a review of Peter Gelderloos's book
The Failure of Nonviolence: From the Arab Spring to Occupy

Designer's notes:
Gabriel originally posted this essay here:
http://www.alpineanarchist.org/r_gelderloos_review_tfon.html
I thought it was articulate and important and asked him if it would be OK for me to design a pamphlet version - this is the result.
All of the graphics in this pamphlet version are mine and don't necessarily reflect Gabriel's views.
Albo Jeavons

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Violence Sells... But Who's Buying?

This essay is a review of *The Failure of Nonviolence: From the Arab Spring to Occupy* by Peter Gelderloos (Seattle: Left Bank Books, 2013).
Peter has written a response to the essay under the title "Misrepresentations, but Substantial Differences as Well"; it can be found on various activist forums online.

When, some months ago, I read on thegild.blogspot.se that Peter Gelderloos was among someone's "favourite activist writers", I wasn't surprised. Gelderloos writes from the perspective of an active participant in numerous social struggles, manages to do this without any bothersome academic jargon, lays out his arguments well, and furthers debate about subjects central to revolutionary movements. All of this also applies to his latest publication, *The Failure of Nonviolence: From the Arab Spring to Occupy,* published by Seattle's Left Bank Books.

If the arguments in *The Failure of Nonviolence* – and, in fact, the title – remind readers of Gelderloos's popular 2005 book *How Nonviolence Protects the State*[1], this is no surprise either. As Gelderloos himself states in the "Comments on How Nonviolence Protects the State", added as an appendix to *The Failure of Nonviolence*, the latter was originally conceived as an updated version of the former, until the author decided "it would be better to write a new book rather than try to revise the earlier one" (p. 284).

The key arguments of both books are the same: "violence" is a terribly vague term that only confuses discussion about tactics and strategy; "proponents of nonviolence" – as Gelderloos likes to call them – write social movement history in ways that fit their own ideological assumptions; and many nonviolent activists[2] hinder revolutionary

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1 The book was self-published in 2005. An expanded version was published by South End Press in 2007.

2 Gelderloos has left the term "activism" behind, because it "was an ugly term, and it is a fitting label for a defunct practice" (p. 293). I will still use it in this review as a shorthand. (In fact, despite his reservations, Gelderloos frequently uses the term "activists" in his book as well.)

developments with their non-confrontational tactics, at times even betraying and endangering those who do not abide by their directives.

What is new in *The Failure of Nonviolence* is an application of this critique to political developments of the last fifteen years, detailed engagements with prominent advocates of nonviolence (among them Gene Sharp, the Dalai Lama, and Bob Geldof), and responses to critics of How Nonviolence Protects the State.

A short evaluation of the *The Failure of Nonviolence* could simply read thus: Once again, Gelderloos skillfully and convincingly discloses the hypocrisy, short-sightedness, and (privilege-based) moralism of many nonviolence advocates. Yet, this would make a blurb rather than a review. So I'll try something else: namely, a critique of a few elements of the book, based on agreeing with its basic assumptions. It is a bit of a risky undertaking, since it can easily lead to irritation in all camps. The divides in the (non)violence debate are deep and public self-criticism can easily be interpreted as aiding the opponent. Gelderloos alludes to this, when stating: "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." (p. 30) As much as I agree that one has to be precise in formulating one's critique in order not to supply the wrong forces, I don't think that completely abstaining from public self-criticism can be the answer. It would rather be the end of any productive debate and only further deepen the divides that often make such a debate so difficult.

Some Personal Background

In order to avoid misconceptions as far as possible, let me spell out some of the personal background on which this review is written: I was politicized in the context of the German autonomous movement of the late 1980s. "Militant action", as we called it, was a given part of our politics. That included participating in black blocs (as most people know, black blocs are a product of the German au-

tonomous movement), a generally confrontational attitude towards the police and other state representatives, and clandestine direct action (spraying graffiti, gluing locks, smashing windows, etc.). To this day, I do not question the legitimacy of such action in the context of social struggles.

On top of that, the reflection on the experiences of the urban guerrilla groups in Germany (and beyond) of the 1970s was extremely important among the radicals of my generation. Despite all of the autonomous critique of the urban guerrilla groups, their members were always considered to be comrades. What mattered was a strategic evaluation of their struggle, not moral condemnation.

