

# The Failure of Nonviolence (Chapters 1-4)

From the Arab Spring to Occupy

Peter Gelderloos

## THE FAILURE of NONVIOLENCE: FROM the ARABSPRING to OCCUPY

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PETER GELDERLOOS  
author of *How Nonviolence Protects the State*

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When they poured across the border  
I was cautioned to surrender,  
this I could not do;  
I took my gun and vanished.  
[...]  
“Oh, the wind, the wind is blowing,  
through the graves the wind is blowing,  
freedom soon will come;  
then we’ll come from the shadows.

-Leonard Cohen, “*The Partisan*”

# Introduction: Nonviolence has lost the debate

Nonviolence has lost the debate. Over the last 20 years, more and more social movements and rebellions against oppression and exploitation have broken out across the world, and within these movements people have learned all over again that nonviolence does not work. They are learning that the histories of purported nonviolent victories have been falsified, that specific actions or methods that could be described as nonviolent work best when they are complemented by other actions or methods that are illegal and combative. They are learning that exclusive, dogmatic nonviolence does not stand a chance at achieving a revolutionary change in society, at getting to the roots of oppression and exploitation and bringing down those who are in power.

At best, nonviolence can oblige power to change its masks, to put a new political party on the throne and possibly expand the social sectors that are represented in the elite, without changing the fundamental fact that there is an elite that rules and benefits from the exploitation of everybody else. And if we look at all the major rebellions of the last two decades, since the end of the Cold War, it seems that nonviolence can only effect this cosmetic change if it has the support of a broad part of the elite—usually the media, the wealthy, and at least a part of the military, because nonviolent resistance has never been able to resist the full force of the State. When dissidents do not have this elite support, strict nonviolence seems like the surest way to kill a movement, as when pure nonviolence led to the total collapse of the anti-war movement in 2003<sup>1</sup>, or an enforced nonviolence led to the collapse of the student movement in Spain in 2009<sup>2</sup>.

In dozens of new social movements around the world, people have gone into the streets for the first time thinking that nonviolence is the way, because contrary to the claims of many pacifists, our society teaches us that while violence may be acceptable for governments, people on the bottom who wish to change things must always be nonviolent. This is why from the Occupy Movement in the US to the plaza occupation movement in Spain to the student movement in the UK, tens of thousands of people who were participating in a struggle for the first time in their lives, who only knew about revolution and resistance from television or from public schools

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<sup>1</sup> This argument is documented in *How Nonviolence Protects the State*. In sum, nonviolent organizations predicted, after the largest protests the world had ever seen, that their peaceful methods would prevent the war. When they were proven wrong, many people who believed in this nonviolent model for change became disillusioned and dropped out, whereas other people became frustrated with the enforcement of nonviolence and the parade-like, self-congratulatory character of the movement, as well as its refusal to express rage at mass murder or condone the sabotage of the war effort. The movement imploded and disappeared with spectacular speed.

<sup>2</sup> In Spain, self-appointed student leaders prevented a discussion of a diversity of tactics and physically ejected students who tried to mask up or practice self-defense in the protests. They organized a series of huge protests and university occupations in response to the privatization of higher education, and after the largest of these protests, strictly nonviolent, the movement swiftly disappeared (until reemerging with a strike and riots three years later). After the university occupations were evicted in Barcelona, a part of the students used direct action and combative tactics to occupy an empty building in the city center and set up a “Free University”. The space for self-organization and alternative education was won only because some students decided to practice combative street tactics. Thanks to this illegal experience, the student movement was kept alive, and the self-appointed leaders were no longer in control of it when it reemerged in 2012.

(which is to say, from the media or from the government) overwhelmingly believed in nonviolence. And around the world, experience taught many of these people that they were wrong, that the pacifists, together with the media and the government had lied to them, and in order to change anything, they had to fight back.

This has been a collective learning process that has taken place around the globe, and the direction of that process has overwhelmingly gone from nonviolence to a diversity of tactics—the idea that we cannot impose a limitation of tactics or one method of struggle on an entire movement, that we need to be able to choose from a wide range of tactics, that struggles are more robust when such a variety of tactics are present, and that everybody needs to decide for themselves how to struggle (peaceful tactics, therefore, are included within a diversity of tactics, where nonviolence excludes all other tactics and methods).

Eight years ago, there were frequent debates between proponents of nonviolence and proponents of a diversity of tactics. In the fall of 2004, I wrote *How Nonviolence Protects the State*, one of several similar polemics to appear at the time (the arguments I make in that book, as well as criticisms of it, are outlined in the appendix). In the climate of the antiglobalization movement, which was heavily skewed towards nonviolence thanks to the disappearance or institutionalization of the social movements that came before us, and thanks to the heavy ngo participation, the debate felt like an uphill battle, although most of us were aided and inspired by the discovery or republication of texts from earlier generations of struggle, like Ward Churchill's *Pacifism as Pathology* or Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

At that time, proponents of nonviolence frequently emerged from their ivory towers to debate with proponents of a diversity of tactics. But in the intervening years, something has changed. Insurrections have occurred around the world, while nonviolent movements have proven themselves stillborn or morally bankrupt (see Chapter 3). Even within the confines of the antiglobalization movement, the most powerful and communicative protests were those that openly organized on the basis of a diversity of tactics, while the rebellions in the Global South that kept the movement alive were nothing close to pacifist.

Many of the proponents of nonviolence were drawing on a rich if somewhat flawed history of peaceful movements for change, like the Latin American solidarity movement in the US or the anti-militarist and antinuclear movements in Europe. But many of these older, principled pacifists have disappeared, while those who have remained active were scarcely present in the emergence of the new nonviolent mass movements. In the face of its defeats, nonviolence nourished itself not in the experience of social movements, which repeatedly counseled against it, but rather anchored itself with the support of the mass media, the universities, wealthy benefactors, and governments themselves (see Chapter 8). Nonviolence has become increasingly external to social movements, and imposed upon them.

As this has happened, direct debate between the idea of nonviolence and that of a diversity of tactics has become increasingly rare. The criticisms of nonviolence that were published in those years made a number of arguments that would have to be either rebutted or acknowledged for any honest debate to continue. These include:

- the accusation that proponents of nonviolence, in conjunction with the State, have falsified the history of the movement against the war in Vietnam, the struggles for civil rights in the US, and the independence movement in India to portray movements that used a diversity of tactics as nonviolent, and to make a partial or limited victory seem like a full victory;

- the argument that the State was able to prevent the movement from attaining full victory, both in the case of civil rights and Indian independence, thanks to the role of pacifists in dialoguing with the government and attacking others in the movement who used more combative tactics;
- the fact that proponents of nonviolence, particularly those who are white and middle-class, have heavily edited the teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi to cut out those figures' own learning processes and their radicalization in later years, and to silence their criticisms of white progressive allies or their support for non-pacifist movements including urban rioters and armed liberation movements;
- documentation of government, police, and media encouragement of nonviolence within social movements, including government strategy papers that show that the State prefers to go up against a peaceful movement rather than a combative movement;
- evidence of paternalism and racism by nonviolent organizations towards the struggles of poor people and people of color
- the argument that government and business institutions are structurally immune to a "change of heart" and that historically a strictly nonviolent resistance has never provoked massive mutiny from the military, police, or other institutions, as has combative or diverse resistance;
- a long list of gains won by movements that used a diversity of tactics;
- the argument that "violence" is an intrinsically ambiguous category that enables more analytical manipulation than precision;
- the argument that most of the alleged problems with revolutionary violence are in fact problems that can be attributed to authoritarian movements that use violence and not to anti-authoritarian movements that use violence.<sup>3</sup>

Yet proponents of nonviolence in recent years have not acknowledged these criticisms, neither to rebut them nor to revise their own positions. They continue repeating the clichés, the misinformation, the broad statements, and the name-dropping of Gandhi and King that sparked the criticisms in the first place. But more often still, they avoid any direct communication altogether. In social movements across the world, they have begun spreading the claim that the Black Bloc in particular, or masked rioters in general, are police provocateurs and government agents. Never mind that in every single one of the many countries where this cheap accusation has been made, there are comrades in the social movements who argue in favor of self-defense against the police, of taking over the streets, and of smashing banks; never mind that they have already published explanations of their actions and that they would also be willing to sit down with those of another opinion to debate these things; and never mind that many of them have dedicated their lives to social movements for years—not just to the task of attacking banks but also to solidarity in all its forms, as well as many kinds of creation and self-organization.

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<sup>3</sup> All of these arguments are explained at length and documented in *How Nonviolence Protects the State*.

With increasing frequency, unscrupulous supporters of nonviolence have spread the accusation, often without any evidence, that other members of a social movement are police provocateurs, and they have done this precisely because they are afraid to debate. They have to rob their opponents of any legitimacy and prevent bystanders to the debate from realizing that there is indeed any debate going on, that the social movements contain conflicting beliefs and practices. And by spreading false rumors of infiltration and dividing the movement, they expose those they accuse to violence, whether that is the violence of arrest or the violence of fellow protesters. On a number of occasions, police have tracked down and arrested those “bad protesters” who are accused of being infiltrators in order to clear their names. Supporters of nonviolence have often aided police in identifying the “bad protesters”.<sup>4</sup> And after organizing or participating in debates on nonviolence over a hundred times in Europe, and North and South America, I am convinced that those who have most often physically attacked fellow protesters have been supporters of nonviolence. This is certainly confirmed by what I have seen with my own eyes. The episode has played out so many times that it has lost all its humorous irony: proponents of nonviolence attacking those they disagree with for not using peaceful tactics.

There was a time when the only people dishonest enough to toss around the accusation that the Black Bloc or other masked protesters are police infiltrators were Stalinists. Now, this has become a stock argument, not only by conspiracy nuts but also by pacifists who claim the mantle of Gandhi and King. Lies and manipulations are a resort of those who have lost an argument but don't have the decency to admit it.

In the plaza occupation movement in Spain, self-appointed leaders imposed strict adherence to nonviolence, even prohibiting the blocking of streets or the painting of banks, and they boycotted any debate on the subject. In Barcelona, they even made the paperwork disappear when anarchists tried to reserve the sound system to organize such a debate. And during Occupy, a number of mainstream journalists posing as friends of the movement published denunciations filled with manipulations and misinformation in a bald-faced attempt to criminalize a part of the movement.

When one of these journalists, *The New York Times*' Chris Hedges, sat down to debate a member of Crimethinc,<sup>5</sup> he repeatedly contradicted himself, denied some of the arguments he made in his infamous article, and proved incapable of understanding that violence is a social construct that is applied to some forms of harm but not to others, often depending on whether such harm is considered normal within our society. When some nonviolence proponents broke the principles of unity and denounced fellow protesters after the demonstrations against the Vancouver Olympics, one of them subsequently debated Harsha Walia from “No One is Illegal”, and got soundly thrashed.<sup>6</sup>

Most proponents of nonviolence have been smarter, and they have avoided any level playing field. They have not chosen the terrain of the movement itself, because collective experiences repeatedly prove them wrong. Instead they have turned towards the elite and gotten support from

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<sup>4</sup> One website, [violentanarchists.wordpress.com](http://violentanarchists.wordpress.com), contains dozens of examples from multiple countries across the world showing how accusations of being provocateurs are made against anarchists with no evidence or contradictory evidence, how the mainstream media often promote these rumors, and how these rumors have sometimes resulted in people getting arrested.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.crimethinc.com/blog/2012/09/17/post-debate-debrief-video-and-libretto/>

<sup>6</sup> The transcript of Harsha Walia's part of the debate, and a link to a video of the entire debate, can be found at <http://riselikelions.net/pamphlets/14/10-points-on-the-black-bloc>.



the system itself. Mainstream, for-profit publishing companies print out their books by the millions, in a stream of titles that increases as combative social movements gain more ground. Mainstream, for-profit media give nonviolent activists interviews while they demonize the so-called violent ones. University professors and ngo employees living off of grants from the government or wealthy donors (and living lush, compared to those of us who make our living working in restaurants and bars, shoplifting, teaching in public schools, driving taxis, doing temp work or sex work, or volunteering for medical experiments), also tend to weigh in on the side of nonviolence, bringing a hefty array of institutional resources along with them.

All of these resources overwhelm the small counterinformation websites, the pirate radio stations, and the all-volunteer independent presses of the movement. For every book we print out, often cutting and binding by hand, they can print a thousand books. The proponents of nonviolence, yet again, have chosen to unscrupulously work with and for the system in a Faustian pact, availing themselves of resources, economic security, safety from repression, and even fame, but make no mistake: they have revealed themselves as morally corrupt. The closer one gets to the do-it-yourself, the self-organized, and the crowd-funded structures of our movements for revolution, and the more one is immersed in the streets, in the struggles of those who are fighting for their own lives, the more likely you are to find support for a diversity of tactics. And the closer you get to the ngos, to the corporate publishing houses, to the mainstream media or the richly funded “alternatives”, to the elite universities, to the media-conscious careerists, and to the halls of wealth and privilege, the more likely you are to find strict support for exclusive nonviolence.

Nonviolence has failed on a global level. It has proven to be a great friend to governments, political parties, police departments, and ngos, and a traitor to our struggles for freedom, dignity, and well-being. The vast majority of its proponents have jumped ship to cozy up to the media, the State, or wealthy benefactors, using any cheap trick, manipulation, or form of violence (like attacking fellow protesters or helping the cops carry out arrests) that comes in handy to win the contest, even if it means the division and death of the movement. Many have proven themselves to be opportunists, politicians, or careerists. And a principled minority who actually have remained true to their historical movements still have not answered for past failings or current weaknesses.

In response to *How Nonviolence Protects the State*, there were a few principled supporters of nonviolence (writing in *Fifth Estate* or on *Richmond Indymedia*, for example) who criticized the tone of the book but accepted many of the criticisms, and called on other pacifists to read it in order to come to terms with certain mistakes.

In this book also, I argue in favor of a diversity of tactics. At its most basic, the concept of a diversity of tactics is nothing more than the recognition that different methods of struggle exist side by side. My goal is not to make other people think like I do or support the exact same tactics and methods that I do. To me, not only is it inconceivable that a movement contain a homogeneity of methods, it is also undesirable. It is nothing but authoritarianism to censor a movement for social change so that everyone else uses the same method as we do. This is why I believe that nonviolence—meaning an attempt to force nonviolent methods across an entire movement<sup>7</sup>—is authoritarian and belongs to the State. For the same reason, I do not want to impose my methods

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<sup>7</sup> This is by no means a straw man: nonviolence is predominantly expressed not as the idea that sometimes we should use peaceful tactics but the idea that a movement must be nonviolent in its entirety. “A 99% commitment to nonviolence is not enough,” as some have said. The concept in its essence presupposes a division of all actions on the basis of the category of “violence”, a belief that the nonviolent actions are superior and that violent actions, even in

on others. And even if this could be done through the pure force of reason, simply convincing everybody (and it couldn't, for no human group ever thinks with the same mind, and thank the heavens for that), it would be a grave mistake. We can never know whether our analysis and our methods are wrong, except sometimes with hindsight. Our movements are stronger when they employ diverse methods and analyses and these different positions criticize one another.

Those of us who have tried to create a more conflictive struggle have often been wrong, and sometimes we have been aided by the criticism of those who are more drawn to healing and reconciliation than to conflict. But that kind of mutual criticism and support is only possible if those who today separate themselves as pacifists decide unequivocally to stand always with those who struggle, and always against the powers that oppress.

My aim with this book is not to convert or delegitimize every person who prefers nonviolence. Within a struggle that uses a diversity of tactics, there is room for those who prefer peaceful methods as long as they do not try to write the rules for the entire movement, as long as they do not collaborate with the police and the other structures of power, and as long as they accept that other people in the struggle are going to use other methods, according to their situation and their preferences. It would also help if they acknowledged the historical failings of nonviolence, but that is only their concern if they wish to develop effective nonviolent methods that must actually be taken seriously, as contrasted with the hollow, comfortable forms of nonviolence that have predominated in the last decades.

And while any struggle not attempting to enforce homogeneity must accept the existence of a diversity of tactics, I do not wish to give anyone the impression that we, collectively, have been doing a good job of building this struggle, or that the diversity of tactics framework is adequate to our needs. We need much stronger social struggles if we are to overcome the State, capitalism, patriarchy—all the forces that oppress and exploit us—to create a world on the basis of mutual aid, solidarity, free association, and a healthy relationship with the earth and one another. To that end, I will conclude by talking about struggles that have revealed promising new directions, and about how we can move past a diversity of tactics so that different methods of struggle can complement one another critically and respectfully.

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small quantity, will corrupt or pollute the movement as a whole. To be a proponent of nonviolence is not to simply prefer peace, but to sign up to the peace police and attempt to determine the course of the whole movement.

# Chapter 1. Violence Doesn't Exist

Perhaps the most important argument against nonviolence is that violence as a concept is ambiguous to the point of being incoherent. It is a concept that is prone to manipulation, and its definition is in the hands of the media and the government, so that those who base their struggle on trying to avoid it will forever be taking cues and following the lead of those in power.

Put simply, violence does not exist. It is not a *thing*. It is a category, a human construct in which we choose to place a wide array of actions, phenomena, situations, and so forth. "Violence" is whatever the person speaking at the moment decides to describe as violent. Usually, this means things they do not like. As a result, the use of the category "violence" tends towards hypocrisy. If it is done to me, it is violent. If it is done by me or for my benefit, it is justified, acceptable, or even invisible.

In the last ten years, I have organized or participated in dozens of workshops on the topic of nonviolence. Whenever I can, I ask people to define "violence". The curious thing is that no group of people, whether they number five or a hundred, has ever agreed on the definition. And we're not talking about a random sample of the population, but relatively homogeneous groups who participate in social movements, who live in the same town and often know each other, or in a few cases a neighborhood association or study group. Excepting the occasional university class, we're talking about a self-selecting group of people who come out to a talk critical of or in support of nonviolence. And even in that narrow sample, there is no consensus about what violence actually means.

Sometimes I would try teasing it out by asking folks to stand or raise their hand if they thought a specific action or situation was violent. Then I named cases like, "a protestor punching a cop who is trying to arrest someone," "breaking the windows of a bank that evicts people from their houses," "buying and eating factory-farmed meat," "buying and eating factory-farmed soy," "a person killing someone trying to rape them," "carrying a gun in public," "paying your taxes," "driving a car," "the police evicting someone from their house," "making a cop feel good about their job," "a predator killing and eating prey," "a lightning bolt killing someone," "imprisonment" and so on.

After doing this exercise dozens of times, I noticed a few clear patterns. First, as I have already mentioned: there was no agreement. But even more interesting was what happened if I asked people to close their eyes while answering. If they could not see how their peers were responding, there was an even greater divergence. If people had their eyes open, most questions had a clear majority describing the case as "violent" or "not violent". If their eyes were closed, many more cases were divided clearly down the middle (this divergence was even more evident if I asked people to position themselves on a spectrum rather than giving a simple yes or no). In other words, "violence" is not necessarily a category that is reasonably defined, so much as one that is defined by the reactions of our peers. What is considered normal or acceptable is much less likely to be defined as violent, no matter how much harm it may cause.

Something that critics of nonviolence have long said is that nonviolence hides structural violence or the violence of the State, yet it is this kind of violence, and not riots or liberation struggles, that harms far more people around the world. It was no surprise, then, that many people, especially outside the United States,<sup>1</sup> thought that it was violent for someone to carry a gun in public, whereas hardly anyone considered working as a cop to be a violent act, even though being a cop means, among other things, carrying a gun in public. In other words, the category of violence makes the legal force of the police invisible, whereas it highlights anyone who fights back against this commonplace. This is why we say that nonviolence privileges and protects the violence of the State. This is why the most respected, longstanding pacifist organizations will prohibit people from coming armed to their demonstrations (even armed with things as innocuous as sticks or helmets) but will make no move to disarm the police, whom they often invite to oversee their protests. And this is why the police, in turn, try to urge protesters and protest organizations to be nonviolent, to publish nonviolent codes of conduct, and to expel or help arrest any “bad protester” who doesn’t follow the law.<sup>2</sup>

Only people who are involved in radical causes, or who have experienced it first hand, tend to see structural harm as violence. People in a typical college class do not identify paying taxes or buying clothes made in a sweatshop as violent. People who have been foreclosed, or participants in a group that fights foreclosures, will identify an eviction as violent. Animal rights activists will identify eating meat as violent. Small farmer advocates or rainforest advocates will identify soy as violent. Almost no one will identify driving a car as violent, even though in objective terms it is the item on the list that has caused and will cause the most deaths, without a doubt.

What about natural violence? What about the harm caused by weather, by predators, by lack of predators, by the simple fact so many people still have not come to terms with, which is that everybody dies? How much does the concept of a “right to life” owe to Christian morality, founded in the idea that our lives belong to God and not to us? What is the relationship between this fear of violence and a fear of the naturalness and inevitability of harm and death? Categorically separating harm that is inevitable in nature and harm caused by humans is inextricable from a separation of humans from their environment, both philosophically and materially. How much suffering is caused by this separation?

Does violence mean causing harm? If we participate in a non-voluntary structure (like the State or the capitalist market) that tortures, kills, or malnourishes millions of people, are we off the hook, just because we would face negative consequences for refusal (to pay taxes, to engage in any market exchange because, let’s face it, even if you buy green, all economic activity

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<sup>1</sup> This detail is extremely significant, as it shows that if something is legal and therefore normalized by the State, it is less likely to be considered violent: in the US, carrying a gun in public is legal, whereas in Europe and South America, generally it is not.

<sup>2</sup> In *How Nonviolence Protects the State*, I document police manuals, FBI memos, military counterinsurgency experts, and studies of the police that show state attempts to convince social movements to be nonviolent, or evaluations that a popular nonviolent movement is less of a threat than a popular armed movement. A much more recent example occurred after the March 29, 2012 general strike in Spain, which led to heavy rioting in Catalunya. The Catalan Interior Minister Felip Puig (in charge of the police and public order) was fried by the media for losing control over the streets. A large part of his comprehensive response, the government’s plan of repression, was to pressure organizations that plan protests and strikes to assume responsibility for security and peacekeeping, to criminalize the wearing of masks, to encourage “the citizens” not to stand by the rioters (during the day’s events, even those who were not directly participating in the clashes stayed close to the riots, making it impossible for the police to counterattack), and to set up a public snitching website in the hopes that fellow protesters would reveal the identities of rioters who had been caught on camera.

fuels overall economic activity)?<sup>3</sup> This would make a joke of nonviolence, if those who fight back against structures of oppression are considered worse than those who accept them passively. And if complicity with violent structures is also to be defined as violent, then how much resistance is required of us so as not to be violent? If we participate in a protest once a year, that after over thirty years has still not succeeded in closing one military school, can we now be considered nonviolent? What if we get arrested for civil disobedience, even if we know that our arrest will probably change nothing?

