of infiltrators or state agents. Each current had to acknowledge the other's existence and make the best out of it, that is, value the opportunity for lively discussion, the encouragement to self-criticism, and the wide skill set available for radical action. However, I'm not sure if the same can be said about Sweden (at least the combative current wasn't as strong), and I don't experience the problems you are describing in your book there either. So, maybe things in Germany or Sweden aren't actually that different to other countries, and it is indeed our general perception of social movements that differs? Well, as stated above, I believe it is impossible to determine this here, but, luckily, I don't think it matters much, as people will simply relate to the perception that is closest to their own.

How We Speak

Let me end on another note on tone. I know you don't particularly like this topic, but I actually think it is important, especially when we try to carve out the substantial differences between us. After all, it was largely the tone of your book I reacted to. I admit that I find it divisive, and, at times, puzzling. I felt similarly about certain things you wrote in your response. Let me try to illustrate this with a few examples.

1. In your critique of the "legalistic project" you are making fun of pseudo-legalistic terms creeping into activist language. I can't claim to grasp what you're saying (that any agreement is a rule?), but it is of no big importance, because I agree with you that anarchists who act like "lawyers" aren't particularly sexy. However, if we feel the same about judges, we

might want to take it easy on litmus tests and reconsider pronouncements like the following: "When it comes to nonviolence, harsh criticisms are warranted. They are necessary. And they are deserved."

2. You write that you don't use phrases such as "nobody owns a protest" as slogans. It's not really a rebuttal of anything I said, as I was talking about you using slogans as arguments (and not as slogans, which would be more appropriate), but that's besides the point. I readily admit that I focused on the "articulations" in your book that I call slogans more than on the "chain of arguments" in which they appear. I did so with a purpose, since it is the slogans that readers remember out of a chain of arguments, which is why I find it important to choose them carefully. Even if you don't agree, I hope this helps explain why I find a phrase like "the line between democracy and dictatorship is fictitious" highly problematic (regardless of any polls on life in East Germany pre- and post-German reunification). I understand that you want to drive home the point that a democracy is a state, too, and that there is no "absolute difference" between dictatorship and democracy. I'm not sure what an "absolute difference" is (and I certainly never claimed that any such thing existed between dictatorship and democracy), but I still don't understand what the point of using such a phrase is other than it perhaps sounding very radical. If you want to emphasize that democracies also suck (which, unsurprisingly, I agree with, and there really never was any talk about giving them a "free pass"), I truly think there are better ways of doing it. Meanwhile, we must acknowledge, and analyze, the differences between different kinds of states in order to be able to fight each of them effectively. By garnishing our analysis with simplified slogans, I don't think we're doing ourselves a favor. As you yourself say, "things aren't that simple." I don't think that anarchist theory should pretend they are either.
3. Finally, I must admit that your choice of words sometimes simply baffles me. Let me use the following example: "I admire those societies that fought back against colonization. Some of them continue to fight back, whereas the peaceful ones have been assimilated or annihilated. That should be a lesson for all of us. When a group of people try to conquer, rape, and enslave – in a word, to rule – it is simply not an ethical or 'moral' response to sing songs to them, to try to change their minds but refrain from striking them down."
 - a) You might say that I am misreading again, but I just can't see how this statement is different from saying that those who – forcefully (?) – strike back are true revolutionaries, while those who try to handle their life under oppression differently, resist in other ways, or simply can't strike back in the manner you find admirable betray the revolutionary cause? To me, this is an extremely troubling way of passing judgment on people living under oppression. Besides, I do, in fact, have great admiration for those able to show restraint in struggle when it is a hard thing to do, managing to use only the force they deem necessary to advance the resistance.
 - b) Your dismissal of "singing songs" conveys how you, in my opinion, misconceive certain forms of resistance. Songs sung by oppressed people are not the Christmas carols sung at the vigils of the Western middle class. If we take South Africa as an example, the singing of songs played a tremendously important part in the struggle of the anti-apartheid movement.

c) To suggest that, if you are confronted by oppressors, it is more ethical to "strike them down" than to "try to change their minds" – which, I suppose, can only mean trying to turn them into better people who do not oppress – is seriously bewildering to me. I completely understand that it might be necessary to strike them down or that you can't be bothered to wait for anything else to happen, but to declare the act of striking someone down to be ethically superior to turning someone into a better person stands in total contradiction to anything I'd consider liberatory. To be honest, I find it rather scary.