I am utterly convinced that the use of "violent", "militant", or "combative" tactics (the final adjective is the one preferred by Gelderloos – more on terminology later) will always be an inevitable part of social movements and that it is more important to develop a tactically and strategically sound way of relating to them than to get caught up in abstract ethical debates. I am not, and have never been, a nonviolent anarchist.

Okay, so much for that. Now let's turn to the problems I find in *The Failure of Nonviolence* amidst all of its merits.

Is Nonviolence Monolithic?

It is important to note that some experiences which seem to have motivated Gelderloos to write the book differ from mine. This probably needs to be considered throughout the entire review (although certain parts are more affected by it than others). It is up to the individual readers to determine whether Gelderloos's experiences or mine are closer to their own. The relevance of what I have to say will largely depend on this.

Gelderloos's characterization of "nonviolence" is not entirely clear. On the one hand, he categorically defines it as "an attempt to force

nonviolent methods across an entire movement", adding in a footnote that "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" (p. 19). On the other hand, he also speaks of "dogmatic nonviolence" (p. 11), "nonviolence as an absolute philosophy" (p. 241), and "nonviolence as an exclusive methodology" (p. 281), suggesting that there are also other – acceptable – forms of nonviolence. While this can be confusing at times, it is certainly the former notion – nonviolence as an exclusive, dogmatic, and absolute position – that dominates Gelderloos's account. And this is where our perceptions differ. While my experiences with the "peace police" are limited,[3] I know plenty of nonviolent activists whose outlook I treasure, who I happily collaborate with in certain campaigns, and who I wholeheartedly respect as radical comrades.

This might, in fact, seem ironic given my background in the German radical milieu. Next to a strong, and militant, autonomous movement, Germany also has a very strong nonviolent anarchist current. The country's biggest anarchist newspaper, graswurzelrevolution, was founded in 1972 in the context of the anti-nuclear and peace movement and explicitly embraces nonviolent anarchism to this day. Yet, it is perhaps the long coexistence of militant action and nonviolent activism that has led to a fairly relaxed attitude toward the (non) violence debate. Yes, the debate flares up every so often, but the arguments are always the same, the differences are clear, and, once the ritualistic claims have been made, everyone gets back to their daily business. The "diversity of tactics" that Gelderloos advocates in *The Failure of Nonviolence* has long been a "fact on the ground", a

3 There is a sense in Gelderloos's book that I often encounter in "combative" circles, namely, that every time someone interferes with "combative" actions during a protest, it is a case of peace policing. I think that interpretation is not entirely justified. I have witnessed interferences that had nothing to do with anyone peace policing (let alone unmasking other protestors or handing them over to the police), only with other "combative" protestors – often rightfully, in my opinion – believing that a certain charge was, right there and then, irresponsible, self-defeating, or dangerous.

reality that everyone has to relate to, whether they like it or not.[4]

So, when Gelderloos writes about an "outrage" with respect to proponents of nonviolence, and about how "angry" he feels about their conduct (p. 285), then he talks about sentiments that I don't share. This is, of course, not to say that Gelderloos doesn't have a right to his outrage and anger. I'm sure he's had plenty of experiences to justify them. I just haven't.

Not all of the differences between Gelderloos's perspective and mine are based on different experiences, however. Some concern theoretical aspects. Let us now focus on those.

I. Terminology: "Violence doesn't exist" – Really?

The first chapter of *The Failure of Nonviolence* is entitled "Violence Doesn't Exist". Allow me to go off on a short tangent: When Slayer released the album God Hates Us All, the band's vocalist Tom Araya was asked if he really believed that was true. His answer was, "No, God doesn't hate us – but it's a really good title." "Violence Doesn't Exist" is a really good title, too – but its message is not very convincing.