These questions are impossible to answer. We are all forced to participate in a society that is held together by structural violence, and rewarded for our participation with various privileges, though these privileges are spread unevenly across society. Given that those who use some form of visible, antisocial violence are often the least likely to enjoy the privileges of structural violence, there is no feasible way to determine who is violent and who is not. And if we define passive complicity as support for violence, there is no way to judge which methods of struggle are more or less violent, since a peaceful method may be more complicit with structural violence. Given that we do not yet know for sure which methods will be most effective at finally abolishing the structures that are oppressing us and destroying the planet, no one can make a solid claim to having a truly peaceful method, unless we understand “peaceful” as “non-conflictive” and perhaps also as “at peace with existing structures of violence”.

Therefore, nonviolence is not an absence, avoidance, or transformation of violence. That would be impossible to certify. Nonviolence is an attempt to resolve, transform, or suppress those things in our society and in our social movements that appear to its practitioners to be violent. Because violence cannot be understood objectively, nonviolent groups will tend to focus on eliminating or discouraging the forms of violence that are more obvious, and in their reach; the kinds of violence that are not normal, but that go against normality; the kinds of violence that are not invisible, but spectacular. This means nonviolence will prioritize resistance against open war (a “hot” war between states), against dictatorships, against military rule, while downplaying or even cozying up to the less visible violence of democratic government, capitalism, and structural warfare. This also means pacifying those who are fighting against power, because the act of rebellion will always appear to be the most violent act in our society. For this reason, many proponents of nonviolence denounce any combative form of rebellion while normalizing and even justifying the repressive response of the State.<sup>4</sup> This is not by any means true of all practitioners of nonviolence, but it is the logical outcome of the contradictions in the idea of nonviolence, and therefore it is the path that many or most practitioners will take.

It is no surprise, then, that one of the largest nonviolent movements of recent years, the “indignados” of Spain,<sup>5</sup> declared any illegal actions including blocking streets or even guerrilla

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<sup>3</sup> Which is to say that the company that produces green or worker-friendly products still contributes directly to exploitation and ecocide, because the commodity is simply not an earth-friendly or human-friendly form. The same company produces other products that are even more blatantly abusive, or if it’s one of the few companies that only markets eco- and worker-friendly products, the profits it generates recirculates in the economy and goes on to fund all sorts of other activities.

<sup>4</sup> *Pacifism as Pathology* documents many examples of this tendency to blame the victims of repression or claim that repression is justified.

<sup>5</sup> Because not all of the 15<sup>th</sup> of May plaza occupation movement was nonviolent nor unified behind a progressive populism, I use the largely media-assigned label of “indignados” only to refer to those who saw themselves as peaceful citizens indignant with the direction their government was going in. Many other people in the movement believed in revolution and were beyond indignant.

gardening—turning the grassy lawn of a public plaza into a garden—to be violent. In contrast, many self-described pacifists I have met have decided that self-defense or even assassinating dictators would not be violent because they were aggressors and such an action would avert a much greater harm. Violence is a very flexible term that people can bend and twist however they want to morally justify or condemn the actions they have already decided are acceptable or unacceptable.

Violence is so vague, so hard to define, it is useless as a strategic category. It would be silly to abolish it as a word, because it can succinctly describe a certain emotional reality. But to use it analytically, to use it as a guiding criterion for our strategies of struggle, is an invitation to confusion.

It can take hours of debating and only sometimes will a group of people agree to a common definition of violence. But they have accomplished nothing, because some of them will still not be convinced whether “nonviolent” lines up with “good” and “violent” with “bad” as they are intended to. In other words, they still will not have learned anything about the proper methods for struggle. And more importantly, nearly everyone else in the world will still be using another definition,

How was the category of “violence” introduced in our strategic debates? I would argue that it was introduced by the very institution that serves as the gatekeeper to people’s perception of violence: the media. It is the media who constantly discipline social movements to adopt these categories and defend themselves from the ever-ready accusation of being “violent”. As soon as dissidents try to defend themselves by arguing that they are not violent, they have fallen into the trap, taking up the values of the State and adopting its preferred category. There are also histories that suggest the media’s role in introducing this category in earlier struggles. Even Gandhi, who saw how the liberation struggles before his time were maligned by the powerful, and who went to study at an elite university in England, his country’s colonizer, would have been highly sensitive to how rebels and revolutionaries were characterized in the discourses and the media of the ruling class. He certainly would have gotten such a perspective when he voluntarily rallied his fellow Indians in South Africa to support two different British wars, winning a War Medal for his efforts.

Discussing the history of popular movements and elite responses in the city of Barcelona, Chris Ealham reveals the media’s use of “moral panics” to unify the city bourgeoisie against the threat of revolution from below.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the major newspapers were primarily a tool of communication among the bourgeoisie—the class of rulers and owners. Because there was no single effective conspiracy uniting all the elite, especially in Barcelona, where the elite were divided between Spaniards and Catalans, merchants and landed gentry, Catholics and progressives, much of the conversation about how to rule had to take place in the open. But in the face of general strikes, worker rebellions, and a growing anarchist movement, the factory owners, politicians, aristocrats, and church officials could not communicate openly about their need to keep the lower classes down. Doing so in a newspaper would only hasten their loss of control over the hearts and minds of their subjects, and it would also contradict with their own self-image and the philanthropic discourses they used to justify why they got to sit on top of the social pyramid. So they turned to moralistic euphemisms.

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<sup>6</sup> Chris Ealham, *Anarchism and the City: Revolution and Counterrevolution in Barcelona 1898-1937* (San Francisco: AK Press, 2010).

The elite, as has been the case at most times in history, did not have a single set of interests, but conflicting interests and differing strategies regarding how to maintain and amplify their power. Different sectors of the elite generally had their own newspapers, and these featured competing discourses. However, when popular movements were particularly strong, such that they presented a threat to the social pyramid, it was crucial for the elites to get over their differences and join their forces to trample down those on the bottom. Therefore, the newspapers began to deploy some of the key euphemisms they were already circulating to signal a moral panic, an ungodly threat to the ruling order that required the whole ruling class to unite.

Aside from uncleanness or hygiene, the principal term used to unleash a moral panic and mobilize elite action was “violence”. Among the elite, then as now, in Barcelona as in the English-speaking world, “violence” was a euphemism for a threat to the ruling order and its illusion of social peace, with which the class struggle, the brutality of patriarchy, and the murderousness of colonialism are hidden. The newspapers did not talk about violence when cops killed strikers, when landlords evicted families, or when poor people died of hunger. They talked about violence when workers went on strike, when tenants stopped paying rent, when street vendors refused to surrender their wares to the cops (who would harass them at the behest of the store owners), and when anarchists carried out sabotage or held unpermitted marches.

One of the advantages of moralizing elite discourses, and of democratic government as well, is that they train the oppressed to adopt the mentality and the language of the oppressor. Over time, people fighting to better their situation came to care about their image in the eyes of the media, which is to say in the eyes of the elite. They wanted to appear respectable. In some cases, they were opportunists who formed political parties and cashed in their popular support at the first opportunity to obtain a seat at the table of power. In other cases, they were people who took these elite discourses seriously, bit down on the bait, and tried to prove that they were not violent or unhygienic. They debated with the hollow hypocrisy of the elite in an attempt to show that they were not monsters deserving repression. If the justification for repression could be removed, wouldn't the repression also disappear? As the Spectacle grew in strength, many people became so detached from the reality in the streets that their own self-image and moral compass were largely crafted by the media.

As soon as social movements began to listen to the media, the elite could determine which forms of resistance were acceptable, and which were unacceptable. Every day of the week, the media—which are owned by the same people who profit off the current state of affairs—are telling us what is violent and what is normal. The category of violence belongs to them. By using the same category as our moral compass, we are allowing those in power to guide our struggle. One justification for clinging to the category of violence is that violence is oppressive, therefore we need to highlight it and avoid it.

This would only have a chance of being true if we controlled the definition of violence, rather than the powerful. If we choose other criteria for evaluating our resistance, for example whether or not a tactic or method is liberating, whether it makes us more free and opens up space for new social relations, we can avoid the forms of authoritarianism or self-harm the pacifists wish to avoid, without giving the advantage to the media. The media do not talk 24 hours a day about what is liberating, because they do not want us to think about it, and because we have the advantage in that debate. More often than their occasional use of “freedom” as the justification for some war, the government and media have to explain why we need limits on freedom. But when it comes to violence, in a ten-second sound bite they have the upper hand if they want to

describe a conflictive social movement as violent, or an austerity measure or capitalist development project seem like a mundane fact of life. Even in a fair debate, and the debate is far from fair, most people will be persuaded that the thing that triggers a release of adrenaline, that has a sense of danger—a riot, a shooting, smashing things, shouting and running around, crime—is violent, whereas the thing that is abstract, bureaucratic, or invisible—a million slow deaths on another continent, the price of medicine, a prison sentence—is not violent.

Freedom as a concept sides with those who are struggling for theirs, whereas nonviolence as a concept sides with the enforcers of normality and the rulers of the status quo.

By criticizing nonviolence, I am not advocating violence. Many of us believe that the phrase “advocating violence” has no inherent meaning, it is just a form of demagoguery and fear-mongering. Nonviolence requires a strategic usage of the concept of “violence”, which is moralistic, imprecise, incoherent, and tends towards hypocrisy. We reject nonviolence because it is pacifying, and because it is incoherent. The category of violence is a tool of the State. In using it uncritically, nonviolent activists also become tools.

I do not want to waste any more time by talking about violence. I will try to talk concretely about the actions we need in our struggles. If I have to refer to a body of methods or tactics that are usually excluded by nonviolence, I will talk about “illegal”, “combative”, “conflictive”, or “forceful” actions, as the case may be. But I will try to do so with my eyes set on the necessity for a diversity of tactics.

But “diversity of tactics” should not simply be a replacement term for “violence.” I think the criticism has sometimes been warranted that practitioners of a diversity of tactics have done whatever they wanted without thinking about the consequences for anyone else. But also, some of the most effective protests in North America in the last few years—effective in terms of disruption to the summits of the powerful, in terms of spreading awareness, surviving repression, and also allowing a diverse range of protest methods to inhabit the same space in a spirit of respect and solidarity (excepting that method which tries to dictate how everyone else may or may not participate)—used a diversity of tactics. These include the Seattle WTO protests in 1999, the Republican National Convention protests in St. Paul in 2008, the Pittsburgh G8 protests in 2009, and the protests against the 2010 Vancouver Olympics; and one might also add the 2005 protests against the G8 Summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, or the 2007 protests against the G8 in Heilighendamm, Germany. And in the aftermath, there were inevitably some proponents of nonviolence who broke the principles of unity agreed on beforehand and denounced the “bad protesters” in the media.

While the debate around a diversity of tactics most often surfaces in major protests that bring together people with very different methods, it also applies to other moments and other kinds of struggle. Likewise, the most effective social uprisings since the end of the Cold War can be characterized as using a diversity of methods, whereas the exclusively peaceful movements have resulted in disappointment. (Chapter 3 is dedicated entirely to this point).

There are other criticisms that have come from the so-called bad protesters, the violent ones, themselves. While many still hold to the ideal of a diversity of tactics, and many believe that combative methods such as sabotage, riots, Black Blocs, or even armed struggle, are necessary, few are content with our methods to date. Participants of certain struggles, at certain moments, have criticized a fetishization of violence in their struggle, or the lack of a next step once police have been defeated in the street (see, for example, “And After Having Burnt Everything? Strasbourg,



Black Bloc, and the Question of Strategy” or “Another Critique of Insurrectionalism”<sup>7</sup>). Generalizing these criticisms to all “violent protesters” would be dishonest and it would also miss the very valuable and nuanced points they bring up.

In my experience, the unfair and often manipulative generalizations made by supporters of nonviolence make it much harder for conflictive anarchists to make these self-criticisms openly. Ironically, nonviolence advocates have created the exact sort of polemical environment that “nonviolent communication” tries to avoid, in which two sides close ranks and face off. I could decry this as yet another example of nonviolent hypocrisy, but then pacifists who don’t deserve that criticism, along with those who do, would be more likely to block their ears and reload for the counterattack. So, I’ll just leave the criticism in the open and reiterate the point that those who support a diversity of tactics are not generally satisfied with our struggle, many are self-critical, and many want to be more inclusive.

A diversity of methods is necessary in our struggle because none of us have the answer regarding the one true strategy for revolution; because there is no one size that fits all and each of us must develop a unique form of struggle for our respective situations; and because in fact our movements are harder to repress when we replace a party-line unity with a broad solidarity, when we attack as a swarm and not as an opposing army. Whether that army is pacifist or combative, the discipline required to coerce or intimidate everyone into following one set of pre-approved tactics, and to exclude those who fall out of line, is authoritarian. In such a contest, whichever army won—the army of the government or the army of the movement—the State would triumph.

A lack of unity does not mean a lack of communication. We learn from difference, and we are stronger when we communicate across this difference, criticizing one another but also helping one another, and all the while respecting our fundamental divergence. There are many totally erroneous or backstabbing forms of struggle, and these should be criticized vehemently, not protected behind a polite relativism. But the goal of our criticism should be solidarity, not homogeneity. There are a thousand different roles to play within this struggle, if we can learn to support one another in our differences. There is a place for healers, for fighters, for story-tellers, for those who resolve conflicts and those who seek conflicts. All of us can do a better job at seeking this more robust struggle.

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<sup>7</sup> Both of these anonymous texts can be found on [theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

## Chapter 2. Recuperation is How We Lose

The reason I am talking about methods of struggle is because struggle is a vital part of the lives of many people around the world. Sometimes we meet in the streets—in protests, occupations, demonstrations, festivals, talks, and debates—and sometimes we are separated by a wide gulf in our practices. What we have in common is that we want to fight against the current state of things, but we don't even agree on how to phrase this. Some would say we want to liberate ourselves from colonialism, others that we want to abolish oppression, and others that we want to change the world. One person might say we are working for social justice, and others, myself for instance, would counter that justice is a concept of the ruling system.

I am an anarchist, but I fight alongside many people who do not define themselves the same way. We may all say that we want revolution, but we mean different things by this. Many people believe in political revolution, which would be the overthrow of the existing political structure and the installation of a new, presumably better political structure. The revolutions in the American colonies, France, Russia, China, Cuba, and Algeria were political revolutions. Anarchists generally believe in a social revolution, which means the destruction of the existing political structure and all coercive hierarchies, without the imposition of a new political structure, therefore allowing everyone to organize themselves freely. But again, those are my terms; others would describe it differently.

Some people understand revolution as the abolition of classes, while others see it as the proletariat achieving political dominance. Some focus on the abolition of the patriarchy, and others on ending white supremacy and imperialism. The idea of revolution can apply to all aspects of life. If I do not talk exclusively about my own vision of revolution, it is because my goal in this text is not to convince others of that vision, but to deal with a problem that has arisen in spaces where people with very different ideas of revolution try to work together.

Even though revolution is a term with many definitions, it is informed by experiences of the struggle we often share. This vague commonality, the fact that we are on some level struggling together even though our reasons and concepts differ, is why we can criticize one another's concept of revolution without necessarily agreeing on what revolution means: because concepts inform practices, and practices meet with different results when they are put to use in the streets. When these results are counterproductive, sometimes we refuse to see our own failings and need to hear criticism from a different perspective. This, in my mind, is the complicated, suspended nature of reality, often lacking any objective coordinates but still full of pressing needs and imminent truths. An academic approach demands that we establish objective definitions and shared criteria for evaluation. This method has its uses but it is not always realistic in a situation of struggle. The criteria we choose might be incorrect, or the definitions misleading, and we will not know until we put them into practice. We each know why we are fighting, but perhaps we cannot articulate it, much less agree about it with others. Perhaps the demands for a philosophical unity are themselves antithetical to the project of liberation, since we ourselves are so obviously neither identical nor unified.

Despite lacking a common definition of revolution, we can criticize the nonviolent vision of revolution for betraying that nameless refusal, that urge for freedom we all have inside of us. Through collective debate, we can dismantle visions of revolution that do not live up to their pretenses of being either liberating or realistic. The end result of this debate is not a single definition of revolution nor a common, correct practice, since we do not represent a homogenous humanity with the same needs and experiences. The result is a multiplicity of practices that are more intelligent and more effective, and that either complement one another or clearly evince the unbridgeable chasm between themselves.

The present criticism of nonviolence, therefore, does not seek to convert its adherents, but to disprove their pretenses, suggest new directions for those interested in a revolution against all forms of domination, and let them make up their own minds.

The primary flaw in a majority of nonviolent discourses is to view revolution as a morality play. According to their morality play, revolutions lose because they open the Pandora's Box of violence, are corrupted, and end up reproducing what they intended to abolish.<sup>1</sup> But not only the so-called violent revolutions have suffered this fate. The government of India continued to mete out humiliation, exploitation, beatings and killings after the victory of the supposedly nonviolent independence movement. In the United States, the desegregated South continued to preserve white supremacy northern style, through gentrification, judicial lynchings, structural discrimination, and other measures. And in recent years, where the "Color Revolutions" have forced out the ruling political parties in Serbia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and elsewhere, we still find government corruption, police brutality, the forcible exclusion of common people, and widespread apathy.<sup>2</sup>

Government violence is not the result of violent revolutions, but the product of government itself. Any movement that leaves the State intact will fail in ending the oppressions we are fighting against. A nonviolent movement that replaces one government with another—and this is the greatest victory a nonviolent movement has ever achieved in the history of the world—ends up betraying itself, allowing Power to change its masks without addressing the fundamental problems of society. Nonviolence as an analytical tool has no means of understanding this kind of defeat—the kind that looks like victory.

When evaluating the possibility for a revolutionary social change, it is necessary to set our sights on a complete transformation that does away with coercive hierarchies of any kind, including governments, capitalism, and patriarchy. Governments are by their nature aggressive and dominating. No society is safe if its neighbor is a state. Capitalism, for its part, is based on the endless accumulation of value, which requires exploitation, alienation, the enclosure of any commons, and the destruction of the environment. Capitalism has proven to be the strongest engine yet for state power, which is why every state in modern history, even those that call themselves socialist, link themselves to the accumulative processes of capitalism. And patriarchy is

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<sup>1</sup> Many proponents of nonviolence try to say, more pragmatically, that "violence" is simply less effective, but they have no historical revolutions to show, and therefore no basis for claiming effectiveness. When pressed to answer for the violent revolutions that were successful in overthrowing a particular government, they will almost always claim dissatisfaction with the revolution in question due to its authoritarianism, a quality they often blame on the means used to bring it about.

<sup>2</sup> See *How Nonviolence Protects the State*, particularly Chapter 1, for detailed arguments about how the Civil Rights movement, the Indian independence movement, and other supposed nonviolent victories did not actually achieve their long-term goals. The book is available for free on the internet, at [theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org) and [zineli-brary.info](http://zineli-brary.info).

perhaps the most insidious, longest lasting form of oppression on the planet, constituting itself as a plague in our own families and communities as much as an external force to be combated.

An anarchist revolution opens the door to many different forms of self-organization, but it must do away with all these hierarchical systems. Being critical of nonviolence is not essential to being anarchist, as there are many anarchist pacifists, and participating in social movements does not at all require having an anarchist vision.

Although some folks participate in social struggles simply to recover lost privileges (especially in these times of austerity measures), a deeper unhappiness with exploitation, oppression, and the destruction of the planet drive many more people to the streets. Most of these folks understand their problems within the dominant discourses of the day, which tend to be democratic or religious. In other words, they reject the problems caused by the system, but they adopt the language, the philosophy, and the range of solutions given to them by that same system. As such, they often set themselves the goal of getting the right leaders in power. But all social ills flow from the fact that we are robbed of power to make the decisions and solve the problems that directly affect us. No one knows what's best for us more than we ourselves do. Once we are turned into spectators of our own lives, any manner of abuses can be heaped on us with ease.

This book is not only for anarchists, but it is written from an anarchist perspective, based on the belief that no matter how people understand their problems, rising up to solve them will necessitate conflict with the State, and those problems will not be solved until the State is destroyed.

Many readers may not agree with this contention, but if they continue struggling for their own vision of freedom, the debate will come up again and again, because their struggle will bring them into conflict with the State, and if they should ever win, and have the opportunity to build a better state supposedly compatible with their liberation, they will be sorely disappointed, and all their dreams will be corrupted, as has happened so many times in the past. In the meantime, we can agree to disagree, and focus on the fact that struggling for a better world means conflict with the current system. If we are going to challenge that system, it will help to familiarize ourselves with how governments themselves understand resistance. The specific strategies vary greatly, but for the last half century, governments across the world have used the paradigm of counterinsurgency for defeating rebellious movements. The idea of counterinsurgency comes from the State itself, based on experiences in Kenya, Algeria, Vietnam, and urban ghettos in the United States and Europe. Its basis is the hypothesis that conflict is the inherent condition of society under the State. The goal of government, therefore, is not to eliminate conflict, but to manage it permanently, and make sure it remains at lower, less threatening levels, which according to the military authors of this idea, includes nonviolence.<sup>3</sup>

Insurrectionary anarchists often divide counterinsurgency into repression and recuperation. Together, these two motions constitute a carrot and a stick that can discipline social movements into adopting behaviors that do not threaten the fundamental basis of the current system. Nonviolent activists very rarely talk about recuperation, and some would say this is because they tend to play the role of recuperators.

Recuperation is the process by which those who rebel and break away from current power structures are induced to rejuvenate those power structures or create more effective ones. They

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<sup>3</sup> For more on counterinsurgency, see Kristian Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue*; or *How Nonviolence Protects the State*, p. 106.

either turn their rebellion into the mere symbol of rebellion, as a way to exorcise whatever anger or discontentment led them to rebel, or they direct it against only a small part of the system, creating a change that allows the State to function more effectively overall. Recuperation is when countercultural movements like punk or the hippies become just new ways of buying and selling, new product lines, a new niche within the diversity of capitalist democracy. Recuperation is when workers' movements around the world form political parties that enter into government and sell out their base, or when labor unions come to convince workers of the needs of bosses, for example accepting voluntary pay cuts for the good of the company. Liberation movements in India, South Africa, and many other countries were recuperated when they decided to seek common ground with their colonizers and fight for a new government that would carry out all the same economic projects of the old government, reserving themselves the special role of local managers for international finance.