Conclusion

I'm not sure if the following question – posed towards the end of your response – was rhetorical or whether you'd actually want me to answer: "I am curious, though, if you think that I succeed in being less insulting, and more open to the possibility of working together or engaging in self-criticism than in *How Nonviolence Protects the State*. That was my goal. I wonder if I succeeded."

Well, if you indeed wanted an answer, I'm afraid it would have to be: No, if that was your goal, I don't think you succeeded. However, I am actually surprised that you're describing this as your goal, at least with regard to the "possibility of working together". How does that fit in with clarifying the following: "I don't want to bridge the divide as it currently exists. ... I am closer to those who think it is best to just write off the proponents of nonviolence rather than debate them"? Obviously, if that's the case, you need not worry about your tone or about how much you alienate potential nonviolent allies. Then again, you also say that you want "to engage with those who are undecided, and to show anyone in the nonviolence crowd who sincerely believes in revolution that they are burning their bridges". If you are serious about this – as I'm sure you are – then the tone might matter after all, since you have to ask yourself how to make the best arguments for your cause and how to best present them. Now, of course I might be proven wrong, but my suspicion is that you're not going to win over many people sitting on the fence and that you're not going to make sincere nonviolent revolutionaries believe that stuff about burning bridges.

Perhaps, this is precisely what made me react to your book the way I did, because despite of all the substantial differences we might have, I really feel I'm on your side in the violence/nonviolence debate. I just don't think your book does this side much good. Or, let me rephrase that: Your book will work tremendously well as a source of inspiration and reassurance for those already on your side, especially if they like their combativeness expressed verbally and regard concerns like mine as wimpy. That's a great achievement for a writer. But are you opening doors for better working together with those who are not on your side? I seriously doubt that. I think that, first and foremost, you wrote a book that preaches to the choir. Again, there's nothing wrong with that. I guess it's just a matter of choosing your audience.

With respect to self-criticism, I know that you stress the importance of it. But – and please don't take this the wrong way – everybody does; it's not particularly popular to propagate self-righteousness. That's why the willingness to engage in self-criticism really needs to become tangible in the way we express ourselves. To me, it is statements like the following that stand out in your book: "Even in the heart of nonviolent movements, one is often hard-pressed to find any real articulation of a critique against exploitation, domination, or the power structures

that create these problems. Those who support a diversity of tactics, on the other hand, tend to remain on point, with no alienation between their ideas and methods, attacking capitalism in their discourse as well as in moments of protest and action.” To be frank, I consider this about as far removed from demonstrating a willingness to self-criticism as it gets. Yet, we do indeed need self-criticism more desperately than anything. The state, the media, the ”proponents of nonviolence” might all stand in the way of anarchist triumph, but, at the end of the day, the reason the anarchist movement’s impact on life in general remains relatively weak is because the anarchist movement remains relatively weak. This is why I personally find discussions about our weaknesses much more relevant than repeated poundings of our true or supposed enemies.

Is *The Failure of Nonviolence* less insulting than *How Nonviolence Protects the State*? It’s been a long time since I read the latter, so I can’t really compare, but I would say that *The Failure of Nonviolence* sets a pretty high standard. And so does your response. Peter, you write with respect to proponents of nonviolence that ”*the best of them* [my emphasis] have made some quiet criticisms and then gone on ignoring all the problems” while the rest ”continued sharing the same bed with snitches, racists, liars, and careerists”. Honestly, what do you expect?

In solidarity,
Gabriel

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