1. The argument is mainly rhetorical. To explain why violence doesn't exist, Gelderloos says, that "it is not a thing" (p. 20). Alright. But neither is the state, capitalism, racism, sexism, or anarchy. Does this mean that none of these phenomena exist? ... Gelderloos mentions the numerous workshops on nonviolence he has held and how "no group of people, whether they number five or a hundred, has ever agreed on the definition" (p. 21). Gelderloos finds this "curious". I don't. He would without doubt get the same result if he held

4 Speaking from my own experience, the worst that might happen is that a nonviolent anarchist publisher hesitates to publish one of your pieces because you are deemed a "black bloc anarchist". Yet, I think that's hardly anything to get worked up about – the label is kind of amusing, it is in some way applicable, and there are plenty of other publishers.

workshops on all of the above-mentioned phenomena. And not only that. Even several "things" are defined in a variety of ways. How about the difference between a journal, a magazine, and a newspaper? A ship, a boat, and a vessel? People can also end up discussing for hours whether chess is a sport, a game, or an elitist cultural marker, or whether corn flakes belong to the cereals family or constitute their own food group. Very few terms, especially complex ones, are clearly defined.[5] If our answer to this problem is that these terms can't be used in any meaningful way in discussion, we might as well stop discussing. Yes, the term "violence" is often used in confusing, hypocritical, and nonsensical ways. However, the challenge lies in suggesting meaningful definitions that make meaningful discussion possible, rather than abandoning the debate.

2. Gelderloos seems to exaggerate the fact that "violence is so vague, so hard to define" (p. 25). Even if it is hard for a group of no more than five people to reach a definition that satisfies everyone (which, again, goes for any complex term), most of us share a very basic understanding of what the term "violence" implies – going beyond just "a certain emotional reality" (ibid.), which is the only one that Gelderloos seems to acknowledge.[6] When we say, for example,

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5 Gelderloos continues his critique of the term "violence" by writing: "It [violence] is a category, a human construct in which we choose to place a wide array of actions, phenomena, situations, and so forth." (p. 20) But this is the very definition of what terms are – they are all human constructs in which we place all sorts of things (and non-things). I might also add that I think Gelderloos fails in replacing the term "violence" with supposedly less vague and incoherent terms. He writes: "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." (p. 29) "Illegal" is certainly not incoherent, but it is a good choice? Many nonviolent activists I know do illegal things all the time. And can't a blockade be "conflictive"? The burning of a draft card "combative"? And what exactly is a "forceful" method or tactic?

6 Interestingly enough, Gelderloos writes the following with respect to the term "revolution": "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

"Be careful when arguing with John, he can get violent", we pretty much all know what that means: if John doesn't like what we say, he might smash our nose in. When we speak of a less violent society, we speak of an end to domestic abuse, gun killings, fist fights at the county fair, and so forth. I think we also have a pretty common understanding of what it means to have violent parents, a violent partner, to grow up in a violent neighborhood, or to fall victim to a violent crime.[7] In fact, to tell people who've been in such situations that violence doesn't exist, can become somewhat cynical – although that is certainly far from Gelderloos's intentions.

3. Gelderloos's thrashing of the term "violence" appears a little odd given that the main interest in his book comes from his exploration of "nonviolence". I understand that Gelderloos doesn't see nonviolence as "an absence, avoidance, or transformation of violence" (p. 24). However, he also states that "perhaps the most important argument against nonviolence is that violence as a concept is ambiguous to the point of being incoherent" (p. 20). This clearly makes the meaning of nonviolence dependent on the meaning of violence, as it logically should be when you equip a noun with the prefix non. However, when you add the prefix non to a term that doesn't have any meaning, it (the meaning, that is) doesn't miraculously appear – rather, you will end up with yet another term that has none. So, if this is the case, what is Gelderloos actually writing about? ... Gelderloos explains that he sees nonviolence as "an attempt to resolve,

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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. ... 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." (p. 33) I'm not exactly sure why this very logic wouldn't apply to the term "violence" as well.

7 Gelderloos himself makes repeated use of the colloquial consensus on what violence is, for example when he repeatedly speaks of "police violence", when he entitles a chapter "How the peaceful can benefit from violence", or when he explains: "Even those who believe they do not like violence benefit from the more dynamic space that is created when a diversity of tactics is at play" (p. 278). All of these usages of the term only make sense because such a consensus exists.

transform, or suppress those things in our society and in our social movements that appear to its practitioners to be violent" (p. 24). That's a fair argument. Like the Catholic Church invented devil worshipers to get rid of unwanted deviants, the proponents of nonviolence invented violence so they can go after protestors they don't like. However, that still begs the question of why the term "violence", even in its negative form, attracts so much attention. It is hardly a coincidence that Gelderloos uses it in the title for his book. Gelderloos might answer along the following lines: "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." (p. 26) I don't think so. The media didn't invent our fascination with violence. This fascination is rooted much deeper in human culture, and there is very little difference between the media and your radical housing project next door. Violence – also in the form of "nonviolence" – excites everybody, and everybody will want to read about it. Gelderloos must be aware of that. In this sense, his statement, "I do not want to waste any more time by talking about violence" (p. 29), can only be meant tongue-in-cheek. He talks about violence on every page of his book.