NGOs profit constantly off the State's need to recuperate popular rage. Rich donors and government agencies give away huge amounts of money to pay dissidents to feel like they're making a real change in the world by running services that constitute a bandage on the gaping wounds of poverty and structural violence, while training those in need to passively accept aid rather than fighting to change their circumstances. Thanks to charity, the powerful can throw some crumbs to those who wait obediently, allowing them to more effectively crush those who rise up to create change directly.

Struggles in democratic societies are defeated by recuperation more often than by repression. Though a democratic state is perfectly capable of shooting down protesters in the street or torturing rebels in prison—and every democratic state does this with more regularity than many of its citizens suspect—democracy's greatest strength is in winning the consent and participation of the exploited. To do this, a democratic government has to pretend it is open to criticism. Democracy requires *social peace*, the illusion that, in a society based on exploitation and domination, everyone can get along and nobody's fundamental well-being is under threat. If a democratic government cannot successfully project the idea that its use of the bullet and the baton is exceptional, the social peace is disrupted, investors grow cautious, and state subjects stop participating.

To preserve the social peace, businesses and politicians constantly deploy measures to convince those who rise up to make demands, to enter into dialogue, reform the system, play politics, or turn their critiques and anxieties into something that can make money. We can't overcome the destruction of our communities, but we can have a thousand friends on Facebook. We can't keep the forest we played in as children from getting cut down, but we can start a recycling program. Indigenous people cannot have their land back, but one or two of them might get elected to Congress. Poor neighborhoods of color can't get rid of the police who occupy their streets, harass them, and occasionally shoot them down, but they might get the city to pay some NGO to give the cops cultural sensitivity trainings.

For recuperation to work, those who participate in social struggles must play along in some way. Enough people need to agree to play by the new set of rules being imposed from above. They need to accept the new police training requirements or recycling program as a victory, they need to vote for the new candidate or support the new worker-friendly business. They will do this only if they do not see the system as a whole as their enemy; they will accept domination at the hands of the police as long as it happens in more subtle ways; they will be content with the destruction of the planet as long as it happens a little more slowly.

For this reason, nonviolence tends to be a necessary component for recuperation.<sup>4</sup> Nonviolent resistance is less likely to help people develop an antagonistic consciousness of the State. It gives the guardians of law and order more opportunities to put on a friendly face. And it also prevents the disruption of the social peace during the necessary period of institutional pressure and dialogue in which radical movements allow themselves to be recuperated.

The Civil Rights movement in the US was recuperated when it was convinced to fight for voter registration instead of any material equality or meaningful freedom. The independence movements in India and South Africa were recuperated when they set their goal on new capitalist states that played by the same rules that had enriched investors during the colonial or apartheid regimes. Popular outrage in Ukraine, Serbia, Lebanon, Kyrgyzstan, and other countries that experienced the “Color Revolutions” was recuperated when they identified their enemy as one specific political party, and declared victory when a new political party came into office, even though none of the structures that caused their poverty and powerlessness had changed. Nonviolence played a key role in all of these processes of recuperation by enabling dialogue between powerholders and movement leaders, by preventing people from taking power into their own hands, giving them instead an ideology of glorified powerlessness, and by ensuring peacefulness and stability in critical moments of transition from one form of oppression to another.

Anyone who believes in revolution needs to have an analysis of recuperation and a strategy for how to keep their rebellion from being twisted to suit the needs of the State. Not only does nonviolence lack this analysis, it frequently serves as a vehicle for recuperation.

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<sup>4</sup> Just as the first edition of this book went into layout, there were major uprisings in Turkey and Brazil. Both of these demonstrated the collusion of police, politicians, and media in encouraging peaceful protest, contrary to pacifist claims that the authorities “want us to be violent.” In the case of Turkey, the media aggressively promoted the rather absurd “Standing Man” protest in a clear attempt to direct would-be rioters to harmless, symbolic, and spectacular forms of dissent. While the police and the politicians criminalized violent protest, the politicians and the media encouraged nonviolent alternatives. As Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu stated to *The Guardian*, “all peaceful protests reflect our achievement in expanding democratic participation and debate”. Peaceful protests help governments mask their abuses by giving them the opportunity to bring popular rage into the terrain of civic debate, a terrain they fully control. As Davutoglu concluded, “Elections are the only way to change a democratically elected government.” A multifaceted movement that directly addressed problems of public space, commercialism, self-organization, surveillance, policing, and so much more has to reduce everything to election day issues that some political party is going to pretend to fix for them. Protesters who do not play by the rules will be demonized by the media, the politicians, and by fellow protesters. As rioters in Brazil jubilantly set fire to the state parliament in Rio (incidentally winning major reforms as politicians tried to buy them off, once again disproving nonviolence advocates who claim that “violence doesn’t work”), the Brazilian president attempted the same trick, encouraging dialogue, applauding the peaceful protesters, and casting the violent protesters as somehow foreign and external to the very movement they started. Fighting uncompromisingly with the State, using violence, is a logical extension of the idea of “no demands, no dialogue with authority” that has infused social movements from the antiglobalization movement to Occupy. It sends the clear message—most importantly within our own circles—that we will not make deals with power. This is a threat to those who, through the vehicle of nonviolence, want to represent movements in order to get a seat at the negotiating table.

## Chapter 3. The Revolutions of Today

After demonstrating that the historical victories of nonviolence have not been victories from a revolutionary standpoint, that they did not bring an end to oppression and exploitation, they did not fundamentally change social relations, much less create a classless, horizontal society, one often hears the rebuttal, *But violence has never worked!*

Moving past the moralistic simplemindedness contained in the belief that “violence” is a method, this statement conceals an important fact. Unlike the proponents of nonviolence, we (and here I only mean to speak for anarchists who believe in revolution, though many other anti-authoritarian anticapitalists as well as indigenous people fighting for their freedom from colonialism may identify) have never claimed victory. We have pointed to specific battles won, ground gained, or small steps ahead as sources of inspiration and learning, but we are not trying to offer easy solutions, cheap hopes, or false promises to anyone. If we liberate ourselves in one area, all we gain will be lost again unless the State is defeated on a worldwide scale.

The State does not brook any independence or externality to its rule, and that is why it has brutally colonized the entire globe. The tendency of nonviolence to claim superficial, false victories reveals its inclination to seek accommodation with ruling structures by identifying oppression with the spectacular violence of “bad government”, thereby covering up the deeper mechanisms that “good governments” use to accomplish the same ends. Supporters of nonviolence claim Indian independence as a victory for their method, whereas anarchists who support combative methods do not claim the Russian Revolution as a victory. Why should they? Although they participated, along with other currents of struggle, the world they talked about did not come about, and in fact they were slaughtered as other elements took over the revolution. Things clearly changed in Russia, but it was not an anarchist change.

However, these exact same criteria apply to the nonviolent movement in India. They were but one of multiple currents, their leaders were killed off, and the peaceful, just society they spoke about never came into being.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, proponents of nonviolence jump at the chance to declare victory, no matter how many embarrassing details they have to ignore. This is not simple opportunism, but an outgrowth of the functional complicity between nonviolence and the structural violence of the State. The very philosophy of nonviolence leads to a misleading distinction between good and bad government, based on whether a government must make use of shocking, visible forms of violence or whether it can control society through other, invisible means.

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<sup>1</sup> The movement was not exclusively nonviolent, and the armed or riotous parts of the movement were an important force in convincing the British to leave. And while the ejection of the British was an important achievement, it was not a final victory. Furthermore, the British colluded with the nonviolent and dialogue-oriented segment of the movement to isolate and repress the “violent” radical currents so they could stage-manage a transition of power that would be favorable to British interests. They put Gandhi’s disciple Nehru in power. In other words, we cannot talk about a meaningful victory in India, so much as a partial victory that was fully recuperated within the capitalist system. Whereas the combative part of the movement played a major role in forcing some kind of change, it was the nonviolent part that was most instrumental in the recuperation.

By chalking up the failure of the revolutions in Russia, Spain, China, Cuba, and elsewhere to one simple factor, the revolutionaries' use of this thing called "violence," they save themselves the need for any nuanced, thorough historical analysis. Nonviolence, in sum, encourages superficiality, false expectations, dishonesty, and sloppy thinking. Even more troublesome, it conforms with the narratives of those in power, who would also have us believe that a nonviolent Gandhi carried the day in India, and that the workers in Russia opened a Pandora's Box by rising up.

Anti-authoritarians who support a diversity of tactics do not claim a victory in the revolutions in Russia, Spain, Haiti, and elsewhere. They are forced, therefore, to analyze how people empowered themselves to defeat the government and begin to self-organize society, what went wrong, and what was the interplay between different revolutionary currents. To make sense of their defeat, they have to investigate whether people achieved a meaningful freedom in the Maroon villages, the Russian soviets, or the collectives of Aragón<sup>2</sup>; and whether these liberated zones were effective or ineffective at defending themselves. This has led to years of research and debate to hack out nuanced answers to organizational questions regarding movement unity and coordination, volunteer militias, guerrilla forces, clandestine cells, and labor unions; socioeconomic questions like the role of the struggle against patriarchy within these revolutions, the possibility of alliance between wage slaves and unwaged slaves, whether the productive logic of the factory can ever be liberated, whether intensifying attacks on capitalism and efforts to collectivize a society's resources strengthen or weaken the attempt to defeat fascist or interventionist militaries, and a long et cetera. In moments of social peace, this can seem like an obsessive escapism into the distant battles of history, but when social movements reemerge in times of renewed conflict, the people who have participated in these debates have been able to apply historical lessons to ongoing struggles and avoid the repetition of old errors.

Social scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan are the authors of a study that is among the only statistical analyses of the effectiveness of nonviolence. Like many social scientists before them, they use statistics to obscure more complex truths. They claim to have compiled a list of 323 major nonviolent campaigns or violent conflicts from 1900 to 2006, and then superficially rate these as "successful", "partially successful", or "failed". They do not use revolutionary criteria for success, and in their mind the "Color Revolutions" and many other reformist, dead-end, or self-betraying movements were successful. Although they rate campaigns as objectively violent or nonviolent, they do not define violence, and they also uncritically use loaded terms like "the international community". They credit nonviolence with victory in cases where international peacekeeping forces, i.e. armies, had to be called in to protect peaceful protesters, as in East Timor, and they define victory simply as the achievement of a movement's goals, as though movements ever had a consensus on their goals.

They do not publish the list of campaigns and conflicts with their original study, and after extensive searching I was unable to find it. They explain that the list of major nonviolent campaigns was provided to them by "experts in nonviolent conflict", in other words, people who are almost exclusively proponents of nonviolence. Given widespread manipulation by such "experts," who frequently describe heterogeneous struggles as "nonviolent," such as the independence move-

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<sup>2</sup> For more on slave revolts and anticapitalist movements in Haiti, Jamaica, Suriname, and elsewhere, see Russell Maroon Shoatz's short but succinct "The Dragon and the Hydra: A Historical Study of Organizational Methods" (2012). An important history of the Russian Revolution is Voline's *The Unknown Revolution* (1947). Sam Dolgoff's *The Anarchist Collectives* and Gaston Leval's *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* both offer detailed accounts of the anarchist collectives in Aragón and elsewhere.



ments in South Africa and India, the Civil Rights movement, or the uprisings of the Arab Spring, we can only assume that many of successful nonviolent campaigns on the list included armed and combative elements. The violent conflicts that they include in their study come from a completely different source: lists of armed conflicts with over 1,000 combatant deaths. In other words, wars. They are comparing apples and oranges, lining social movements up against wars, as though these different kinds of conflicts arose in the same circumstances and were merely a product of the choices of their participants.

One methodological weakness they do admit to, in a footnote, is that by focusing on “major” nonviolent campaigns, they weed out the many ineffective nonviolent campaigns that never assumed large proportions. But none of the measures they took, ostensibly to correct that bias, could possibly have any effect. Circulating “the data among leading authorities on nonviolent movements to make sure we accounted for failed movements” is useless since there is no objective distinction between major and minor campaigns, and the biggest failures never become major campaigns. Running “multiple tests both across nonviolent and violent cases and within nonviolent cases alone to ensure robustness on all results” is worthless if the study sample is stacked from the start.<sup>3</sup>

Their entire method is superficial to the point of being useless. They are using statistics to obscure complex realities. But even in this flawed endeavor, they have to manipulate the statistics in order to affirm their preconceived conclusions. Most of their paper centers on a detailed explanation of their hypotheses, and pseudo-logical arguments for why their hypotheses must be correct. For example, they cite psychological studies on individual decision-making, with the unspoken assumption that complex social conflicts between institutions and heterogeneous populations will follow the same patterns.<sup>4</sup> They provide no evidence for key arguments like “the public is more likely to support a nonviolent campaign” (p. 13) nor do they interrogate the figure of “the public”. They also make convenient use of non sequiturs, as in the following paragraph:

Second, when violent insurgents threaten the lives of regime members and security forces, they greatly reduce the possibility of loyalty shifts. Abrahms finds that terrorist groups targeting civilians lose public support compared with groups that limit their targets to the military or police.[footnote removed] Surrendering or defecting to a violent movement [...] [p. 13]

All the subsequent arguments in the paragraph, which are rhetorical arguments lacking any documentation or data, refer to the topic sentence of the paragraph. All of them are intended to convince readers that so-called violent movements are less effective at provoking defection or “loyalty shifts” among state forces. The only sentence that makes any reference to evidence is the second one, quoted above. But notice how the study cited actually has nothing to do with the topic sentence, no bearing on the question of defection nor the variable violence/nonviolence (Abrahms’ study only addresses violent groups, distinguishing between those that do and do not target civilians).

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<sup>3</sup> Quotes from Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Resistance” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Summer 2008). Footnote 41.

<sup>4</sup> The 1965 “Correspondent-Inference Theory” they cite explains how an observer infers the motivations behind an individual’s choices. They do not mention the highly individualized scope of the study when they trot it out as proof for a geopolitical argument. Ironically, research around the theory demonstrates that observers often overlook or underestimate the situational, socioeconomic, and institutional factors that may constrain a person’s choice.

Elsewhere in the study, the authors ambiguously admit that the statistics do not reveal more defections in the face of nonviolent movements, but they structure the entire article to hide that inconvenience and advance their preconceived arguments.

Such operational successes occur among violent campaigns occasionally, but nonviolent campaigns are more likely to produce loyalty shifts. Although in the quantitative study these findings are qualified by data constraints, our case studies reveal that three violent campaigns were unable to produce meaningful loyalty shifts among opponent elites, whereas such shifts did occur as a result of nonviolent action in the Philippines and East Timor. [p. 42]

To put it more plainly, these “data constraints” are a lack of data supporting their argument, or “insignificant effects” as they admit on page 20. The three case studies they call in to save the day are three examples cherry-picked to prove the point they are trying to make. We can do better: the Vietnam War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, partisan resistance during World War II in Yugoslavia and in Italy, and the anarchist resistance in Ukraine during the Russian Civil War. Five examples of armed movements provoking major defections among the armies sent to crush them, all of them more definitive and on a higher scale than the “loyalty shifts” provoked in the Philippines and East Timor.

In one paragraph summing up her research, Chenoweth acknowledges that the impact of a “violent wing” on the success rates of a movement is “not statistically significant” and then in the next paragraph say that “the most troubling possibility is that the armed wing will reduce the movement’s chances of success.” Later, she commits the most basic error in statistics, confusing correlation with causation, to say that “an **armed wing can reduce popular participation** [her emphasis]” even though her own data do not support this assertion.<sup>5</sup>

It is significant that mention of this study made the rounds on a number of nonviolent websites. From what I saw, the nonviolence advocates who used the statistics to prove the superiority of their method never linked directly to the study. They probably never even read it.

In order to evaluate the successes and failures of the major uprisings of the last twenty-odd years since the end of the Cold War, we need a fair and sensible set of criteria. We can set aside the superficial question of “who won?”, given that nobody has won, except for those who continue to rule us.

We should also avoid the criterion of whether or not a movement leads to increased repression. I can remember countless arguments in which supporters of nonviolence have tried to paint a struggle as a failure on the grounds that it was heavily repressed. The semi-effective nonviolent movements of the past all provoked an increase in government repression whenever they could encourage widespread disobedience. The belief of modern pacifists, which was not shared by King or Gandhi, that peaceful struggle can avoid brutal consequences at the hands of police and military, has been effectively used as a selling point to flood the ranks of nonviolent movements with opportunists, weekenders, fair-weather friends, cowards, careerists, and naïve citizens who think that changing the world can be easy and hassle-free. Repression is inevitable in any struggle against authority. It is important to be able to survive this repression, but in the worst case, a

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<sup>5</sup> Erica Chenoweth, writing about a follow-up analysis of the same data set (with Kurt Schock), in “Armed Wing in Syria: To What Effect?” *Rational Insurgent*. 10 October 2011. <https://rationalinsurgent.wordpress.com/2011/10/10/armed-wing-in-syria-to-what-effect/>

struggle that is completely crushed by repression is still more effective—because it can inspire us today—than a struggle that allows itself to be recuperated for fear of repression, as happens with many nonviolent movements. Therefore, because the long-term effects of repression still remain to be seen, we will not include this as a criterion, but we will note if a particular rebellion was successfully defeated by repression or recuperation, so that readers will notice a pattern if the combative movements truly are unable to cope with repression, as their critics claim, or if nonviolent movements are frequently recuperated, as we claim.

One criterion of the utmost importance is whether a movement succeeds in seizing space in which new relations can be put in practice. New relations mean: do people share communally and enjoy direct access to their means of survival, or is the social wealth alienated; are people able to organize their own lives, activity, and surroundings, or is decision-making authority monopolized by government structures; do women, trans, and queer people enjoy means of self-defense and self-determination, or are they fully exposed to the violence of patriarchy; do people of color and indigenous people have means of self-defense and autonomy, or are they at the mercy of colonial structures like the market and the police? While the forms are different, the social relations are fundamentally the same between one capitalist state and another, whereas there is a marked difference in the social relations in a stateless commune or an independent indigenous territory. Even though autonomous space will usually be reconquered by the State, we take the experiences of self-organization away with us. The more of these experiences we win, the more powerful our struggles become, the greater our capacity for self-organization on a higher level, and the more people there are who know that obedience to the existing system is not the only option.

This suggests a second criterion: to what extent a movement spreads awareness of its ideas. And this, in turn, needs to be evaluated in terms of whether those ideas are spread as passive information, or whether they are communicated as ideas worth fighting for (or in the case of the nonviolent, taking action and making sacrifices for).

Because of the importance of recuperation in defeating social movements, one important criterion is whether a movement has elite support. If a part of the elite supports a movement, it is much more likely that the movement appears to achieve a victory, when in fact the victory is insubstantial and allows the elite to improve their own situation. This criterion can also show if the pacifists are right when they say the government wants us to be violent, or if the opposite is true, that the elite want us to be nonviolent.

Finally, did a movement achieve any concrete gains that improve people's lives, restore their dignity, or demonstrate that struggle is worth it and that the government is not omnipotent? From this criterion, we must exclude strictly formalistic gains, like pro-democracy movements that achieve free and fair elections, because this is a redundant victory that can only matter to those who have allowed themselves to believe that democratic government is somehow analogous to freedom or a better life. When the Soviet Bloc countries transitioned from dictatorship to democracy, citizens' freedom of action did not at all increase, whereas their quality of life suffered dramatically. In other words, the achievement of democracy is solely a question of how power organizes itself, and not one that necessarily impacts how normal people live. If, however, successful resistance to a dictatorship means that people can take to the streets without fear of

being arrested and tortured, then we can clearly count this as a concrete gain. Hopefully, the critical difference is obvious.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, the four basic criteria are:

1. whether a movement seized space for new social relations;
2. whether it spread an awareness of new ideas (and secondarily if this awareness was passive or whether it inspired others to fight);
3. whether it had elite support;
4. whether it achieved any concrete gains in improving people's lives.

Because all of us are still at the mercy of an oppressive system, our focus must be on the strengthening of our struggles for freedom, dignity, and well-being. The above criteria measure the health of our struggles, and whether different methods avail us of what we need to have any chance of creating a new world.

## The Oka Crisis

In 1990, Mohawk warriors took up arms to prevent a development project on their lands. According to *Warrior Publications*:

The Oka Crisis of 1990 involved the Mohawk territories of Kanehsatake/Oka & Kahnawake, both located near Montreal, Quebec. The standoff began with an armed police assault on a blockade at Kanehsatake on July 11, 1990, which saw one police officer shot dead in a brief exchange of gunfire. Following this, 2,000 police were mobilized, later replaced by 4,500 soldiers with tanks & APC's, along with naval & air support... The armed warriors at both Kanehsatake & Kahnawake inspired widespread support & solidarity from Indigenous people throughout the country. Protests, occupations, blockades, & sabotage actions were carried out, an indication of the great potential for rebellion amongst Indigenous peoples.

This manifestation of unity & solidarity served to limit the use of lethal force by the government in ending the standoff. Overall, Oka had a profound effect on Indigenous peoples and was the single most important factor in re-inspiring our warrior spirit. The 77-day standoff also served as an example of Indigenous sovereignty, and the necessity of armed force to defend territory & people against violent aggression by external forces.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Those who are hopelessly attached to the concept of democracy can consider it in these terms. Voting for one's rulers, as opposed to legitimizing them through some other ritual ordained by law, is clearly a change, but it is not a change that has any bearing on a struggle for freedom, just as a blue t-shirt is obviously different from a red t-shirt, but a person is not more free wearing one t-shirt or the other. As long as one has rulers (and bosses, and creditors, and owners, and bureaucrats), one is not free. This is the difference between changing the process by which those rulers are legitimized, and wresting some sphere of your life away from their control. Or, on a less liberatory, more slippery slope, forcing them to concede something that lessens their profits and decreases the economic pressure they can leverage against you.

<sup>7</sup> Warrior Publications, the source of this quote, "is published in occupied Coast Salish Territory on the Northwest Coast of 'british columbia.' Its purpose is to promote warrior culture, fighting spirit, and resistance movements." warriorpublications.wordpress.com.

The Oka Crisis was an armed conflict.

1. It succeeded in seizing space.
2. It spread ideas of indigenous sovereignty and inspired many others in North America to fight back.
3. It did not have elite support.
4. The golf course expansion on their lands was defeated, and the conflict came to a dignified conclusion for the Mohawk.

## **The Zapatistas**

In 1994, the Zapatistas, an indigenous army based in Chiapas, Mexico, rose up against the North American Free Trade Agreement and neoliberalism in general. They are an armed movement, though they have also carried out a large number of peaceful actions. In other words, they have employed a diversity of tactics. Although critiques exist of hierarchical organization, nationalism, and other problems among the Zapatistas, for the time being they seem to have distinguished themselves considerably from other guerrilla movements that proved to be authoritarian.

1. The Zapatistas have seized space for new relations, liberating a number of villages, and holding assemblies and *encuentros* for over a decade.
2. The Zapatistas did more than most any other group in the '90s in spreading critical awareness of neoliberalism, and inspiring people to take action.
3. The Zapatistas do not have any significant elite support in Mexico. They do receive support from academics and far-left political parties, but in recent communiqués they seem to have rejected this support for its paternalism or authoritarianism.
4. Although blockades and punitive actions by the Mexican government have made life difficult for Zapatistas, they have been able to protect themselves from paramilitaries, self-organize to meet basic needs, and by many indications reclaim their dignity.

## **The Pro-Democracy Movement in Indonesia**

In May 1998, thousands of people in Indonesia protested and rioted against the Suharto regime and economic conditions. Soldiers cracked down, and more than a thousand people were killed. The military negotiated with a protest leader to cancel a major rally. When the pro-democracy political groups demonstrated they had control over the movement by successfully canceling the rally, Suharto stepped down. In sum, the movement was not peaceful, but its leadership tended towards nonviolence.

1. The movement seized the streets, and student protesters held assemblies in the universities. However, much of the rioting had an internecine character, including attacks on women and ethnic minorities.

2. Although the movement succeeded in ousting Suharto, it was not linked to any social critiques that spread beyond Indonesia.
3. Suharto stepped down after receiving a call from the US Secretary of State, and pro-democracy groups received government support in pushing for a democratic transition. It was also alleged that elements of the military redirected crowd violence away from government buildings and against ethnic minorities. In sum, pro-democracy elements of the movement did have elite support.
4. The movement did succeed in getting rid of a particularly brutal dictatorship. However it did not succeed in changing the underlying economic conditions that was the main grievance of many participants.

## **The Second Intifada**

In September 2000, Palestinians rose up against the Israeli occupation and apartheid system, immediately in response to a visit by then Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon (the highest official responsible for the Sabra and Shatila massacres of 1982) to the site of the al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest place in Islam, annexed by Israel in 1980. In the first five days of fighting, Israeli security forces killed 47 Palestinians, while Palestinian rioters killed five Israelis. The uprising, or intifada, spread across the country and lasted some five years. Palestinians used mass protests, general strikes, slingshots, suicide bombings, and homemade rockets, while the Israelis tried to crush the uprising with tanks, infantry, helicopter gunships, snipers, missiles, starvation, and mass imprisonment. Over 3,000 Palestinians and around 1,000 Israelis lost their lives. The intifada ended in an impasse.

Because of the nature of the conflict, it is extremely hard to evaluate the results of the intifada in liberatory terms. Most of the losses suffered by the Palestinians, both to their quality of life and in terms of the degree of oppression and dispossession they suffer, can only be attributed to the viciousness of Israeli repression. Some proponents of nonviolence would blame the repressive conditions on the violence of the Palestinian struggle but this hides the fact that the idea of Zionism has always been predicated on the obliteration of whatever people happened to already be living in the “promised land”, and that in moments when Palestinian resistance has been relatively peaceful, the Israeli government has only been more aggressive in stealing Palestinian lands. I would argue that thanks only to combative Palestinian resistance and international solidarity, is there still a Palestinian people left to speak of. But because we are dealing with historical hypotheticals, this argument cannot be proven.

It is not without meaning, though, that the intifada was a popular and spontaneous struggle that had the overwhelming support of Palestinians. People who live in other situations and are not fighting for their own survival—both individual and collective—cannot make the argument without a great deal of arrogance and paternalism about whether or not the struggle was worth it. As outsiders, if we respect their cause the best thing we can do is respect the choices they make for how to struggle.

From a distance, I cannot venture to say whether the struggle opened up more liberatory spaces than the reaction closed down. We can state with certainty that a greater part of the global elite opposed the intifada, though it did have the support of a few governments such as Iran, and that

domestically, the much more powerful Israeli elite uniformly opposed the uprising while one wing of the Palestinian elite (Fatah) tried to moderate the uprising and the other wing ( Hamas) supported it. As for the spreading of ideas, the Second Intifada is probably directly responsible for bringing the plight of the Palestinians back to the attention of people around the world, generalizing critiques of Israeli apartheid, and spreading theories and debates about neocolonialism, statehood, urban combat, and social control.

It would be extremely difficult to talk about concrete gains in such a bloody struggle, but a few things can be pointed out with clarity. Israel was unable to decisively crush the uprising, despite enjoying what may be the most competent military/security apparatus in the world, in terms of being able to project force on a domestic and localized level. Not only that, it proved unable to guarantee the security of its privileged citizens, to rescue hostages, or to protect its own economy. According to the Israeli Chamber of Commerce, in 2002 the intifada caused as much as \$45 billion in damage, mostly in tourism losses. This constitutes a whopping one-third of the total GDP.

Because the Palestinian resistance raised the costs of occupation, the Israeli government cannot avoid the consequences. The costly impasse in the Second Intifada cannot be separated from Israel's subsequent failures in its 2006 invasion of Lebanon and its 2009 invasion of Gaza, nor from its decision not to invade Gaza in 2012, nor from its budget crisis in 2013.

In the near invasion of Gaza in 2012, many media analysts declared the conflict a victory for Hamas, the armed Palestinian group that was able to stare down the Israeli military. One mainstream journalist, Chris Hayes, went further to say that the conflict was a victory for violent tactics. In his analysis, Hamas had policy victories to show for their use of rocket attacks. Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah, who for years have been counseling non-militant, non-conflictive forms of resistance, along with the nonviolent protesters trying to stop the construction of the Apartheid Wall, have nothing to show. Their nonviolence has failed. Hayes goes on to advise US policy makers to reward nonviolent action so that the violent currents of the Palestinian resistance do not continue winning support. In Hayes' analysis, Palestinians are still the terrorists, the ones who have to prove they are not violent, while Israel is let off the hook. Hayes' advocacy for non-violent Palestinian resistance is clearly predicated on a view that privileges Israeli power and that sees violent action as the greater threat to existing hierarchies. Because Hayes is not an ideologue of nonviolence, he can be honest about its total ineffectiveness. What he argues for is the modification of the current political system to create the *illusion* that nonviolence is effective, a philosophy of power that rewards nonviolent action and encourages a practice of dialogue in which the needs of those in power will always be honored first and foremost, but a greater number of well placed crumbs are allowed to fall to the floor, into the hands of those at the bottom of the social pyramid who protest in the ways the powerful dictate they should protest.<sup>8</sup> The lesson is clear: nonviolence is ineffective, which is why those in power want us to use it.

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<sup>8</sup> Chris Hayes, *MSNBC*, 25 November, 2012. Hayes does try to make an argument for the inherent superiority of nonviolence, using a typically fear-based middle-class reasoning. With a shameless logical substitution that only a professional journalist could get away with, he attributes the Palestinians of the West Bank with nonviolent methods (if journalists based their authority on factual credibility, he would have lost it at this point, as Palestinian resistance on the West Bank is far from nonviolent) and the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip with violent methods. From there, he goes on to say that the quality of life is better in the West Bank than in Gaza, *ipso facto* people are more likely to be able to achieve a middle-class standard of life (he leaves this part of the argument implicit) using nonviolence. Here he has confused cause and effect. The Gaza Strip is basically the world's largest open air concentration camp. Residents have few if any opportunities for nonviolent action or nonparticipation. If the inhabitants of Gaza are known for more

Although applying such straightforward criteria to such a complex situation is necessarily reductionist, we can assert in broad strokes that:

1. The intifada seized and defended spaces.
2. It globally spread a critique of Israeli apartheid, militarization, and urbanization, therefore linking to global histories of occupation and resistance; it inspired solidarity movements and was also a major inspiration for the later revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere.
3. The intifada received support from the Palestinian elite as well as minority sectors of a global elite, although this support was largely directed towards the brokering of a peace settlement.
4. The intifada established a limiting factor in Israeli military actions over the next several years.

## **The Black Spring in Kabylie**

Kabylie, a Berber territory occupied by the state of Algeria, was the site of a major uprising in 2001. The police murder of Guermah Massinissa, a Kabyle youth, provoked months of intense rioting that police and military were unable to suppress. In fact, rioting Berbers pushed government forces out of their territory, which remained largely autonomous years later. Around 100 youth were killed while fighting with government forces, and 5,000 injured.

1. In the space of the uprising, people brought back the Arouch, a traditional assembly-based form of direct, communal self-organization, and they also reversed much of the erosion of Berber culture by the Algerian government.
2. The initial riots, conducted by a small number of people, quickly spread until hundreds of thousands of people were participating, including tens of thousands of Berbers in Algiers. The uprising brought Berber demands for autonomy in Kabylie to the world's attention, and their practice of communal assemblies even influenced social movements in Europe and elsewhere.
3. The uprising did not have elite support, not even within Kabylie. In fact, the uprising permanently changed the politics of the Kabylie liberation movement, leading to the grass-roots creation of the Arouch movement and completely undermining the existing Kabyle political parties.
4. The uprising won a large measure of autonomy for Kabylie, led to the withdrawal of the gendarmerie, and to the official recognition of Tamazight, the Berber language.

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combative methods, it is because nonviolence is unthinkable in a concentration camp. Meanwhile, whatever quality of life can be claimed by Palestinians on the West Bank, they have defended over the years using a diversity of tactics.



## The Corralito in Argentina

In December 2001, the Argentine government froze all bank accounts and floated its currency in response to a mounting debt crisis. As a result, many people lost their savings while private businesses were able to decrease their debts and buy up suddenly cheap properties. A massive social uprising followed on the heels of the *corralito*, forcing out one government after another in a few short weeks. Many participants have noted that the rioting, in which tens of thousands of people took to the streets, smashed banks, looted supermarkets, and fought with the police, finally shattered the terror that the military dictatorship of 1976-1983, which murdered around 30,000 dissidents, had left in its wake: only by rising up were people able to conquer their fear, and since then Argentine politics have not been the same. Whereas previously, the country had remained in the military's shadow, with the government controlled by the rightwing and the neoliberals, since 2003 Argentina has had a leftwing government that has supported the prosecution of figures from the dictatorship and opposed the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and other free trade agreements with the US.

In the streets, many things also changed. Neighborhoods in all the major cities formed assemblies to facilitate their self-organization on economic, cultural, and political levels, upgrading neighborhood infrastructure, organizing soup kitchens, food and clothing banks, libraries, and theaters, and coordinating protests. Workers took over factories and other workplaces that had been paralyzed by debt, often linking these occupied factories in a productive network, and defending them from police with the help of neighbors.

The uprising had diverse roots that predated the *corralito* by many years. One root was the struggle of people from poor suburbs who seized unused land and built their own communities, or blockaded highways to win their demands. These were the people who made up the bulk of the revolt, until it was taken over by middle-class families who generally only got involved once their bank accounts were frozen.

Another root was the association of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a group of mothers whose children had been disappeared by the military dictatorship, who began gathering weekly in the Plaza de Mayo in central Buenos Aires in 1977, demanding to know what had happened to their children. The Mothers are largely credited with drawing attention to the atrocities of the dictatorship and creating pressure for the transition to democracy. Pacifists seize on this as an example of the force of nonviolence, but they leave out the bigger picture. Many of the people disappeared by the dictatorship, whose disappearance the Mothers were protesting, were members of armed leftwing organizations that made up a larger anticapitalist movement. The resistance of the Mothers only makes sense in the context of their struggle and sacrifice. Furthermore, the Mothers were not able to put an end to the dictatorship. The democracy that followed continued the exact same political project that the military had pursued with an iron fist during the Dirty War. Many of the exact same people stayed in power and the dominance of the military remained unquestioned. It was not until people fought the police in the streets and toppled one government after another in 2001, that the military's immunity was finally revoked. The Mothers played an important part in this process, but in all fairness it was a process that used a diversity of tactics, from blockades to riots to peaceful vigils.

1. By rioting, taking the streets, occupying land or factories, and defending their gains against police, people in Argentina were able to seize space in which self-organized communi-

ties, neighborhood assemblies, and self-managed workplaces could flourish. This movement, anything but pacifist, constituted a major experiment in self-organization and self-management. Many people, including myself, have argued that autonomous factories producing for a capitalist economy reproduce the same alienated social relations as a traditionally managed factory. Nonetheless, the workplace occupations in Argentina constitute an experiment in new social relations, even if they provide a negative example, one proving that the new social relations lead back to the old ones; because negative examples such as this one help illuminate the way for future struggles. And this criticism is not to mute the insistence of many participants of these workplace occupations that theirs has indeed been a liberatory experience.

2. There can be no doubt that the uprising in Argentina spread an awareness of new ideas and inspired other people to fight. The experiences in neighborhood assemblies and the self-management of workplaces were transmitted directly to similar experiments in other countries. The uprising in general strengthened the antiglobalization movement and helped spread critiques of neoliberal capitalism across the globe.
3. Until the popular movement was co-opted by Nestor Kirchner, representing the leftwing of the Peronist party, and conducted into supporting the charity programs of a populist government and accepting a chauvinistic, South American capitalism (in rejection of the dominant, North American model of capitalism), it did not have significant elite support, although the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo enjoyed important support from NGOs and international legal organizations.
4. The revolt probably led to the defeat of the FTAA in South America, which is definitely a concrete gain, although it would be hard to argue that Kirchner's Mercosur is any better for people or the planet in the long run. More immediately, it shattered the psychological residues of the dictatorship, and allowed poor people to organize their own form of emergency economic relief, through the looting of supermarkets.

## The Day the World Said No to War

That is how many proponents of nonviolence refer to the multitudinous—and almost exclusively peaceful—global protests on February 15, 2003, against the then-upcoming invasion of Iraq. “Our movement changed history,” writes progressive journalist Phyllis Bennis for the Institute for Policy Studies on the ten-year anniversary of the protests. She notes that the protests made it into the *Guinness Book of World Records* for their unprecedented size. But what the protests did not accomplish was to stop the war. The peaceful protesters demonstrated that “millions were now willing to show their opposition by marching in the streets,”<sup>9</sup> but the dozens of governments preparing the war shortly proved that people marching in the streets did not matter.

Did members of the anti-war movement take that as a lesson to change their tactics? Not at all. Protest leaders and proponents of nonviolence declared “victory” while continuing to exclude

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<sup>9</sup>James Clark, *The day the world said 'No' to war: looking back on February 15, 2003*, <http://rabble.ca/news/2013/02/day-world-said-no-war-looking-back-february-15-2003> (February 15, 2013).

non-pacifists and to silence the debate about tactics. The vast majority of participants would quickly disappear, unmotivated to continue protesting in the face of its apparent uselessness, although ten years later nonviolent activists would refer to the day as “inspiring”.

In the US, relatively small numbers of anarchists would carry out acts of sabotage against military recruiting centers and infrastructure used in the war mobilization, while also participating in open protests and counter-recruiting drives, sometimes together with war veterans. Proponents of a diversity of tactics worked together with proponents of nonviolence to blockade the ports of Olympia and San Francisco, stopping military shipments. However, on the whole the latter excluded the former from broader movement spaces, denied them support, and left them to fend for themselves when they were targeted by repression. Practically the only case of a broad movement using a diversity of tactics was the San Francisco port blockade, though in a typical betrayal nonviolent organizers later described the action as a victory for peaceful methods.

The movement failed to stop the war. The people in Iraq had to resist the invasion and occupation as best as they could, and the methods they chose overwhelmingly involved the use of arms. Some of these groups were fundamentalist and authoritarian in ideology, many were leftist, and a few were anti-authoritarian. Nonetheless, pacifists and proponents of nonviolence who were ostensibly opposed to the war never spoke of Iraqi resistance. For them, Iraqis only gained mention when they became victims. It is noteworthy that public opinion in the US did not turn against the war and occupation—eventually becoming a major election issue that helped Obama win on a platform of troop withdrawal—until US casualties started piling up thanks to the effective armed resistance of the Iraqis. This should not be a surprise, as the same thing happened in the Vietnam War.

The armed resistance of the Iraqis and the global protest against the war were separated by a broad gulf. Focusing on the protest movement, we have to admit that it was overwhelmingly nonviolent.

1. On the whole, this was exclusively a movement of protest, and did not propose or practice the development of new social relations.
2. What the movement communicated was a simple word, “No”, which can hardly constitute an idea in a world in which colonization, domination, and mass murder can be carried out with many means aside from military invasion, means which were already being used against Iraq. And given the fact that the movement vanished almost overnight, this peaceful “No” cannot be considered inspiring, not even to the bulk of the movement’s participants.
3. The protest movement was supported by cultural elites (actors and other celebrities), progressive rich people, a part of the mass media, and numerous political parties and other elite institutions.
4. The movement accomplished nothing. It did not stop or limit the war, it did not end the occupation, and if it made any real difference in its participants’ lives, it did so without a trace, since they so promptly abandoned it.

## **The Color Revolutions**

In 2000, the civic youth organization Otpor in Serbia led a movement that brought about the ouster of President Slobadan Milosevic. This became known as the “Bulldozer Revolution”. The movement was nonviolent, organized according to the same model that later brought about regime change in Georgia’s “Rose Revolution” in 2003, and Ukraine’s “Orange Revolution” in 2004.

Because of their overwhelming similarity, I will deal with these three movements simultaneously. All of them were nonviolent, all of them succeeded in ousting the political party in power, and all of them do rather poorly when evaluated by the criteria for an effective revolutionary movement.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to a more thorough study of these movements.

1. These movements did not put new social relations into practice. Although they often occupied central areas in capital cities, they did not initiate practices of self-organization, because their central point of unity was to dispute fraudulent elections and to bring the opposition party into power.
2. These movements did not spread new ideas. They mobilized people on the basis of the lowest common denominator of politics. In Ukraine, for example, their slogan was “Yes!” and their symbol was the color orange. Their social critiques remained at a superficial level.
3. These movements not only received elite support, they thrived on it. In every case, they had media support, funding from the US government and/or wealthy backers like billionaire George Soros, and a direct relationship with the major opposition political party in their country. It is doubtful that these movements would even have been noticed without all the elite support they got.
4. These movements did not improve the quality of life in the countries where they succeeded. They usually did not even improve the transparency of government. In every case, a year, or two, or three years after the so-called revolution, basic economic conditions were unchanged, and political corruption and elitism continued.

## **Kuwait’s “Blue Revolution” and Lebanon’s “Cedar Revolution”**

In 2005, nonviolent movements inspired by the methods of the Color Revolutions sprang up to win women the right to vote in Kuwait, and to end Syrian military occupation in Lebanon.

1. The movement in Kuwait did change social relations by giving women full citizenship, although the relations reproduced by voters are still marked by alienation and passivity, rather than self-organization or collective well-being. The movement in Lebanon, similar to the other Color Revolutions, did not change social relations.
2. Neither of these movements spread new ideas or social critiques. The idea that women should be able to vote was already a foregone conclusion, and quickly accepted by the government. The idea that women should be equal, or autonomous from male control, has still not taken hold in Kuwait.

3. Both of these movements received elite support. Kuwait was something of an international embarrassment for not allowing women suffrage, and much of the Lebanese government favored independence from Syria.
4. Voting does not usually improve people's lives, although being considered an equal citizen can improve people's psychological well-being. In the case of Lebanon, ending a military occupation can improve people's lives, although Syria still maintained heavy influence. In both cases, the improvements are not steps towards a revolutionary change in society, as they leave state and capitalism completely untouched, and patriarchy only slightly altered.

## **The 2005 Banlieue Uprisings**

In October 2005, youth in the banlieue, or urban slums, in cities across France began a month of rioting, triggered by a police killing. They burned cars, government buildings, and schools, and attacked police. The media, government, and the Left treated the riots as an entirely irrational phenomenon, and repressed them in a series of police and political operations. The rioters made no demands, nor could anyone claim to lead them.

1. The rioters seized the streets; however, the unrest centered almost exclusively around attacks and arsons, rather than assemblies or other activities. Nonetheless, the self-organization of marginalized youth in immigrant neighborhoods, for the purpose of fighting back against a system that has only given them racism and precarity, should not be overlooked. And winning the capacity for self-defense constitutes a change in social relations.
2. This point is also inconclusive. The rioters made it obvious that racism, poverty, and police violence were huge problems in the heart of a wealthy country at the peak of economic prosperity. Their attacks constituted a sharp condemnation of democracy and capitalism. But they generally did not try to communicate with the outside world, leaving everyone to interpret it as they would. Their influence has perhaps been most present in the medium of hip-hop.
3. They received absolutely no elite support.
4. Although the banlieue residents were cynically criticized by the well-to-do for burning down their own neighborhoods, they definitely caused the police to think twice before abusing them.

## **Bolivia's Water War and Gas War**

In 2003, hundreds of thousands of residents of the Bolivian city of Cochabamba rose up against the police and the military to take over the city and prevent the privatization of the water supply. For years, poorer neighborhoods, organized into water committees, had already been using direct action to build their own water infrastructure, providing themselves drinking water without the interference of government or private corporations. In 2005, the whole country rose up, blocking highways and fighting with the military to prevent the privatization of the natural gas reserves.

Dozens of people died in the fighting, but they held their ground and defeated government forces. In the meantime, in numerous indigenous villages throughout the country, residents would lynch the mayor—often the only representative of the government in their village—as a direct action for the preservation of indigenous autonomy and against neocolonial interference.

The cumulative effect of these actions was to defeat the legacy of decades of dictatorship and military government, preserve indigenous autonomy in the face of ongoing colonialism, and reverse the advance of neoliberalism at a time when the experts insisted there were no alternatives.

1. These violent movements successfully seized and defended spaces for self-organization, for more communal forms of living, and for indigenous culture.
2. The earlier battles of a local character inspired the later battles of a countrywide character, and all of these in turn inspired movements against capitalist globalization across the world.
3. Up until 2005, the movement did not have substantial elite support. After that point, a political party formed out of the unions and other movement institutions was suddenly “taken seriously”, given elite support, and elected into power. That political party has succeeded where the military failed, recuperating the social movements and putting neoliberal development projects back on track.
4. These various uprisings achieved multiple concrete gains, in people’s quality of living, in their psychological ability to stand up to the government, and in their cultural resistance to colonialism.

## **Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution**

The Tulip Revolution was intended to be another nonviolent Color Revolution, but the opposition was neither united nor disciplined sufficiently to enforce strict nonviolence or herd the masses into a single strategy. In fact, they had not even agreed on a slogan and a color, and the same uprising was sometimes referred to as Lemon, Silk, Pink, or Daffodil. The name “Tulip Revolution” actually comes from the Kyrgyz president who was ousted.