II. Analysis: Where Does Social Change Come From?

The Failure of Nonviolence includes an ambitious 50-page chapter on "The Revolutions of Today". It covers everything from the Oka Crisis and the Second Intifada to Occupy and the Syrian Civil War. The success of each "uprising", "movement", or "revolution" (Gelderloos makes no clear distinction between the terms here – probably because such distinctions are hard to make) is assessed according to four criteria: "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." (p. 48)

Unsurprisingly, Gelderloos reaches the following conclusion: "...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 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." (p. 90)

I'm not exactly sure what to make of this. Some of the criteria seem very general (for example, how exactly do you evaluate "concrete gains in improving people's lives"? and which section of society are we talking about?), and it appears difficult to apply them to all of these events for someone without first-hand experience (which Gelderloos can hardly have in every single case). In particular, though, I'm wondering if the distinction between "nonviolent movements" and "heterogeneous movements using conflictive methods and a diversity of tactics" can really be made that strictly. Unless a movement is really exclusively nonviolent (are there that many?), the nonviolent tactics are a part of the puzzle of a diversity of tactics, and the relevant question would then be which role they play in this patchwork and how they relate to other tactics. Gelderloos's point would be stronger if he said that his survey proved that nonviolent tactics never work, but that others do (which, of course, we'd then be curious to learn about in more detail). But to state that a "diversity of tactics" works better than the dogmatic use of one particular tactic is a bit of a no-brainer and puts us back to square one: Which tactics – or which combinations of tactics – are the most effective in a specific historical situation?[8]

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8 Another word on Gelderloos's claim that an exclusive use of "non-combative" methods only leads to superficial and cosmetic change: At one point, he writes that "the greatest victory a nonviolent movement has ever achieved in the

I also think that it'd be worth looking closer at some historical developments that Gelderloos pays little attention to. A monumental event like the collapse of the Eastern European communist bloc in 1989-90 – which happened largely without "combative" tactics (except for Romania, where this, arguably, did not contribute to a more radical development) – is basically ignored. Gelderloos contents himself with the observation that "citizens' freedom of action did not at all increase" (p. 48) – a statement that I, as someone who grew up close to the iron curtain with family friends on the other side, find rather bold. The same applies to the following: "The line between democracy and dictatorship is fictitious. Whatever difference there is is primarily one of formalism and ritual." (p. 106) Having Austrian grandparents who lived through the Third Reich, I would strongly deny that the difference between Austria in 1943 and Austria in 2013 is fictitious. In 2013, there are no concentration camps, there is no genocide of minority populations, and no one is executed for distributing leaflets either. I consider all of these differences beyond "formalism and ritual".[9]

The fall of the iron curtain meant more than just a change of government; it meant the eradication of an apparently untouchable totalitarian political, economic, and social system. There is a tremendous lesson to be learned here for political activists. The decisive question thereby isn't whether the changes led to something better or not. The decisive question is how such changes were possible at all. Yes,