In March 2005, when police tried to suppress a protest against a disputed election, rather than responding nonviolently, crowds threw rocks and molotov cocktails, beat up cops, and seized government buildings. The regime change was consummated when huge protests in the capital fought past police and soldiers, seized numerous government buildings, and forced President Akayev to flee the country by helicopter.

However, as their demands were purely electoral, they proclaimed victory once an opposition politician was installed in power. They did not attempt to put new social relations into practice or spread social critiques, and within a few years they were all thoroughly disillusioned with the new government, under which all the same problems continued. Nothing had changed.

1. They did not put new social relations into practice.
2. They did not spread social critiques, beyond complaints of corruption.
3. They enjoyed partial elite support.

4. They succeeded in ousting a government but not in changing the underlying system.

## **The Oaxaca Rebellion**

In 2006, indigenous people, teachers, and workers in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca rose up against the government. They set up barricades, kicked out the police, held assemblies and indigenous cultural festivals, and liberated villages. Much of Oaxaca was autonomous for six months. At the very end of the rebellion, movement politicians who had succeeded in taking over the central assembly convinced people not to fight back against the military invasion, although as a whole the movement was not nonviolent, and for months had fought with stones, fireworks, slingshots, and molotov cocktails.

1. The rebellion was one of the most dramatically successful in recent years at seizing space and putting new social relations into practice, questioning government authority, capitalism and privatization, sexism, and the racism of colonization. They put into practice horizontal forms of self-organization, and they employed communal or collective ways of feeding and taking care of themselves. Many of these forms were indigenous in origin.
2. The rebellion spread ideas and served as an example of self-organization for movements in the rest of Mexico and the rest of the world. Texts from the movement or interviews with movement participants were translated and distributed in several other languages.
3. The movement did not have elite support. It was slandered in the media, and attacked by police, paramilitaries, and the army.
4. While it lasted, the rebellion greatly improved people's quality of life in a revolutionary way. Arguably, some of the experiences won in the rebellion still form a basis for ongoing social struggles in Oaxaca.

## **The 2006 CPE Protests**

Throughout France in February, March, and April of 2006, millions of young people rose up against the new CPE law, an austerity measure which would undo decades of hard-won labor protections, allowing bosses to fire younger workers with hardly any restrictions and greatly increasing workers' precarity. They occupied universities and government buildings, blocked streets and highways, protested peacefully, rioted, burned cars, went on strike, and fought with police. In the occupied universities, students held assemblies and debated topics that went far beyond the particularities of the CPE law, to talk about wage labor, capitalism, and the organization of life in general. In the end, they defeated the law.

1. The strikers, protesters, and rioters seized space in which they could practice self-organization and discuss new visions of life.
2. Throughout France, this movement helped regenerate anticapitalist movements and spread social and economic critiques.

3. It did not have elite support, and was generally infantilized or muted by the media.
4. It defeated a law that would have greatly worsened labor conditions for workers.

## **2007 Saffron Revolution**

When the dictatorial government in Burma removed fuel subsidies in August 2007, leading to a 66% price increase, students, political activists, women, and Buddhist monks took to the streets in nonviolent protest and civil disobedience. They were careful not to directly challenge the military regime, in consideration of the 1988 coup when a mostly peaceful pro-democracy movement was utterly crushed, with 3,000 killed and many thousands more tortured. Within a few months, the military government had gotten the protests under control, arresting thousands and killing between 13 and hundreds, depending on the source.

1. The protest movement was unable to hold the streets or open up space for the organization of new social relations, and it was a complete failure measured in terms of its ability to defend itself against the police.
2. The protest movement succeeded in expressing opposition to economic conditions, but domestically it shied away from expressing ideas of opposition to the government or visions for new forms of social organization. This content was inserted by international commentators and supporters, though it may have constituted the true aspirations of at least part of the movement.
3. It is rumored that the Burmese military was divided on its response to the protest movement. What is certain is that the movement enjoyed widespread elite support on an international scale, counting on no less an institution than the United Nations. Whatever message or ideas might be associated with the movement were spread almost exclusively by the international corporate media (creating a problematic dynamic, and forcing a critical observer to question why protesters were making economic demands about the cost of living while media characterized it exclusively as a pro-democracy movement).
4. The movement was a failure in restoring government fuel subsidies or lowering the cost of living, its principal demands. If, one day, the military junta is replaced by a democracy, this movement will no doubt receive a part of the credit, whereas armed rebel movements like those of the Karen ethnic minority will be excluded from the history books. But if such a change comes about, the vast majority of the pressure will have come from international governments and institutions. Military governments around the world have shown a tendency to transition to democracy on their own because democratic government tends to be more stable and allows the elite to enrich themselves more than they can under a dictatorship. If Burma one day achieves such a victory, they will still face poverty, a high cost of living, and all the other vagaries of a global capitalist market.



## The 2008 insurrection in Greece

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of December, 2008, Athens police shot and killed a teenager in the largely anarchist neighborhood of Exarchia. That same night, riots began in several major cities, quickly transforming into an insurrection that gripped the entire country for a month. Millions of people participated, young and old, immigrants and citizens. The arson attacks on banks and police stations that in the previous years had been the sole practice of anarchists instantly generalized to the point of becoming common. By some accounts few police stations in the whole country escaped attack. The insurrection made a joke of the pacifist claim that “violence alienates people” by bringing together people from across Greece and inspiring people all over the world. The momentum of the uprising galvanized social struggles in the country and brought them to a new level.<sup>10</sup>

1. The momentum created by the insurrection led directly to the occupation of numerous abandoned buildings, government buildings, and vacant lots for the creation of social centers, neighborhood assemblies, community gardens, and assemblies of artists, critical journalists, medical workers, and so forth. It is important to note that the first Athens neighborhood assembly was created in the midst of a prior struggle in which direct action, confrontation with the police, and sabotage played a decisive role.
2. The insurrection in Greece generated a powerful new cycle of anarchist activity in countries around the world, it disseminated the idea of anarchism and heavily influenced theories of insurrection, renewed debates about clandestinity and discrete armed groups, and also spread concepts that would be replicated elsewhere as specific components of a revolutionary struggle, such as public or temporal occupations, base unions, and the attack. The insurrection would even inspire proponents of nonviolence such as Chris Hedges, who later would run back to the side of law and order as soon as windows started shattering closer to home (see Chapter 8).
3. The insurrection enjoyed zero elite support. The most leftwing parties tried to co-opt and pacify it, and were rebuffed. The police tried to suppress it, and were set on fire, trounced, and sent running. The military tried to threaten it, and its own soldiers circulated a letter saying they would hand their arms to the insurgents. The academics tried to explain it away, and were ignored. The media slandered it, and the insurgents covered the walls with their own words. The media, however, were the most effective of all the institutions of control. After a month, they succeeded in turning a large part of the participants back into helpless spectators, and then they began a major campaign of openly encouraging rightwing, fascist ideologies, which over the years began to weaken the social struggles.
4. The insurrection made it clear to the police that they could not get away with murder (at least, not without doing a better job of covering it up); and made it clear to everyone that the police could be defeated, notwithstanding the insistence of pacifists that we cannot hope to overcome the armed might of the State. The insurrection also saw a flourishing of

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<sup>10</sup> Interviews with participants in the insurrection and the forms of struggle that flourished afterwards can be found in AG Schwarz, Tasos Sagris, and Void Network (eds.), *We Are an Image from the Future, the Greek Revolt of December 2008* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010).

neighborhood assemblies, social centers, community gardens, arsonists that destroyed debt and tax records, and organized looting that put expensive foodstuffs at the free disposal of people without a lot of money. In short, in the months during and after the insurrection, people (not including cops, politicians, and the wealthy) were looking a lot happier than normal.

## **Bersih Rallies**

The Bersih rallies were a series of democracy protests in Malaysia, occurring in 2007, 2009, and 2012. The demands of the movement are purely formalistic, all related to electoral reform and motivated by the desire to see an end to the decades-long rule of the Barisan Nasional political coalition. The first two rallies, numbering in the tens of thousands, were exclusively peaceful, whereas the so-called Bersih 3.0 rally was preceded by a *fatwa*, a call for revolt, issued by one of the Muslim organizations participating. This rally was much larger, drawing hundreds of thousands of participants and including some rioting, self-defense against police, and the injury of some 20 cops (providing another example that belies the claim that violent movements will scare away supporters). As of 2013, because of continued media support for the movement, the Malaysian government has softened its crackdown on the movement and allowed rallies without carrying out arrests.<sup>11</sup>

1. As a formalistic democracy movement, the Bersih rallies constitute no change in the social relations in Malaysia.
2. The Bersih rallies are not connected to any social critique or attempt to achieve a direct change in society, only a different set of representatives. They have not spread new ideas.
3. The rallies are supported and organized by media organizations, NGOs, political parties, religious organizations, and a section of the owning class. Among these, the media organizations and NGOs consistently try to discipline it as an exclusively nonviolent movement, while some of the religious organizations are ambiguous in this respect.
4. As a purely democratic movement, it is intentionally substituting questions of representation for questions of quality of life, and has not made any concrete gains.

## **Guadeloupe General Strike**

In January 2009, a general strike broke out in the French colonies on the Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique. The strikes were triggered by poor living conditions, the high cost of living, and low wages, though racial tensions and anticolonial sentiments were also major elements, as the population of these French colonies, reserved as vacation resorts for rich white tourists, are primarily black descendants of African slaves. Due to forced economic dependence

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<sup>11</sup> This exact causation is claimed by one of those media outlets, *Free Malaysia Today*, “An Uprising for a Better Malaysia,” <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2013/01/15/an-uprising-for-a-better-malaysia/> (January 15, 2013).

on tourism, island residents had to deal with high prices, low wages, short-term, precarious employment, and exotification in their own homes for the amusement of foreign vacationers.

Because unemployment already topped 50%, the strikers wisely chose to complement their attempted economic shutdown with more forceful tactics. After four weeks of failed negotiation, islanders began rioting, burning cars and businesses, throwing rocks and eventually opening fire on the police.

After just three days, the French authorities came back to the negotiating table with a much better offer: raising the lowest salaries by a whopping 200 euros a month, and acceding to all of the strikers' top 20 demands. President Sarkozy, a hardliner and law-and-order politician through and through, took on an apologetic tone with rioters and promised to review French policy in all its overseas possessions.

1. Although self-organization and collectivization were not primary components of the uprising, in the course of the protests, island residents questioned and directly challenged the dominance of the white elite, and they forced the colonizing country to humble itself at the negotiating table.
2. The strike in Guadeloupe and Martinique inspired solidarity strikes in other French colonies across the world, from Réunion (in the Indian Ocean) to French Guiana.
3. The strikes and the riots were opposed both by the island elite and the French mainland elite.
4. As stated, the actions achieved strikers' demands and changed the racial and class power balance on the islands. In just a matter of days, rioting got the goods.

## **UK Student Movement**

In the autumn of 2010, tens of thousands of students in the UK began to protest a new law that would slash funding for higher education and raise university tuition caps to more than double the current amount. The major protests of the movement, held in November, were jointly organized by the National Union of Students and the University and College Union, which called for nonviolence. In the beginning, most students were peaceful, carrying out sit-ins or simple protests. Other students committed property damage, fought with police, and occupied government buildings. Far from a "small minority," several thousand protesters pushed past police during the November 10 march, surrounded and occupied the Conservative Party campaign headquarters, smashing windows, lighting fires, spraypainting, throwing objects at police, and chanting "Greece! France! Now here too!"

In its attempt to control the protests, London police brutalized peaceful and illegal protesters alike. The leaders of the NUS and the UCU, along with the mass media, politicians, and spokespersons for the police, all spoke up in favor of nonviolence, condemned the acts of property damage, and attempted to blame it all on an outside minority. However, despite extra police preparation, this troika of government, media, and would-be protest leaders was not able to enforce nonviolence at later protests, as rioting, attacks on police, vandalism, and property destruction occurred with increasing frequency. When the government approved the proposed austerity measures on December 9, student protesters engaged in another wave of rioting, smashing out the windows

of Her Majesty's Treasury, trying to break through police kettles, and lightly attacking the motorcade of Prince Charles and Duchess Camilla.

The popularity of student union leaders suffered dramatically as a result of their collaboration with police and denunciation of the rioters. At one point, students booed and rushed the stage to interrupt a speech by NUS president Liam Byrne. Outside of the virtual majority created by the media, ever in favor of people at the bottom of the social pyramid staying peaceful, it would be hard to say that the property damage, occupations, and fighting with police were not a part of the collective will of the student movement. As always, the first to break out of the legally sanctioned forms of protest were a minority and their actions generated great controversy, but this minority quickly grew and had a dynamic effect on the movement.

While nonviolence advocates were quick as always to claim that violent protest was the domain of young, white males (often accompanied by the adjectives "spoiled" or "middle-class"), the Daily Mail expressed its surprise (on November 25, 2010) that many of the most aggressive rioters "leading the charge" were young women.

1. The student movement was focused exclusively on presenting demands against austerity measures, rather than the self-organization of education, the seizing of space, or the practice of new social relations.
2. In general, the student movement did not communicate any social critiques beyond their opposition to the austerity measures. However, after the riots of November 10, a debate opened up within the movement about acceptable tactics, with many people arguing in favor of occupations. Subsequently, occupations of universities and government buildings occurred at other marches and in other cities.
3. The nonviolent wing of the student movement enjoyed largely symbolic elite support, although the government across the spectrum was in favor of some form of austerity measures.
4. Although the austerity measures were passed in England, the Welsh Assembly announced in response to the protests that it would not allow tuition hikes.

## **Tunisian Revolution**

The Tunisian Revolution was the first revolution of the so-called Arab Spring, sparked by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010. Bouazizi, a vegetable vendor, had been abused and robbed by a cop, deprived of his sole source of income. In response, he went to the police station and set himself on fire. His death sparked small protests, which police tried to quash with tear gas. A couple other destitute protesters killed themselves, and police bullets killed a few more. Day after day, small groups of protesters returned to the streets, fed up with police humiliations and brutality, poverty, and lack of free speech. Trade unions and students began to get involved. On January 3, when a police tear gas canister landed in a mosque, protesters burned tires and attacked the offices of the ruling party. From that point on, the uprising exploded (which once again, to beat a horse that should have died long ago, disproves the pacifist cliché that "violence alienates people", and shows how rioting and fighting back against authority galvanizes social struggles and wins support from those who do not see the system as their friend). Protests,

strikes, and riots spread across Tunisia. Eleven days later, President Ben Ali, in power since 1987, had to flee the country. Protesters continued to hold the streets in defiance of a military curfew, until the ruling party crumbled entirely. 338 people had died, mostly killed by cops.

1. It does not seem that self-organized spaces played a major role in Tunisia as they did subsequently in Egypt. However, the power relations between the people and the government have changed dramatically. People have reconquered their ability to protest and to spread critical ideas. Labor struggles have also grown in strength and number, as people now regularly carry out blockades and protests to press home their demands against employers. There have been no shortage of financial institutions and investors' magazines bemoaning the revolution's effects on Tunisia's "competitiveness" and "labor flexibility" – shorthand for the vulnerability of workers vis-à-vis bosses.
2. Although the Western media tried hard to portray the North African uprisings as nonviolent and solely democratic in character, in Arab-speaking countries the revolution sparked an exponential expansion in the critiques of capitalism and government, and it is self-evident that the revolution inspired others to also take action.
3. Initially, the Tunisian revolution did not have elite support. Its primary protagonists were the poor and marginalized. Little by little, trade unions began to take part, and then professional workers. Because the government-controlled media opposed it and tried to silence it, rebels had to rely on the forms of media they could organize. Internationally, elite support began once the revolution was undeniable, but this was a manipulative and disconnected form of support that helped isolate Ben Ali in the hopes of containing the spread of the movement against him. International support was designed to pressure Tunisians into adopting a peaceful and solely political form of struggle. Towards the very end, when the revolution's triumph was already assured, the same police who had been killing rebels tried to join them, in typical rat-like fashion.
4. The Tunisian revolution opened a new range of possibilities for people to struggle for a better life: protests, free expression, blockades, strikes, the ability to face down the police. Because so far their main achievement has been democratic government, the economic precarity that constituted a major motivation for the revolution has not been addressed. Democratic government is also unable to address the problem of police violence and humiliation, but as long as the cops remember the uprising and remain afraid of the people, they will not act as insultingly as they had before.

## **The Egyptian Revolution of 2011**

Sparked by the Tunisian revolution, the Egyptian revolution began on January 25, 2011, and as in Tunisia, it continued after the February 11 ouster of President Mubarak. Also like the Tunisian revolution, the movement in Egypt addressed many economic and social issues that were censored by the international media, which wished to downplay the largely anticapitalist nature of the uprising. And in another similarity, proponents of nonviolence (including anyone from Gene Sharp to the US government) blatantly falsified the reality of the struggle to portray it as a nonviolent movement.

Millions of people across Egypt participated in strikes, blockades, peaceful protests, riots, attacks on police, self-defense against government paramilitaries, handing out flyers, running blogs, and organizing the occupations of central plazas. They were primarily influenced by the (violent) struggles in Tunisia and Palestine, though white nonviolence guru Gene Sharp shamelessly tried to take credit. Protesters in Egypt burned down more than 90 police stations, they sent the police running time and again, they defended themselves from government thugs with clubs and rocks, and in Tahrir Square young volunteers went around taking up collections to buy gasoline for the molotov cocktails that were a staple of the movement.

1. As a result of their direct experiences in the assemblies and maintenance of the Tahrir Square occupation, growing parts of the revolution stopped talking about elections and started talking about self-organization. Many of the same people have seen the revolution as the beginning of a movement against capitalism and against patriarchy, and they have stayed in the street to oppose the authoritarianism of the new Islamic government. Directly as a result of their participation in the revolution, the position of women in society has also begun to change.
2. Even more than the Tunisian revolution, the uprising in Egypt spread critiques of capitalism, as well as specifically anarchist ideas, throughout neighboring Arabic countries, inspiring further uprisings. The Tahrir Square occupation was also the direct influence for the plaza occupation movement in Spain.
3. As in Tunisia, the movement lacked elite support in the beginning, but later saw international media and governments, as well as domestic political parties, jump on the bandwagon to try to steer the movement in reformist and nonviolent directions.
4. People empowered themselves, negated the ability of the government to intimidate them, opened up new possibilities for struggle, and began to change the position of women, workers, and Muslims within Egyptian society.

## **The Libyan Civil War**

Though the 2011 revolution in Libya started out as a spontaneous uprising, because it ended in large part due to foreign military intervention it is difficult to analyze as a social struggle. The militarization of the conflict and a lack of direct communication between the participants and social rebels in Europe or North America (which was not the case with Tunisia or Egypt, where we were in direct contact with participants as the uprisings unfolded) makes it very hard for me, from my vantage point, to know about the social content of the uprising. From what I have been able to ascertain, it seems that whatever social content the revolution might have contained was largely eroded by military concerns and realpolitik. Hopefully I am wrong, but it seems the war had an exclusively military character. This is not an intrinsic problem of combative revolutionary movements, as the nonviolent Color Revolutions were even more devoid of social content, but a problem of movements that focus primarily on the conquest of political power, whether peaceful or armed, democratic or military. Revolutionary movements that actually wish to end oppressive social relations must never allow questions of political power or military victory to take precedence. This does not mean that revolutionary movements cannot take up arms, only

that a revolutionary movement, whatever tools or weapons it finds itself obliged to use, must always focus on creating emancipatory social relations rather than seizing political power. In any case, the example of the Libyan Civil War is another reminder that when the State decides to unleash its full military force, movements cannot maintain any pretense of nonviolence. They must either fight back, or disappear.

Due to a lack of information and the way the conflict in Libya became a proxy war between external powers, it would be especially reductionist to apply criteria measuring its effectiveness as a struggle for liberation.

## The Syrian Civil War

In March 2011, an uprising began in Syria after police arrested schoolchildren painting revolutionary slogans on a wall in the city of Deraa. A relatively small group of people took to the streets in peaceful protest, and soldiers opened fire with live ammunition. The next day people returned to the streets, and again soldiers tried to crush the protests. The revolution spread from there. Peaceful methods proved incapable of holding the streets against bullets and tanks. Government forces even murdered Ghaith Matar, the activist who began handing flowers to soldiers, demonstrating the unsustainability of that tactic (as I stated in *How Nonviolence Protects the State*, a flower does not in any way impede the ability of the gun to fire). People began to arm themselves, and gradually the uprising turned into a civil war. According to Lina Sinjab, writing for the BBC:

But amid the violence, there is a great sense of hope. Among civilians, there is an unprecedented sense of solidarity. People are sharing homes, clothes and food - notably with the hundreds of thousands displaced by the fighting. The sense of freedom is palpable, with opposition voices speaking out. More than 30 new online publications are promoting democracy, despite the crackdown. In some opposition-controlled areas, civilians and rebels are establishing local councils to get the services working. And as people start to look past the civil war, some are protesting against rebel groups that have committed abuses or which, like the Nusra Front, are seeking to Islamise society. Syria has risen against tyranny and will never be the same again.<sup>12</sup>

By 2014, it became apparent that the Islamic fundamentalists of ISIS had become a dominant force within the uprising and taken control of a large part of the Syrian territory. The fundamentalists could make an excellent argument against violent rebellion, since they constitute everything that people fighting for freedom wish to avoid: totalitarianism; brutality; intolerance; and genocidal, misogynist practices. Incidentally, they are also the one sector of the rebellion that is receiving significant elite support, getting funding or other aid from Turkey, the conservative Gulf states, and even from the Syrian government itself. There are reports that the Assad regime

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<sup>12</sup> Lina Sinjab, "Syria Conflict: from Peaceful Protest to Civil War," BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21797661> (5 March 2013). One has to take the article with a great deal of skepticism, as the BBC along with other Western media clearly favor regime change in Syria. However, as of March 2013 the rebellion is happening largely autonomously of NATO intervention. As for the accuracy of the description cited above, the historical record is abundantly clear about the increase in solidarity in situations of disaster as in uprisings.

has largely tolerated ISIS,<sup>13</sup> allowing the fundamentalists free rein to go after the more humanistic elements of the resistance, like the Kurds in Rojava, who will be discussed in a later entry. Just as the US occupation in Iraq enacted policies that allowed the fundamentalists to dominate what had been a multifaceted resistance, the Syrian government can restore its international image if the rebellion comes to be seen as monstrous, which was not possible when the resistance groups were democrats and socialists.