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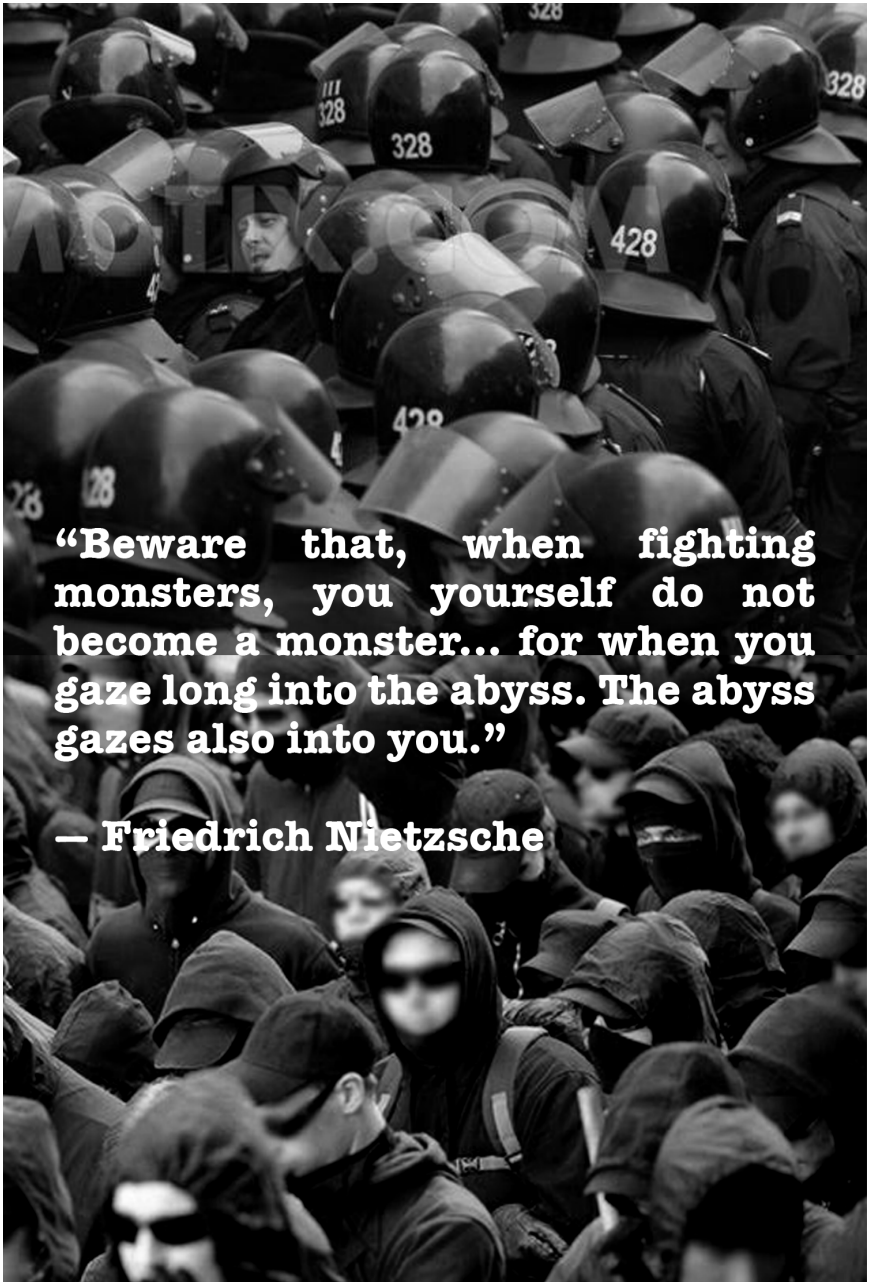
history of the world [was to replace] one government with another" (p. 34). But can any "combative" movement claim anything different?

9 In the context of his critique of democracy, Gelderloos also criticizes democratic forms of decision-making: "All forms of unitary decision-making, whether democratic or autocratic, are designed to force people to abide by decisions they disagree with." (p. 250) We encounter this argument regularly in the most radical of our circles. One crucial thing always seems to be forgotten, however: If I agree that I will sometimes abide by decisions I disagree with because I deem this beneficial to a healthy and balanced community life in the long run, I do not experience being outvoted as a quasi-fascist attack on my precious personal freedom. It is the possibility to agree to the rules of the game that distinguishes democratic (and by this I do not mean parliamentarian) ways of decision-making from autocratic ones.

partly the system just imploded, eroded by its own contradictions. Yet, to simply leave it at that would be too naive an interpretation of history. Rather, we must investigate all of the "silent" and "invisible" forms of everyday resistance that contributed to this process – almost all of which fall outside of what most Western activists today would regard as "combative" tactics, or even "social movements".