1. Having liberated a large part of the country, there is no doubt that the Syrian rebels have seized space: whether they are putting new social relations into practice is another question. Segments of the rebel movement are fighting for a more egalitarian society; however much rebel territory has been taken over by ISIS, which is instituting social relations marked by authoritarianism, intolerance, and patriarchy.
2. Along with the other Arab revolts of 2011, the Syrian uprising has inspired other people to fight for their freedom, however it does not seem to have accomplished as much as the Egyptian revolution to spread new ideas and social critiques. The exception is in Rojava, or Syrian Kurdistan.
3. In the beginning, the uprising did not have elite support, though it gradually gained support from some sectors of the domestic elite not included in the ruling government, and an increasing amount of support from Western media and NATO governments. Meanwhile, the authoritarian, fundamentalist wing of the rebellion won massive funding and support from several regional governments.
4. In the midst of a bloody civil war, which has claimed 200,000 lives and counting, it is hard to talk about gains, although the article cited above is not without its sense of optimism.

## 15M Movement and General Strikes

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of September, 2010, millions of people across Spain participated in a general strike against the first round of austerity measures, protesting, carrying out blockades, sabotaging transportation infrastructure, and in a few cities, rioting, looting, and fighting with police. Anarchist labor federations played an important role in the preparation, as did horizontal neighborhood assemblies. The force of the day's events initiated an intense cycle of other protests and strikes, with a largely anticapitalist character. Further general strikes were held the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, and in 2012 on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March, the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, and the 14<sup>th</sup> of November. Concurrently, there was heavy rioting on May Day, 2011, and two weeks later, on May 15, plaza occupations directly inspired by the uprising in Egypt spread to hundreds of cities and towns across the country, winning the participation of millions of people. In the plaza occupations, people organized protests and matters of daily survival in open assemblies. The movement also led to the expansion of neighborhood assemblies, the occupation of empty buildings by people who had lost their homes to foreclosures, the occupation of hospitals, the blockade of highways and government buildings, and collective resistance against evictions, layoffs, and the privatization of healthcare and education.

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<sup>13</sup> Dan Roberts, "ISIS jihadists and Assad regime enjoy 'symbiotic' relationship says John Kerry," *The Guardian*, 17 November 2014.



The 15M movement (the plaza occupations beginning on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May) was an attempt by nonviolent activists in Madrid to refocus the growing anticapitalist movement on strictly political demands, primarily the reform of the electoral laws. This attempt was based on a manipulated version of the Egyptian uprising that portrayed it as a nonviolent movement constructed around exclusively political, electoral demands. There was a major debate around nonviolence within this movement (though would-be leaders generally tried to suppress the debate). The mass media, politicians, and police consistently weighed in on the side of nonviolence. After the plaza occupations began in May 2011, what had been at least a partially combative anticapitalist movement suddenly became an overwhelmingly nonviolent democratic movement. But this began to steadily change. The critical participation of labor unions, anarchists, and others, and the struggles against mortgage evictions and hospital privatizations soon replaced naïve demands for electoral reform with far-reaching critiques of capitalism and government. And in Barcelona, the brutal police eviction of Plaça Catalunya and the absolute inability of nonviolent resistance to defend the plaza was a first step in eroding the stranglehold of nonviolence on the movement's strategic discourse. Similar experiences in other cities had the same effect.

Within months, more and more people openly supported a diversity of tactics. Pacifists in the movement tried to criminalize anarchists who assaulted politicians in the blockade of the Catalan parliament in June 2011, but when those anarchists were identified and arrested later that year, thousands of people came out to protest in solidarity with them. By the time of the March 29, 2012 general strike, people were fed up with nonviolence, and hundreds of thousands participated in riots that rocked cities across the country. The labor unions, pressured by the government, took steps to prevent riots in the subsequent general strikes, such as organizing their own volunteer peace police to help cops maintain order in the protests. Though many people did not go to work that day, police controlled the streets, and people generally left with a sense of defeat and powerlessness. The pacified strikes are universally recognized to be less significant than the earlier, combative strikes. The riotous general strike of March 29, 2012 created a palpable sense of freedom in the streets, with people smiling, playing amidst the fires, and laughing with strangers; and it sparked a whole new cycle of activity, with an energetic anticapitalist May Day protest and another round of general strikes in October and November. But those pacified strikes, even though they achieved a similar level of participation in terms of work stoppage, failed to inspire many people to throw themselves into organizing after the smaller, radical unions announced they would join the major unions in establishing peace police and working with the police to prevent riots; the mood in the streets was more often one of desperation, fear, or defeat; and the experience did not inspire a new wave of activity in its aftermath, but months of stagnation, directionlessness, and social peace. The government reaction also shows how much less threatening they considered the peaceful strikes. After the March strike, they were on the defensive, trying to place blame and justify their loss of control, using the media to vilify the strikers and announcing new repressive measures (some of which were repealed after generating heavy resistance). After the relatively peaceful November strike, the government was much more calm and composed. They did not have to deal with a challenge to their rule, nor reveal their antagonistic relationship with society in such clear terms.

1. The diverse movement which in reality includes the 15M movement, the general strikes, and the various movements against austerity, has probably done more to win space than any other movement in Spain since the end of dictatorship. People have negated the power

of the State to demand permits for the use of public space, they have won the ability to take over the streets in protest or to take over plazas for meetings, they have organized neighborhood assemblies, workplace assemblies, hospital occupations, the “autogestion” or horizontal self-guided direction of primary care centers, urban gardens, collective housing, and other anticapitalist projects.

2. They have spread anticapitalist and anarchist ideas throughout Spanish society and to neighboring countries, spread critiques of democracy within social movements, and inspired other people to take action. The plaza occupation movement was a major inspiration for similar movements in the United States and Greece.
3. In general, the only powerful institutions that supported the movement were the major labor unions, whose participation aimed at bringing peaceful masses into the streets to hold their signs, listen to their speeches, and dutifully accept the compromises they signed with the government. When the 15M movement was just a nonviolent gathering, the mass media gave it a huge amount of attention, but when it became a more complex movement that did not issue demands and that began pushing at the constraints of nonviolence, the media turned against it.
4. The neighborhood assemblies allowed many people to meet their neighbors and gave them practice in direct decision-making. The plaza occupation assemblies gave people practice in self-organization (if not in decision-making, due to their unwieldy size) and they also created police-free zones where immigrants and others could be safe for over a month. The related movement against home evictions has saved many people from foreclosure and homelessness, the supermarket sackings have given working-class people free food, and the movement against the privatization of healthcare has maintained primary care access for several neighborhoods that otherwise would have lost it.

## **2011 United Kingdom Anti-Austerity Protests**

Although the 2011 anti-austerity protests hardly constitute an uprising or a revolutionary movement, I am including them to make it clear that I am not weeding out nonviolent movements. After all, many proponents of nonviolence believe that simply by being large and peaceful, an event becomes important.

This movement was marked by a major day of protest on March 26, with 500,000 people marching in London, a protest and day of strike on June 30, and another one-day strike in November. The protest movement was entirely peaceful. According to polls, 52% of the population supported the protests, though 55% believed the government spending cuts were necessary. However, we should be clear that in polls, “support” does not mean that someone would participate in a movement, only that they like the idea of the movement enough to say or click “Yes”, depending on whether the poll is verbal or written. This is democratic support, where ideas are alienated from actions. The results of the movement show exactly how powerful a passive majority can be, and how wise are those activists who seek the support of the majority over that of a committed minority.

1. The movement neither attempted nor managed to seize space for new social relations.

2. The movement did not talk about ideas, only about budget cuts, and its practice did not spark similar movements in other countries.
3. The movement was organized primarily by major trade unions and the Labor Party, and supported by a part of the media.
4. The movement achieved zero changes in government policy, zero reductions to the austerity measures, and zero changes in people's daily lives.

## **2011 England riots**

In August 2011, people in cities across England rioted after police shot and killed Marc Duggan, an unarmed black man, in a traffic stop. As per the standard procedure, police initially lied to the media, claiming that Duggan had opened fire on them, and media uncritically repeated the lie as they always will. When friends and family spread the truth of the incident, rioting and looting broke out in Tottenham, spreading to other neighborhoods in London and then across England. Participants were multiracial, and their targets included the police, government buildings, public infrastructure, stores, and people perceived to be rich or middle-class. The rioting, which was described by many as an all-out insurrection, also included a significant amount of poor-on-poor violence or simple opportunism. Regardless of a perceived lack of social analysis or political criticism on the part of the rioters, some of the basic causes were obvious, and the immense costs to government and police constitute an effective punishment for the police murder. The insurrection also divided English society into one camp that stood on the side of law-and-order, attempting to criminalize or pathologize the rioters and favoring harsh measures like the very stop-and-search policies that triggered the rioting in the first place, and another camp that rejected the government discourse of security and sympathized with the rioters, while perhaps trying to encourage a sense of solidarity and a revolutionary perspective.

1. As far as I can tell, the movement did not seize space for new social relations, although it did allow groups of neighbors to organize together in order to carry out attacks on the police, reversing the usual alienation and state of fear.
2. Although the insurrection made a rejection of the police, the reality of social exclusion, and the failure of tough-on-crime policies obvious, it did not in its own words spread social critiques. However, the very act of rioting proved eloquent enough to be replicated by tens of thousands of people across the country.
3. Unsurprisingly, the insurrection did not have the slightest bit of elite support. Even the handful of leftists who dared express any sympathy treated the phenomenon like some poor, rabid animal.
4. I have been unable to ascertain whether the rioting led to a gentler approach by police or other concrete changes. But at the least, it temporarily interrupted the social invisibility of those who rioted and allowed them to put the police on the defensive for a change. Looters also took direct action to improve their economic position.

## Occupy

Similar to the plaza occupation movement, but on a smaller scale and with more wingnuts, the Occupy movement in the US spread to cities across the country and centered around assemblies in public parks and the inevitable confrontations with authorities. Occupy Wall Street, the original franchise, began with a commitment to nonviolence, but Occupy in a few other cities respected a diversity of tactics. Occupy Boston, one group that supported a diversity of tactics and that used some light forms of self-defense to resist an attempted police eviction, outlasted Occupy Wall Street by a whole month. Occupy Oakland, which was far from nonviolent, triggered a general strike, spread critiques of capitalism that surpassed OWS's populist rhetoric, and disrupted the functioning of the government and economy far more than any other Occupy.

1. In a hyperalienated society, the Occupy movement gave people (in many cases for the first time in their lives) an experience with collective decision-making and self-organization. Thousands of people held assemblies, learned how to live together, fed one another, organized protests and other actions together, and tried to create a collective atmosphere in which patriarchal and racist behaviors were questioned and overcome (the extent to which they advanced on this front is a trickier question, but in many cities the attempt was there). Given the advanced degree of American social disintegration, such that many occupiers had never participated in a real debate before, much less an assembly or an encampment, Occupy was filled with an innumerable quantity of ugly, miserable, or just plain absurd experiences. But because that ugliness was an ever-present part of North American society, Occupy constituted a step towards overcoming it. In sum, in the spaces seized by the Occupy movement, liberatory social relations were experimented with, if only in a very nascent way.
2. It is sad that the watered-down, populist concept of the 99%, a weak stand-in for class consciousness, could count as a radical idea, but social awareness in the US was so withered at the get-go that even this slogan might be counted as an accomplishment. What is beyond question is that many radical ideas and social critiques were debated and spread in the space of the Occupy movement, ideas that were new to many participants. The example of Occupy Wall Street inspired people to take similar action in other cities around the country.
3. Numerous academics, media outlets, and even some city governments presented Occupy in a positive light, trying to curry its favor and influence its course. This elite intervention always pushed in the direction of maintaining strict nonviolence and issuing demands.
4. During the course of Occupy, hundreds of homeless people could sleep a little sounder, knowing they had a place to stay that was relatively safe from police. People also shared food and other resources. However, Occupy probably did not lead to any lasting gains.

## The 2011-2014 Chile student protests

Millions of high school and university students took to the streets of cities across Chile starting in May 2011, protesting the underfunding of education and the lack of public universities. Students carried out massive protests, strikes, and riots. They erected barricades, fought with

police—sometimes sending them running—attacked banks, and even burnt down a department store. Anarchists have played an influential part in the movement, and many students have begun adopting anarchist tactics. As of this writing, the movement is still ongoing, with major protests occurring in August and October of 2014.

1. The students have occupied schools and public places, though communal spaces remained in an incipient state.
2. The first student protests quickly inspired others and spread across the country. Students began discussing and circulating critical analyses of the role of education, public or private, in a capitalist society. As of 2015, these conversations were still going on. Both the FEL—the Student Libertarian Federation<sup>14</sup>—and the practice of Black Blocs within the student protests, have expanded exponentially throughout the course of the movement.
3. The students did not have significant elite support, although some small political parties and unions had influence in the movement.
4. Although structural changes have not been won at the time of this writing and the students repeatedly rejected government compromises, the movement forced the government to offer multiple concessions, and to return to the negotiating table again and again, each time with a better offer. The government of Michelle Bachelet has promised sweeping reforms, but students continue to protest against the lack of transparency and their inability to participate in the process.

## The Quebec Student Movement

In February 2012, students in Quebec, first at one university, then others, voted to go on strike in response to a government proposal to increase tuition. The strike soon involved 300,000 students, and included protest marches with over 400,000 participants, a quarter of the population of Montreal. The movement organized itself in assemblies and also engaged in heavy confrontations with the police, with many injured on both sides. “Prevented from occupying buildings as it had in 2005, the student movement shifted to a strategy of economic disruption: blockading businesses, interrupting conferences, and spreading chaos in the streets.”<sup>15</sup>

1. The Quebec student movement gave hundreds of thousands of young people direct experience in self-organization through debate and assemblies. Many of the processes of organization in the movement were accomplished through collective direct action, without representatives. Students changed the balance of power so much that elected student leaders, despite substantial support from major labor unions that pushed them to accept a compromise, could not agree to a deal with the government that would have left the tuition increase intact.

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<sup>14</sup> Everywhere except the US, libertarian means anarchist.

<sup>15</sup> “While the Iron is Hot: Student Strike and Social Revolt in Quebec, Spring 2012,” <http://www.crimethinc.com/blog/2012/08/14/the-2012-strike-in-quebec-full-report/> (August 14, 2012).

2. The movement spread critiques of debt, austerity, and capitalism throughout Quebecois and Canadian society. It also inspired the anglophone universities in Montreal to begin using assemblies, whereas before this was only a characteristic of the francophone universities. The students linked their movement with ongoing indigenous and environmental struggles, denouncing and attacking elite structures as a whole rather than only those structures exclusively concerned with university tuition decisions.<sup>16</sup>
3. The student movement received support and funding from major labor unions, but was uniformly denounced and slandered by ruling politicians and the media.
4. In September 2012, the pressure and disruption created by the student movement caused the new government (the old one had been voted out, in part thanks to the strike) to scrap the austerity bill and declare a tuition freeze. First some and then the rest of the universities voted to end the strike. Many students saw this as a weakness of the movement, as the struggle was about more than a simple tuition hike. By ending the strike, they also derailed the spreading articulation of the deeper issues of state violence, elitism, and capitalism as a whole. However, in March 2013, Quebec students were again beginning to take to the streets and riot in response to new government attempts to raise tuition.

## The Gezi Park Uprising of 2013

In May, 2013, a small group of environmentalists, anarchists, and other activists occupied Gezi Park, one of the last green spaces in Istanbul, Turkey. In doing so, they were opposing the model of development that was being aggressively pushed by the neoliberal, socially conservative AKP (Justice and Development) Party under prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. When police brutally evicted the occupation on May 31, rioting followed. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets, occupying nearby Taksim Square, an important location in the history of anti-capitalist struggles in Turkey. They defended the square with barricades, fighting against police tooth and nail, using rocks and molotovs, facing rubber bullets, water cannons, and tear gas. Protests, occupations, and riots spread to most cities throughout Turkey. Fighting lasted through the first half of June, with several people killed and thousands injured. Anti-capitalist political parties, anarchists, Kurdish nationalists, football hooligans, and residents of working-class neighborhoods all participated.

Gezi Park was a beautiful commune for almost two weeks. Spontaneity and autonomy were the rules of the game; after the park was retaken, the first tents went up with the initiative of small groups of friends. The whole park rapidly filled with tents to sleep in and dozens of larger structures hosting almost every single leftist or activist group. Mutual aid was the order of this utopia. Starry-eyed old-timers and fresh militants were living a dream come true. Leaving their normal existence behind for the first time, people who had never imagined a world without the police were impressed to discover a more harmonious society in the absence of the state.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Gavin Marshall, "10 Things You Should Know About the Quebec Student Movement," *Counterpunch*, May 23, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Ali Bektaş, *This Is Only the Beginning*, anonymous publication, October 2013, p. 25 (second quote from p. 12).

1. Similar to other movements in the preceding years, the uprising in Turkey was predicated on occupying space and fighting to defend it. In the liberated space, people gained experience in self-organization and self-defense. Polarization along religious lines was eroded in those spaces, and women improved their position in a generally conservative society. The major football club Carşı reached out to a major LGBT organization and apologized for its prior use of sexist and homophobic chants. The Pride march and the Trans march in Istanbul that June were larger than they had ever been in the past, receiving direct support from the Gezi Park movement.
2. Given that Turkey was experiencing economic growth at the time of the rebellion, the uprising communicated a profound rejection of capitalist economics, neoliberal policies, and the kind of growth and development they promote. The occupation of Gezi Park and the practice of barricades and street-fighting sparked a movement that spread across the entirety of Turkey, and inspired people in similar movements across the world.
3. The movement received some support from opposition political parties and unions; however with the exception of the far left parties, none of those organizations directly participated in or impacted the movement. The media in Turkey opposed or ignored the movement, and subsequently faced attacks. CNN Turkey famously broadcast a documentary about penguins rather than covering the initial rioting, and had several vehicles set on fire by protesters. Some companies, like the Starbucks in Istanbul, expressed support for the movement, though it was in a clear bid to avoid smashing and looting.
4. The occupied spaces were retaken by police, and the AKP remained in power, able to continue its development plans, but now the government will have to moderate its steps, knowing that it can count on resistance. Also, much of the fear and the psychological residues left over from the dictatorship in Turkey have been purged, as people found their courage by fighting back in the streets. Additionally, some first steps towards a reconciliation were reached when Kurds and Kemalists took the streets together, side by side. "One Kurdish student commented that this was the real peace process as opposed to the opportunistic process put into place by Erdoğan over the past year. It is telling of the nature of the conflict with the Kurds that the absence of the state from the streets of Taksim has nurtured the space for people to actually talk and listen to each other."

## **The Brazilian Passo Livre Protests**

Between March and July of 2013, with additional outbursts in 2014, millions of people throughout Brazil took to the streets to protest for free public transportation. The first protests occurred in Porto Alegre, modeled on a movement in Natal that successfully reduced bus fares in 2012. In May, early protests in Goiânia and São Paulo quickly turned to rioting, sparking a movement that soon spread to over a hundred cities across the country. The backdrop to the protests were fare hikes coming at a time when Brazil was spending billions of dollars, preparing a highly militarized police force, and evicting favelas for the upcoming 2014 World Cup.

Protesters fought with police, who used rubber bullets, tear gas, and even live ammunition, killing about ten people and injuring and arresting hundreds. A number of police were also

injured, though, and rioters attacked government buildings, took over streets, and burned buses. The protests marked the widespread use of the Black Bloc in Brazil.

1. Although the rebellion was based more in protests than in occupations, the Passo Livre or Free Pass Movement organized assemblies and created numerous opportunities for self-organization.
2. The movement communicated a radical rejection of the capitalist city, popularized the idea of free public transportation, and linked in with similar movements occurring in countries around the world, like the Gezi Park resistance in Turkey. Often called the *Movimento V de Vinagre* in reference to the vinegar people carried to ward off police tear gas, the combative movement inspired millions of people to take to the streets and confront police.
3. As the left-wing populist Workers' Party was already in power and in fact they were the target of much of the protests, the Free Pass movement did not enjoy significant elite support, and was largely self-organized.
4. The Brazilian state, fearing an uncompromising insurrection, tried to calm the violent protests with a vast array of reforms. Although the more radical goals were not met, like free transportation or the complete abolition of capitalism, many short-term grievances were resolved. Public transport prices were reduced, taxes on public transport abolished, laws were changed to promote a crackdown on government corruption, petroleum revenues were dedicated to healthcare and education, and homophobic laws were revoked.

## The Burgos Uprising

In January 2014, in the Spanish city of Burgos, the local government and a cabal of real estate developers were pushing ahead with a project to gentrify a working class neighborhood by constructing a fancy new boulevard. The neighbors of Gamonal held a protest and the police attacked, sparking four consecutive nights of rioting in which people destroyed banks and construction equipment, and fought with police. Afterwards, they continued holding protests demanding the unconditional release of those arrested, and they organized blockades to prevent construction. The mayor initially announced that the project would continue unabated. Solidarity protests were organized in dozens of other cities across the country, leading to riots or clashes in Madrid, Barcelona, Zaragoza, and the colony of Melilla. In Barcelona, multiple banks were smashed, Town Hall was attacked, and a central police station was attacked, forcing police to temporarily retreat. The gentrification project was subsequently cancelled.<sup>18</sup>

1. The rioters won a degree of fleeting autonomy in their neighborhood, and more importantly they negated the ability of the police to project force and allow the city government to implement whatever plans it wished. When the social peace reigns, a neighborhood is simply a real estate market that exists to generate profit from people's living arrangements. Once people started rioting and kicking out the cops, the neighborhood became home, a place configured by the desires of the people who actually live there.

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Gelderloos, "The Battle of Burgos: In Spain, a Fight Against Gentrification Underscores a Growing Conflict," *Counterpunch.org* 24 January 2014. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/01/24/the-battle-of-burgos/>



2. Though the uprising was not widely reported on outside of Spain, it was influential across the country and showed that people could actually stop gentrification and development projects. Tens of thousands of other people took to the streets in solidarity, and the experience in Gamonal probably informed other similar battles that would occur in the following months.
3. The rioters in Burgos did not have elite support.
4. The uprising succeeded in stopping the development project.

## The Can Vies Revolt

On May 26, the police in Barcelona evicted the seventeen-year-old squatted social center, Barcelona. The eviction was one small part of an ongoing, aggressive gentrification campaign designed to remake Barcelona for tourists and tech-sector yuppies, putting an end to free, non-commercial spaces and spaces intended for the autonomous use of neighbors. That evening, a thousand people gathered in the rain to protest, and a small group of a few hundred masked anarchists set fire to a media van, smashed banks, and attacked police. The next day, people returned to the streets, setting fire to an excavator that had begun to demolish the Can Vies building. Arsons and attacks were carried out across the city. The third day, over ten thousand people took to the streets, smashing banks, setting up barricades, and fighting with police until late in the night. Rioting lasted until the end of the week. The Can Vies collective refused to negotiate with the city government. The mayor accurately summed up the situation with the phrase, “As long as there is violence, there can be no dialogue,” underscoring exactly why so many people supported the violence. When it became apparent that the police were unable to win in the streets and that the revolt might spread to other neighborhoods or even throughout the rest of Catalunya (there had been solidarity protests in dozens of other towns and cities, with the offices of the ruling political party frequently attacked), the mayor abandoned his insistence on peacefulness and began pleading for dialogue in any form. When the protesters still refused, he unilaterally began to throw out concessions, including cancelling the eviction of Can Vies. But thanks to the rioters, this was already *fait accompli*. Rioters had retaken the Can Vies building and pushed out police, and were now announcing their intentions to rebuild, garnering widespread support and a hundred thousand euros in crowd-funding donations. Rioting and protesting lasted through the end of the week, drawing in perhaps a hundred thousand people and demonstrating the popularity of the tactics used.

1. The Can Vies revolt was a resounding success in terms of taking over space and allowing neighbors to define what kind of city they wanted to live in, against the plans of the politicians and their police enforcers.
2. The revolt helped spread radical critiques of urban planning, gentrification, and tourism, and generated active support for autonomous spaces across Spain and beyond.
3. The movement did not have elite support. The media and politicians were continuously slandering the movement or urging it to be nonviolent. One small leftwing Catalan political party participated in the movement, though they were criticized by other movement participants for their opportunism. They also counseled nonviolence.

4. The movement succeeded in stopping and reversing the eviction of Can Vies.

## **Autonomous Rojava**

When the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, it soon sparked a civil war in Syria. But in Rojava, or West Kurdistan, the part of Kurdistan occupied by the Syrian state, things took a different turn. Inspired by the decades-long Kurdish struggle for socialism and independence, people in Rojava formed the Movement of the Democratic Society (Tev-Dam), which eventually constituted the Democratic Self-Administration (DSA).

In contrast to the Arab Spring in other countries, where most protesters aimed to set up new governments,

In Syrian Kurdistan the people were prepared and knew what they wanted. They believed that the revolution must start from the bottom of society and not from the top. It must be a social, cultural and educational as well as political revolution. It must be against the state, power and authority. It must be people in the communities who have the final decision-making responsibilities. These are the four principles of the Movement of the Democracy Society (Tev-Dam).<sup>19</sup>

Operating within the DSA, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a dominant Kurdish party linked at least loosely to the PKK, formed various militias, including Women's Defense Units and the Asaish, a mixed force of men and women. "In addition to these forces, there is a special unit for women only, to deal with issues of rape and domestic violence." The Kurdish fighters have taken the brunt of the assault from the Islamic State, which was being tacitly supported the Syrian and Turkish governments in the hopes that the fundamentalists could eliminate the Kurds. The Kurdish militias played a major role in rescuing large numbers of ethnic minorities from the onslaught of the Islamic State.

Although political parties play a major role in the movement, in any case it is far more horizontal and participatory than the US-backed Kurdish Regional Government of Iraqi Kurdistan, which has attempted numerous times to isolate, subvert, or co-opt the DSA. According to a Kurdish anarchist who visited Rojava in 2014, the movement is an inspiring example of self-organization.

Many people from the rank and file and from different backgrounds, including Kurdish, Arab, Muslim, Christian, Assyrian and Yazidis, have been involved. The first task was to establish a variety of groups, committees and communes on the streets in neighborhoods, villages, counties and small and big towns everywhere. The role of these groups was to become involved in all the issues facing society. Groups were set up to look at a number of issues including: women's, economic, environmental, education and health and care issues, support and solidarity, centers for the family martyrs, trade and business, diplomatic relations with foreign countries and many more. There are even groups established to reconcile disputes among different people or factions to try to avoid these disputes going to court unless these groups are incapable of resolving them.

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<sup>19</sup> All the quotes regarding Rojava are from Zaher Baher, "The experiment of West Kurdistan (Syrian Kurdistan) has proved that people can make changes," August 26, 2014, libcom.org

These groups usually have their own meeting every week to talk about the problems people face where they live. They have their own representative in the main group in the villages or towns called the “House of the People”.

The movement also boasts agricultural and urban communes that are very active, functioning autonomously from municipal governments or higher organs of self-governance. The Tev-Dam has also prioritized the role of women in society, prohibiting female circumcision, the marriage of girls younger than 18, and polygamy. The movement has also armed and trained thousands of young women to fight for their independence from the Syrian or Islamic states, radically changing their social position in the process. There is no doubt that women and their roles have been greatly accepted and they have filled both high and low positions in the Tev-Dam, PYD and DSA. [...] if women stop working or withdraw from the above groups, Kurdish society may well collapse. There are many professional women in politics and the military who were with the PKK in the mountains for a long time. They are very tough, very determined, very active, very responsible and extremely brave. Rojava has been frequently romanticized, and even described as an anarchic or anti-capitalist haven. And while some of their organizing principles are explicitly anti-state or anti-capitalist, it is important to recognize that they function with structures of representative government (the DSA is led by a council of 22 representatives) and they still maintain prisons and other state features. Beyond that, information is sorely lacking about the degree of hierarchy in their militias, and what measures if any they have taken to abolish capitalist relations. In any case, private property, capital, and commodity exchanges seem to be intact, and the Stalinist pedigree of the PKK would suggest circumspection at the least before running off and declaring Rojava a utopia.

Nonetheless, the movement for democracy and autonomy in Rojava has without a doubt changed the position of women in society, improved the condition of ethnic and religious minorities, and operated in a way that is far less authoritarian than any of the surrounding states. And they have done it all armed.

1. The movement has succeeded in seizing a large swath of the Syrian state—the three cantons of Rojava—in which they have been able to practice autonomous forms of organization.
2. The “Rojava Experiment” has reinvigorated the Kurdish movement across Kurdistan and in the exile communities of Europe, as well as inspiring anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist movements across the world, many of whom mobilized in solidarity or sent aid when the city of Kobane was besieged by Islamic State forces.
3. Locally, it appears that most elites supported political parties that were either opposed to the DSA or refused to participate. The elites of all the surrounding governments are staunchly opposed to autonomous Rojava. After much international pressure, the US government began carrying out airstrikes against the Islamic State, in support of the People’s and Women’s Defense Units. This was only after the failure of US policy in Iraq and Syria became abundantly clear, and the Kurdish fighters had won international fame as the fiercest opponents of the Islamic State. Some suggest that the US and the KRG of Iraqi Kurdistan are using their support to control or co-opt the DSA.
4. For the time being, the movement has won autonomy for Rojava, cultural and religious freedom for all the ethnic groups that inhabit the region, a number of forms of equality

and autonomy for women, and increased possibilities for self-organization for the entire population.

## The Ferguson Uprisings

On August 9, 2014, white police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed 18-year-old Michael “Mike Mike” Brown in Ferguson, a poor suburb of St. Louis. Ten days of intense rioting followed, with people looting, burning, and attacking police with rocks, molotovs, and even guns. The National Guard were called in and the police militarized, but they were unable to stop the protests. By many accounts, it was professional activists, celebrity ministers from black churches, and organizations like the Nation of Islam and the New Black Panther Party (which has no connection with the original BPP) that finally succeeded in getting people to surrender the streets, using a combination of harassment, threats, and sexist comments about how the real men needed to step forward and take control of the situation.

In November, shortly before Thanksgiving, the riots kicked off again when the grand jury decided not to indict Darren Wilson. This time, protests and riots spread all across the country in a wave of anger and solidarity unprecedented in the United States in many years. The situation was exacerbated by fresh police murders and the non-indictment of the cops who were caught on camera strangling Eric Garner to death in New York City. In dozens of cities large and small, protesters blocked highways, and in cities like New York and San Francisco, they fought with police. In Seattle, Boston, and elsewhere, protesters intentionally disrupted holiday shopping centers. In St. Louis and Ferguson, rioting was intense, and included a new spate of shootings against police. In Oakland and Berkeley, protesters fought with police, set fires, and calmly looted, piling stolen goods in the middle of the street for everyone to share. Protests continued until shortly before Christmas.

1. Wherever the advocates of nonviolence did not carry the day, protesters were able to seize space, disrupting the normal flows of commerce and creating areas where normally isolated people could share their experiences with police violence and begin to defend themselves. Multiple accounts underscore the communal atmosphere that arose at the site of the QT, a convenience store that was looted and burned for calling the cops on Michael Brown.
2. The riots sparked a major conversation on the problem of police in our society, giving room to perspectives that are usually silenced.
3. The riots did not enjoy elite support, though a number of influential NGOs and protest organizations supported peaceful protests. A number of media outlets like NPR effectively advocated peaceful protest.<sup>20</sup>
4. The protests obviously did not put an end to police murders in the US, but they made the problem undeniable, helped counter some of the typical reformist false solutions (the death of Eric Garner, for example, was caught on tape, discrediting the idea that forcing the police

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<sup>20</sup> Though far outweighed by the thousands of articles and spots favoring peaceful protest, there were a couple articles, namely in *Time* and *Rolling Stone*, that expressed a limited sympathy with the rioters. As I argued in “Learning from Ferguson” (*Counterpunch*), it only became conceivable for the media to accept the legitimacy of rioting at a point when more and more people were starting to take guns to protests and shoot back at police.

to wear cameras will solve the problem), and revealed new ways forward, like collective self-defense against the police.

## The Hong Kong Democracy Movement

From September to December, 2014, hundreds of thousands of people in Hong Kong began protesting and taking over public space, demanding universal suffrage and free elections. The protests were overwhelmingly peaceful, with attacks on government buildings and clashes with police occurring on a few isolated occasions. Each time, protest marshalls helped arrest those identified with the attacks, or other protest organizations denounced the organization believed responsible for the conflict. The Chinese authorities were pragmatically restrained in their response to the movement, carrying out arrests but avoiding bloodshed and largely letting the movement die out. Authorities also paid for pro-government protesters to counter and sometimes to attack the democracy protesters.

1. The movement did succeed in taking over space, largely because the police refrained in most cases from carrying out mass arrests. However, given the hierarchical nature of the movement and its lack of emphasis on self-organization, being exclusively a democratic reform movement, occupied spaces have only been used for symbolic protest, and not for experimenting with new social relations.
2. The movement was very effective in communicating support for democratic reform, but did not popularize any deeper critiques of power or social organization.
3. Inside China, the movement did not enjoy elite support, but government and media organizations throughout the rest of the world were overwhelmingly favorable to the movement.
4. As of this writing, the protesters have not achieved any of their demands.

## The Mapuche struggle

The Mapuche, an indigenous nation whose territory is occupied by the states of Chile and Argentina, have been fighting back since the arrival of the Spanish colonizers, who were never able to conquer them. The Mapuche, a horizontal or “circular” (meaning reciprocal, non-hierarchical) society, effectively used armed resistance to defend their independence long after most other South American indigenous populations had been conquered or exterminated. They were finally occupied during a joint invasion by Chile and Argentina, backed by Great Britain, at the time the most powerful state in the world.

Mapuche resistance continues to the present day, with sabotage actions against multinational mining and logging companies as well as against major landlords who have usurped their lands. They also carry out protests, road blockades, skirmishes with police, hunger strikes, cultural activities, religious ceremonies, riots, and the forceful retaking of usurped lands. In January 2013, on the five-year anniversary of the unpunished police murder of Matias Catrileo, a young Mapuche *weichafe*, or warrior, Mapuche youth rioted in Santiago, the Chilean capital. In the countryside, unknown people set fire to the mansion of major landlord and usurper of Mapuche territory, Werner Luchsinger, whose cousin owned the estate police were protecting when they shot

Catrileo in the back. Werner and his wife were killed in the fire. At the time of this writing, the Mapuche have resisted the attempted criminalization of their struggle.

1. Within the autonomous Mapuche communities, community members revive their traditional language, culture, and spirituality, they practice the traditional horizontal forms of social organization; and the traditional forms of collective agriculture, and property rights, imposed by colonialism, no longer hold sway. In Mapuche communities, the land is collectivized and inheres to the community.
2. The Mapuche struggle has popularized methods of resistance to colonialism that do not rely on the same leftist framework that was also imported via colonialism. The Mapuche have inspired other indigenous struggles across the world, and has also inspired anarchists and other anticapitalists who are willing to give up their leftism<sup>21</sup>.
3. Although the Mapuche struggle is heterogeneous and includes reformist elements, the part of the struggle that fights for full independence and does not adhere to nonviolence receives no elite support; quite the contrary, it is branded as terrorist by the media and government.
4. The Mapuche struggle has made an impressive number of concrete gains in liberating large tracts of land, removing environmentally destructive exotic tree species planted by timber companies, protecting their territory from environmentally harmful development projects, and achieving food sovereignty in multiple autonomous villages.

## **A Cumulative Evaluation**

The foregoing evaluations are neither perfect nor indisputable. Subjecting the successes and defeats of social rebellions and revolutionary movements to a rigorous scientific objectivity destroys what is most valid in them and produces only the illusion of knowledge. My goal was not to produce a framework with the pretension of objectivity or insight into such movements, but to take a moment to compare in a simple way, with clear criteria and without double standards, the accomplishments of nonviolence and those of heterogeneous struggles. All of the rebellions mentioned above are more complex than a single book could do justice to, much less a few paragraphs, but by highlighting central features and obvious achievements, we begin to see a number of patterns.

Some of my characterizations could definitely be disputed: I do not claim to be an expert on the struggles presented above. However, after a fair evaluation based on the readily available information, what becomes indisputable is that since the end of the Cold War, nonviolent movements have had their greatest successes in effecting regime change, helping to inaugurate new governments that subsequently disappoint and even betray those movements. They have not succeeded in redistributing power in any meaningful way, or putting revolutionary social relations

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<sup>21</sup> For example, many Mapuche in struggle reject the Marxist framework that sees indigenous people as peasants or members of the international working class. As some have expressed it, “we are not poor, we are a society apart.” For the Mapuche to accept the working-class identity and the narrative of progress fundamental to leftism, they would have already lost their struggle, as the colonial identity and political framework would have supplanted the indigenous one.

into practice, despite claiming victory numerous times. On the other hand, heterogeneous movements using conflictive methods and a diversity of tactics have been the most effective at seizing space and putting new social relations into practice.

I would also argue that these movements have been most effective at inspiring other people and spreading new ideas, but different people are inspired by different acts. A pacifist could argue that being peaceful is a new social relation. To an anticapitalist that argument should be entirely unsatisfactory as it does not in any way address the question of power or alienation in society. Nonetheless, if one believes in revolution as the end of all violence, and understands oppression as a cycle of violence, simply being peaceful is a way to break the cycle and spread an important new social relation.<sup>22</sup> But one could make the opposite argument that fighting back spreads a new social relation, since our relationship with authority is supposed to be one of obedience and passivity.

In an attempt to be fair, I have not included a redundant spreading of ideas. A nonviolent movement that merely inspires other people to be nonviolent, or a combative movement that just inspires other people to fight back is doing nothing more than spreading its own methods.

Therefore, I have only included the spread of practices of self-defense (either violent or nonviolent) as an achievement where they directly conflict with other ruling structures, for example when marginalized and oppressed people whom our society trains to be defenseless and to accept their victimization reject this role. Nonetheless, I have not encountered any movement in the last two decades that has spread an effective practice of nonviolent self-defense.

The forms of self-defense that have been spread by marginalized people in the rebellions mentioned above have overwhelmingly tended towards the decidedly not pacifist. This may be because the exclusively nonviolent movements have tended to be movements of citizens, a normative identity that further marginalizes the marginalized.

Moving beyond the extension of peaceful or combative methods, there can be no doubt that heterogeneous, conflictive movements have consistently been connected to the proliferation of profound social critiques and ideas of new ways to live, while exclusively nonviolent movements have been systematically linked to superficial, populist, lowest-common-denominator politics. In fact, such politics are a key feature of the most “successful” nonviolent movements of the last two decades, the Color Revolutions, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

In sum, a review of revolutions and social uprisings since the end of the Cold War demonstrates the following:

1. Movements that use a diversity of tactics are overwhelmingly more effective at seizing and defending space, and using that autonomy to put new social relations into practice, whether through practices of self-organization, collective self-defense, the reanimation of indigenous ways of life, or collectivization and communization (ending the alienation of

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<sup>22</sup> In *How Nonviolence Protects the State* I argue why this view is flawed, but in basic terms, suffice it to say that the violence of the State is unilateral. Police shoot and torture people not because they have had rocks thrown at them, but because it is their job. Politicians rule and make decisions that kill thousands not because they were beaten as infants but because institutions of power manufacture their own interests and impose them on what might be considered human or biological interests. Cycles of violence do not explain oppression. The State is pyramidal and accumulative, not cyclical.

capitalist property, which dictates that everything can be bought and sold, and putting our resources in common in a spirit of mutual aid rather than profit).<sup>23</sup>

2. Movements that use a diversity of tactics are more likely to spread, to inspire other people to take action, and they are much more likely than nonviolent movements to spread radical ideas and social critiques, whereas the majority of nonviolent movements are connected to populist complaints and watered-down slogans either lacking in social content or relying on the same social analysis disseminated by the mass media.
3. Nonviolent movements are exponentially more likely to receive substantial elite support. The primary case in which combative movements receive elite support is when they crop up in opposition to governments that are at odds with ruling states (as when NATO will support people rebelling against the Libyan government).
4. Excluding the achievement of free elections, which both combative and peaceful movements have proven effective at winning, movements that use a diversity of tactics have a better track record of achieving concrete gains.

Beyond these four criteria, we have seen that peaceful movements are much more likely to fade away after winning a token gain like electoral reform, whereas combative movements are more likely to continue in the pursuit of deeper, more meaningful social changes; combative movements are more likely to be connected to a critique of capitalism and state authority whereas nonviolent movements hold democratic government, regardless of actual conditions, as the absolute good; movements with the greatest participation tend to display a diversity of tactics, whereas strictly nonviolent movements tend to be smaller or shorter-lived (bringing huge crowds together for a protest, but rarely for more extended action); within the time period under examination, nonviolent movements have never been able to stand up to military force, whereas under certain circumstances, combative movements have been able to defeat the police and military; democratic as well as dictatorial governments sometimes do use lethal force against peaceful protesters, contrary to pacifist claims that governments cannot effectively repress nonviolent movements because public opinion would prevent them.

And aside from the dramatic examples of revolutions and uprisings, we can also perceive a similar pattern in simple protests and movements that have not achieved the same dimensions.

Although nonviolent organizers frequently claim that protesters who use combative or illegal tactics ruin “their” protests—clearly demonstrating an ownership issue—anticapitalist protests in which people damage corporate property, fight with police, and interrupt the spectacle of social peace or disrupt whatever elite summit world leaders have planned, are clearly more effective than protests in which people get arrested, carry out civil disobedience, hold witty placards, but do not go on the attack.

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<sup>23</sup> In very broad strokes, the collective and the commune both subsist on the logic of the commons—that we are part of an interconnected web and nothing necessary for our survival and happiness should be enclosed or privatized—in contradiction to the logic of Capital—that everything must be reduced to its abstract monetary value, relations and beings processed and exploited to maximize their potential to produce value, and value employed to accumulate more value—but the idea of collectivization emphasizes a group of autonomous individuals who interact with the commons in different ways, as long as they do not privatize or destroy it, whereas the commune emphasizes cooperation and the elaboration of mutuality and shared relationships in the group’s interaction with the commons.



Compare the various antiglobalization protests in Washington, DC or New York City between 2000 and 2004—where there were huge crowds but little or no rioting—with the the 1999 Seattle WTO protests. No one even remembers the former anymore, whereas the latter is often referred to (incorrectly, but capitalism tends to have a corrosive effect on memory) as the birth of the antiglobalization movement. Hardly anyone disputes that Seattle did more to spread an awareness of the antiglobalization movement than any other summit protest in North America or Europe, and no one nominates the strictly peaceful protests such as the ones in Washington, DC for that honor.<sup>24</sup> In the heart of the empire, at the pinnacle of Clintonian peace and prosperity, people were rioting. Some proponents of nonviolence have claimed that the resonance of Seattle was caused by the major participation of organized labor, or by the nonviolent lockdowns of activists. Nonviolent organizers Rebecca and David Solnit have written critically about the media and Hollywood portrayals of the protesters, but with an evident desire to erase the participation of those who rioted. David writes about “50,000 ordinary people” and “tens of thousands” who “joined the nonviolent direct action blockade” but takes a big eraser to the Black Bloc and the many others who practiced forms of property destruction and self-defense against police.<sup>25</sup> Writing on the Stuart Townsend movie, *Battle in Seattle*, he objects to the portrayal of the protesters as professional activists (ironic, really) lacking “everyday grievances shared by most Americans”, but expresses no problem with the portrayal of Black Bloc anarchists as unsympathetic thugs or police infiltrators. In his “People’s History,” ideological competitors evidently deserve to be whited-out, and in this regard media lies suddenly become acceptable. One seemingly intentional effect of the Solnits’ intervention in historical revisionism is to portray the Black Bloc as a mere blip, a few dozen people who smashed a few windows during the space of a few minutes. Speaking with other people who were in Seattle, including one who also organized with DAN (the Direct Action Network that had established nonviolent guidelines, though it was not responsible for all the blockades, much less all the forms of protest), we get a very different picture of the day’s protests. First of all, the Black Bloc lasted the whole day, carrying out decentralized attacks in the morning, and converging on Nike Town in the afternoon for another bout of well-justified smashing. When the union leaders refused to march downtown in an effort to help police restore order and segregate their supporters from the rioters, a large contingent of the labor march broke away and came downtown. Though labor leaders and supporters of nonviolence are loathe to admit this, “they were mad [...] and some of them were also smashing stuff – windows and newspaper boxes. And then just a lot of people not in black joining in as often happens.”

My recollection, though it was a long time ago now, was that as the day descended into what felt like an apocalyptic war, nonviolence was not the main sentiment in

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<sup>24</sup> Runners up might include Genoa, Quebec City, or Heiligendamm, none of which were particularly nonviolent.

<sup>25</sup> See David Solnit, “The Battle for Reality,” *Yes Magazine*, <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/purple-america/the-battle> (July 30, 2008). A further irony is that in this same article, Solnit acknowledges that 52% of Americans polled as sympathetic with the Seattle protests. He claims this is “despite” the media portrayals, but he has no basis for arguing that popular support was not in some ways caused by the images of people smashing symbols of wealth and power. After all, those images, spread by the media accompanied by a disparaging or frightening tone, were the extent of the information most people had about the protests. And regardless of the game of majorities, it is a fact that there are a great many people who are more likely to sympathize with a struggle if they see people taking risks and fighting back than if they see people carrying giant puppets or dressing up like turtles. And this brings up the question, who would we rather have on our side? Those who want to fight back or those who just want theater? In any case, supporters of nonviolence have once again failed to back up the claim that “violence alienates people.”

the air – anger and shock were. That does not mean people were 'violent', whatever that means, but some were definitely angry and defending themselves in the street with dumpsters and rubbish.<sup>26</sup>

It is absolutely true that the marching workers and the locked-down activists were important parts of the Seattle protests, and the cancellation of the first day of WTO meetings would not have happened without them. Equating Seattle with the Black Bloc is narcissistic at best. But it is hard to trust people who complain about media manipulations and police brutality and then join sides with the media and police in criminalizing people in the movement whose tactics they disagree with.

This is especially the case when it is self-evident that those tactics deserve the lion's share of credit for the victory activist leaders subsequently wish to manage. If it was the union march that was the most decisive, important element in the Seattle protests, the element that inspired the most people across the country and energized a new cycle of struggle, why did union activity only continue to stagnate in the aftermath of the Seattle protests? If it was the nonviolent civil disobedience, was there a boom in such practices after the whopping success outside the Kingdome? In the years after 1999, there was in fact a major upsurge in "nonviolent direct action" trainings all across the country, though the pool of people conducting these trainings was decidedly small, such that one saw the same faces coast to coast. As to the actual practice of what some seedily referred to as NVDA, it seems that the upsurge was minor at the most. Part of this is probably due to several facts: that those who learned these tactics on the fly, rather than through years of experience blocking clearcuts, did not tend to use them very well; the police quickly learned to dismantle such blockades with ease; in practice, few people were actually inspired by the experience of submitting themselves to the mercy of the police and subsequently having their eyelids swabbed with pepperspray, such that for most people, once was enough; people were also disillusioned by NVDA because of how frequently they were treated like sheep or cannon fodder by the professional organizers giving the trainings or conducting the meetings. I have seen with my own eyes how well David Solnit can manipulate a large consensus meeting to get a bunch of hyped-up college students excited about locking down and going to jail to satisfy a strategy plan formulated in advance.<sup>27</sup>

In short, after Seattle there was a modest upsurge in nonviolent actions that quickly fizzled out on its own shortcomings. And how about the Black Bloc?

Curiously, the Black Bloc tactic exploded, becoming a commonplace at protests across the country. If the tactic really were unimportant, if the resonance of Seattle truly had nothing to do with its masked rioters, why is it that this tactic more than any other has resonated with people across the country since 1999? Even now, thirteen years later, the use of Black Blocs has

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<sup>26</sup> The quote is from an email from a friend who personally participated in the preparation for the Seattle protests.

<sup>27</sup> At the November 2001 protest against the School of the Americas, I overheard protest organizers talking about a more creative action plan designed to result in arrests and capture media attention. Later that same day, a large consensus meeting consisting of numerous affinity groups from all over the country and facilitated by Solnit coincidentally happened to formulate that exact same action plan, as though it were their own idea. The affinity group in which I was participating withdrew from the process, in part because the idea did not interest us and in part because the facilitation was manipulated. A couple times, for example, facilitator Solnit avoided a debate that was leading away from the predecided action, saying things like "We're getting stuck on this question, so let's put it aside for the moment and come back to it." Naturally, the conversation was herded back towards its imposed destination and the point of debate was never retaken.

continued to expand. Thirteen years later, proponents of nonviolence, including the Solnits, still have to use the same tired lies and manipulations to try to minimize or criminalize a practice that continues to leave their NVDA in the dust.

The lesson is clear, for those willing to face the music. In order to show people that we are serious, that we are committed, that we are fighting for our lives, it is better to express unambiguously that we are the enemies of the established order, that we negate their laws, their offers of dialogue, and their false social peace, it is better to attack (and to come dressed for the occasion) than to dress up as clowns, tote about giant puppets, playing up a theatrical conflict with the police, locking down and expecting them to treat us humanely, or wait for the cameras to give our witty protest signs a close-up.

This is not to say that we must be ever grim and serious, nor that our only activity is to smash. Just as we need the full range of tactics, we will express a thousand emotions in our rebellion, from street festivals to funeral marches to riots. But it is our negation of the present system that gives everything else its meaning. Only because we do not frame this as a popularity contest, but as a revolution, as a struggle to destroy the present system and create something wholly new, do all the festive and creative aspects of our struggle break out of the usual cycles of loyal dissent and counterculture that are co-opted from the beginning.

## Chapter 4. The Color Revolutions

Since 2000, the most prevalent method of nonviolent action has been, without a doubt, Gene Sharp's method for regime change, as laid out in his bestselling book, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*. No other method has been explained in such concise, unambiguous terms, and no other method has been as reproducible. Whereas the previous heroes of nonviolence, people like Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr., made complicated, intuitive strategic decisions in the midst of a movement that can inspire but that cannot be reproduced, what Sharp offers is not an example, and not a strategy, but a template. It is no coincidence, then, that so many people have seized upon this most reproducible of methods and attempted to reproduce it. *From Dictatorship to Democracy (FdtD)* was published in English and Burmese in 1994, and since then has been translated to over thirty languages, especially after 2000 when it was used as "the Bible" of the Serbian Otpor movement, in the words of its members.

The main "Color Revolutions" have already been mentioned: Serbia's "Bulldozer Revolution" in 2000, Georgia's "Rose Revolution" in 2003, Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" in 2004, and, following a slightly different model, Lebanon's "Cedar Revolution" and Kuwait's "Blue Revolution" in 2005.

Sharp's method offers unique opportunities for analysis because, unlike any other nonviolent method since the end of the Cold War, it has achieved success in its own terms. And unlike other nonviolent methods, such as that of Gandhi or King, which overlapped with and are ultimately inseparable from contemporaneous combative methods, the use of Gene Sharp's method has in fact occurred in a vacuum, in the near or total absence of competing methods for social change. In other words, the histories of the Color Revolutions can tell us accurately what a strict adherence to nonviolence can accomplish.

Otpor, the Serbian movement to overthrow Slobodan Milosevic, was the first real articulation of this nonviolent template, for which Sharp's book offers the materials but not the precise configuration. Although Otpor activists seem content to give him all the credit—they were, after all, personally trained by Gene Sharp's Albert Einstein Institute—they also drew on numerous characteristics of Philippine's 1983-86 Yellow Revolution, not explicitly dealt with in *FdtD*. The specific configuration of tactics they chose served as the undisputed model for all subsequent Color Revolutions.

The nonviolent Yellow Revolution used a disputed election and years of frustration with a longstanding chief executive for political leverage; it was protected from government repression by elite support, including the media, an opposition political party, and none other than the archbishop of Manila; it was exclusively a regime change effort with no revolutionary perspectives or social content, only the demands for the abdication of the current ruler and electoral reforms that would allow for the regular cycling of rulers; subsequent regimes were also plagued by corruption and politics as usual; victory did not lead to any structural changes in Philippine society; and the new regime did not close down the sweatshops, obstruct private property or foreign investment, refuse to pay the national debt, or do anything else that might have upset world leaders

(they did end the lease on the US military base at Subic Bay, but only after the end of the Cold War; in 2012, with the growth of Chinese naval power, they invited the US military back).

To its credit, this method did lead to people in the Philippines overthrowing another unpopular government in 2001, though this lack of respect for democratic process that the use of disruptive mass protest evidently inculcates should be most embarrassing to Mr. Sharp, who holds democratic government as the highest good. When Filipinos used the methods of the Yellow Revolution to oust then-President Joseph Estrada, the US government immediately recognized the new regime as legitimate with a diplomatic agility that some might regard as suspicious. In fact, many international and domestic critics regarded the 2001 movement as a form of “mob rule” and alleged a conspiracy among top politicians, business leaders, and military and church officials. The *International Herald Tribune* aptly expresses elite sentiments:

The peso and stock markets will rise, some investment will return, neighbors and allies will be visibly happier dealing with a hardworking, well educated, economically literate president used to mixing in elite circles and behaving with decorum. However, far from being the victory for democracy that is being claimed by leaders of the anti-Estrada movement such as Cardinal Jaime Sin, the evolution of events has been a defeat for due process.<sup>1</sup>

This criticism opens up much larger questions about democracy that are the focus of another book. For now, we can dismiss this journalist’s handwringing with the simple historical recognition that democratic due process has always been imposed by force. With regards to nonviolent methodology, several questions arise that must be dealt with: if nonviolent regime change is best suited to achieving democracy, how can it be that the same method also tramples basic democratic principles like due process? If it is democratic to oust fraudulently elected dictators using mass protests and obstruction, but a “de facto coup” to oust an unpopular, corrupt but elected and impeachable president using those same methods, what is the line between dictatorship and democracy? If due process can be twisted or stacked by dictators, but respect for due process is the elemental characteristic of democracy, then are mass protests and disobedience fundamentally democratic or anti-democratic? And why would business, military, political, and religious elites conspire to use a nonviolent movement for greater democracy? The answer to all of these questions is in fact simple, but not within the framework of Gene Sharp, Otpor, or any of the Color Revolutions.

In order to understand that framework, it would help to emphasize a fundamental characteristic of every single Color Revolution. The more obvious features of the Color Revolutions relate to unified, nonviolent mass action subordinated to a viral media strategy. Receiving directions from above, movement members take to the streets in protest, occupy a public square, or carry out some other form of mass disobedience on the same day. They adopt an aesthetic designed to transmit easily via television and internet. A color and a simple slogan, often just one word, are chosen to represent the movement (in Ukraine, for example, the color was orange and the slogan, “yes!”). The movement discourse is equally symbolic, such that discourse, slogan, and color are interchangeable. It is a marketing strategy *par excellence*. To understand the meaning of the color, the public, watching on the television or surfing on the internet, need not read any

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Bowring, “Filipino Democracy Needs Stronger Institutions.” *International Herald Tribune* January 22, 2001. Retrieved January 27, 2009.

text or understand any social analysis that the color and slogan refer to. (By contrast, the circle-A or the hammer and sickle designate certain concepts—anarchism and communism—that are not self-explanatory in the present context; to understand them a viewer would have to conduct a certain amount of investigation, ceasing, therefore, to be a passive spectator).

This marketing strategy requires the discourse of the Color Revolutions to be as simple as a color or a slogan: opposition. They are against the current politician in power. The social critique of all the Color Revolutions goes no deeper than that. This lowest-common-denominator politics serves another function. The only way for a media-savvy activist organization to bring together such diverse crowds in a mass and create the pseudo-movement they need to ride to power is to ardently avoid any theoretical debate, any collective discussion of strategy, any envisioning of new worlds or elaboration of social critiques, any truly creative processes. What they want are sheep. Sheep who will dress in orange or pin a rose on their t-shirt, baaa “yes” or “no” in unison, and go home when those entrusted with the thinking have decided it is time.

A Color Revolution is nothing but a putsch, a bloodless coup, a regime change. And this regime change is not in the interests of those who take to the streets. The nonviolent protesters in a Color Revolution never stop being spectators. They are spectators to their own movement, and at no point are they allowed to collectively formulate their interests. The interests, like the strategic decisions, come from above. Because the fundamental characteristic of every Color Revolution, the glue that holds the strategy together, is elite support.

The mass protests and encampments would come to naught if the government simply sent in the military and cleared them out. Not only do nonviolent movements have a track record of powerlessness in the face of police or military force, the particular kind of nonviolence promoted by Gene Sharp and put into practice by Otpor and other groups is the cheapest, flimsiest, most prefab brand of nonviolence imaginable. Gene Sharp is the Sam Walton of nonviolence. Passive participants in Color Revolutions do not go through years of civil disobedience, arrest, and torture to learn how to conduct a sit-in when the police come in with dogs, batons, or tear gas to kick them out. And they are not allowed to have any ideas, properly speaking, that might give them the strength of conviction to stare down the barrel of a gun and accept the possibility they might get killed. The only thing they have is the assurance that the military will not shoot them because it is already on their side. Every successful Color Revolution has been able to count on either the support of the military or military neutrality from the very beginning, not because they battled for the hearts and minds of the common soldiers, but because the top brass was already amenable to the regime change.

The clever media strategy of the activist organizations behind the Color Revolutions would be so much wasted time if the media simply did not give them any coverage. For decades, the media have disappeared anticapitalist movements from the public eye and edited out any reference to the histories that show a continuity of struggle against capitalism. In the absence of the television cameras, a crowd of people all wearing the same color and holding signs that proclaim “Yes!” would only appear to be a strange sect to the occasional passerby, rather than something to join. The alienated masses of a Color Revolution have not even begun the process of debate, self-education, and expression (not to mention any apprenticeship in writing, editing, layout, printing, broadcasting, and so forth) necessary to assume responsibility for spreading their own ideas without the help of the media. They do not have to do any of this work because the media is already on their side.

In every single Color Revolution, the movement had a large portion of the domestic elite on their side from the beginning. This includes rich people, the owners of the mass media, opposition political parties, academics, religious authorities, and so on. No military organization in the world is going to open fire on protesters who are supported by the country's business elite. Whether in democracy or in dictatorship, military hierarchies form close relationships with a country's "business community".

And it is not only the domestic elite that have supported the Color Revolutions. It's no coincidence that every single Color Revolution has replaced a government that had a close relationship with Russia with a government that wanted a closer relationship with the United States and European Union. Each and every Color Revolution received positive media coverage in Western media, usually beginning before the revolution had even started, so that the public was already trained to think of Ukraine, Georgia, or Kyrgyzstan as a corrupt regime in need of changing. (As friends and I discussed at the time, whenever a previously ignored country started getting ink in the *New York Times*, from Haiti to Georgia, it was clear that regime change was on the way). And in every case, the organization responsible for conducting the so-called revolution received funding from progressive capitalists like billionaire George Soros, or from US and EU governmental institutions like USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, and Freedom House.

Gene Sharp's own think tank, the Albert Einstein Institute (which trained activists from Otpor in Serbia and Pora in Ukraine), receives funding from some of these same institutions. The AEI refutes the charge that they are funded by the government. Stephen Zunes, writing in defense of Sharp for *Foreign Policy in Focus*, claims that "Absolutely none of these claims is true [...] Such false allegations have even ended up as part of entries on the Albert Einstein Institution in SourceWatch, Wikipedia, and other reference web sites." On SourceWatch, we find the information that AEI has received funding from the Ford Foundation, the International Republican Institute, and the National Endowment for Democracy (the first name should be well known to readers, the latter two are funded by the US Congress). Are these false claims? Buried in a single paragraph in the middle of his 42-paragraph article, Zunes mentions in passing "a couple of small grants" from the IRI and the NED. Evidently, these allegations are not so false after all. We also find the interesting tidbit that Gene Sharp's doctoral dissertation was funded by the Defense Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency.

But these evasions, and the ultimately true and factual assertion that Gene Sharp's activities in support of nonviolence are funded by the government, along with several very rich people, ignore the bigger picture: the Albert Einstein Institute works in parallel with these elite institutions. Although the AEI is a small operation, it works alongside much bigger players for the same ends. In both Serbia and Ukraine, the AEI trained the activists, but the US government and a number of business foundations funded those activists. For the most part, they did not funnel their money through Gene Sharp or the AEI, they gave it directly to the activist and media organizations that were conducting regime change efforts.

The fact of elite support for these movements is inseparable from their results: the Color Revolutions have not improved the lives of their participants (except for the opposition political parties to come out on top) but they have improved the prospects of Western investors and governments.

The Color Revolutions in general, and Gene Sharp's method in particular, are completely lacking in social content and revolutionary perspective. Sharp gives us "a conceptual framework for liberation" that does not even begin to address the concept of liberty. He assumes, uncritically, that a democratic government sets its people free and allows them to change the fundamental social relations that govern their lives.

This is why governments and capitalists support the method and have become its primary backers: because it does not challenge any of the fundamental power dynamics of society, and it does not seek to reveal or abolish the unwritten laws that allow them to profit off of our exploitation and powerlessness. As an added bonus, the method is nonviolent, and because nonviolence is intrinsically weaker, those who use it will never be able to take over space and change the basic power dynamics of society, they can only present an obstacle and demand that others change those dynamics for them. Because nonviolence is helpless, it will not deliver those who fund it any unexpected surprises, as when an armed movement overthrows an unwanted regime, but later misbehaves rather than being the obedient puppet (the Taliban is only one of numerous examples of this outcome). Ironically, the weakness of nonviolence is exactly what makes it a fitting tool, what wins it funding, and what allows it the appearance of strength and effectiveness, thereby seducing social rebels in other countries to take up a method designed to fail.

This brings us back to the earlier questions. Democracy is merely another way to organize exploitation, oppression, and social control. Democratic governments have coexisted with slavery, colonialism, warfare, the most patriarchal societies with some of the most unequal concentrations of wealth, the destruction of the environment, starvation, extreme poverty, the pathologization or murder of trans people, labor exploitation, job and housing precarity, homelessness, exclusion from healthcare, genocide, and any other bad thing we can think of. The most brutal forms of poverty and the worst destruction to the environment have occurred since democracy became the predominant form of government on the planet. The US government is a democracy. The German government is a multi-party democracy in which even the Green Party has been in power. Take a moment to think about the horrible things that democratic governments do on a regular basis. Democracy in and of itself isn't worth toilet paper.

This list of abuse and misery is a result of a host of structures related to capitalism and government. Capitalism is based on the endless accumulation of wealth, extracted from the environment and from our labor, and government is based on the accumulation of power and control directly stolen from all the rest of us. A marriage between these two systems, which has defined the social reality for at least five hundred years, means everyone gets fucked.<sup>2</sup> Governments can be democratic or not, more or less corrupt, but they will still pursue the same basic goals, and they will still be controlled by an elite. Government by its very nature concentrates power and excludes people from making decisions over their own lives.

The line between democracy and dictatorship is fictitious. Whatever difference there is is primarily one of formalism and ritual. The two classes of government are often interchangeable, and when a government changes from one to the other, many of the same people tend to stay in charge.

The truth is, revolution is anti-democratic. Revolutions in their beginnings are always opposed by the majority, which is nothing but a virtual herd controlled by the media. A minority of one knows its own interests better than the rest of society, and the rest of society can only be con-

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<sup>2</sup> For a good history of this marriage, see Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. New York: Verso, 1994.



vinced of a truth if people start putting it into action rather than waiting for validation from the majority. The struggle for a world free of domination is the insistence that we are the only ones who can define and meet our needs, and that our needs are more important than the ever-manipulated bylaws, due process, and sacred pieces of paper that democracy holds so dear. The principle of direct action is fundamentally at odds with following the rules and getting permission. Gene Sharp has taken the strike, in various pacified forms, and wed this fundamentally anarchic practice to its antithesis.

Only through the pacification of direct tactics can democracy be presented as freedom, but from the Philippines to Serbia, the contradiction is still there. There is no real contradiction in the forcible imposition of democracy. More than anything else, democracy is a good business model, and it has always been spread by invasions or bourgeois coups. The contradiction is in using the masses to overthrow one government (one that has become an obstacle to business) without letting them lose their respect for government or think they could overthrow it again on their own initiative. But if they are only ever given experience in nonviolent methods, they will never become an independent threat. And if they are encouraged to rise up in the name of democracy, they will reject the current government only on the grounds that it does not live up to the ideal of legitimate government. As long as future elections regularly cycle out candidates, they will think freedom has another chance of flourishing with each new change of masks.

On inspection, a peaceful coup in the name of democracy is only a contradiction if we swallow liberal rhetoric about the rule of law. Law is always coercive, but it is legitimized through a variety of illusions or rituals. The nonviolent coup, in which people are mobilized without being empowered, provides the perfect illusion. It is democratic, *par excellence*.

The Color Revolutions put nonviolence at the service of democracy without questioning the underlying power dynamics and unwritten rules that actually affect people's lives. By being exclusively political movements that only seek a legal reform or a change of politicians, they can accomplish no real change. In this context, nonviolence is revealed not only as a naïve practice that has been co-opted to provide an illusion useful to government, but as an illusion in its own terms as well.

Compare a violent (Tulip) and nonviolent (Orange) Color Revolution, and you will find there is no difference in the results. In both cases, the movement accomplished a regime change, and within a couple years, everyone was disillusioned because the new government proved to be the same as the old government. This is an especially critical observation, given how proponents of nonviolence frequently insist that the presence of violence exercises an almost magical effect in turning on police repression, driving away support, or reproducing authoritarian dynamics. In a direct comparison between two highly similar political movements, we see that violence is a non-factor.<sup>3</sup> If the pacifist hypothesis were correct, we would see quite different results between the Tulip Revolution, where people rioted, beat up cops, and took government buildings by force, and

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<sup>3</sup> Lest anyone take this argument out of context, let me reiterate that tactics likely to be described as violent are a non-factor in a movement that only seeks political reform, according to all the criteria listed in the text. In the pursuit of seizing space, self-defense, or interrupting a dominant social narrative, more forceful tactics are often more effective. We can see this at the tactical level in how Kyrgyz protesters were unique in that they actually stormed government buildings and physically ousted the ruling party, whereas the peaceful protesters in Ukraine could only push the ruling party to agree to step down.

But to avoid prioritizing the forceful tactics over the peaceful ones, we should emphasize that where forceful tactics can be effectively coupled with creative and other non-combative tactics, movements are most effective in the long-term at sustaining struggle, surviving repression, and elaborating revolutionary social relations.

the Orange or Rose Revolutions, where people were entirely peaceful. That difference is absent. Violence is a false category. It is only a question of what actions are effective at overcoming structures of power without reproducing them.

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Peter Gelderloos  
The Failure of Nonviolence (Chapters 1-4)  
From the Arab Spring to Occupy

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From the arab spring to the plaza occupation movement in Spain, the student movement in the UK and Occupy in the US, many new social movements have started peacefully, only to adopt a diversity of tactics as they grew in strength and collective experiences. The last ten years have revealed more clearly than ever the role of nonviolence. Propped up by the media, funded by the government, and managed by NGOs, nonviolent campaigns around the world have helped oppressive regimes change their masks, and have helped police to limit the growth of rebellious social movements. Increasingly losing the debates within the movements themselves, proponents of nonviolence have increasingly turned to the mainstream media and to government and institutional funding to drown out critical voices.

*The Failure of Nonviolence* examines most of the major social upheavals since the end of the Cold War to establish what nonviolence can accomplish, and what a diverse, unruly, non-pacified movement can accomplish. Focusing especially on the Arab Spring, Occupy, and the recent social upheavals in Europe, this book discusses how movements for social change can win ground and open the spaces necessary to plant the seeds of a new world.

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