III. Strategy: What's Next?

As we have already seen, Gelderloos calls for a "diversity of tactics" (sometimes "methods") in opposition to an approach of nonviolence. However, nonviolent activists are also for a diversity of methods, they just want them to be nonviolent. The difference to "combative" activists is not one of principle but one of drawing different boundaries. Any "diversity of tactics" approach that wants to be taken seriously must draw boundaries somewhere. I assume (and certainly hope) that no proponent of such an approach would consider it okay to bomb a kindergarten full of four-year-olds in order to take a stand against the state-run education system. However, once you admit that limits need to be drawn somewhere, the discussion is no longer about who draws them (proponents of nonviolence) and who doesn't ("combative" folks), but where they need to be drawn. This means that you move from an ideological debate to a tactical one; from a place where abstract poles ("diversity of tactics" vs. “nonviolence”) inhibit fruitful discussion to a place where such a discussion becomes possible. In other words, “we”, the “combative” radicals, must not get stuck in discussions about whether it can be okay/beneficial/necessary to throw rocks at the police, to burn down an army recruitment center, or to prepare for armed struggle; instead, we must establish when it is okay/beneficial/necessary to a foe that is already on the ground. Gelderloos himself states that “Nonviolence Has Lost the Debate” – or, at least, that’s the title he gives the introduction to *The Failure of Nonviolence*.



In the book's final chapter, characteristically entitled "A Diversity of Methods", Gelderloos does indeed engage in concrete discussions

about the appropriateness of certain tactics under certain circumstances. This, to me, is the book's most interesting part, and the following critical remarks will mostly relate to it.

1. Gelderloos sometimes presents slogans as arguments, falling short of further investigation. For example, he says that "nobody owns a protest" (p. 251). That is, without doubt, correct – morally, philosophically, legally. But what does it mean? That you can attend any protest and not give a shit about the organizers' intentions? Do we need to grant someone the right of "ownership" to an event before we respect that someone might have a greater investment in it than we do? That would be a strange understanding of anarchism, it seems.[10] If I don't like the organizers' wishes or expectations, I don't need to attend the event. I can join up with those who share my wishes and expectations, so we can organize our own. (Needless to say, the notion of a "mass protest" implies a variety of events.)

2. A similar problem arises with Gelderloos's demands for "basic minimums" among different groups of protestors when "it is not possible for the different sides to simply ignore each other" (p. 281). He writes: "The peaceful ones should never aid the police in arresting or surveilling the combative ones, the combative ones should make sure never to do anything that physically harms the peaceful ones, and none of them should prevent the actions of the others." (ibid.) This sounds great, but it's not really an answer to anything, unless we clarify why physical harm is more important than other harm ("violence" obviously can't be a criterion), at what point one prevents the actions of others, and so forth.[11] Most importantly, though, such

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10 Apparently, Gelderloos doesn't disagree. He writes at one point: "Someone who goes to a candlelight vigil with fireworks clearly has either misunderstood the historical character of this tradition, or they are intentionally trying to disrespect those who are organizing it." (p. 273) I'm not sure why he doesn't extend this principle to other events.

11 We encounter similar problems with sentences like the following: "People who make different choices do not ruin common spaces of protest. The criterion of importance is whether one's actions harm another participant in that space." (p. 268) Or: "...mutual criticism and support [are] only possible if those

basic minimums are way too wide to be strategically helpful. We need discussions about useful tactics, otherwise we select means of protest in the same way we select soft drinks on the beverage aisle: the flavor of the month will do.

3. Gelderloos might, of course, disagree with my call for discussions about strategy. He states that "strategy as a path to a set destination [is] a view I increasingly disagree with" (p. 287). To be honest, I'm not exactly sure which kinds of strategy Gelderloos does agree with, since developing a strategy seems dependent on having a goal, but that's besides the point. What's important is to coordinate our actions in a way that makes them effective on a broad scale.

4. Even this, however, might go too far for Gelderloos. "Unity is a trojan horse for centralization and domination", he writes (p. 280), while I wonder how we can make any substantial social change if we "simply ignore each other". Even if it is difficult at times, I think that debate across differences of opinion and a willingness to cooperate across these differences, is essential for fundamental social change. To defiantly respond to differences of opinion with, "Okay, you have yours and I have mine", or, "Do what you want, just don't get in my way", is liberating only in a crass individualistic sense. It is also reminiscent of a protestant Gewissensethik, an "ethics of conscience", where we can all feel good about ourselves, while the wider social picture disappears or remains something we only pay lip service to. In other words, our self-image becomes more important than revolutionary consciousness. To me, this is one of the biggest problems in activist culture today. Yes, there are sites of resistance everywhere, but their ability to really challenge the state and capital have so far proven minimal. And one reason is that there is too

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who today separate themselves as pacifists decide unequivocally to stand always with those who struggle, and always against the powers that oppress" (p. 19). Defining "harming someone", "those who struggle", and "the powers that oppress" is at least as complicated as defining violence, a task Gelderloos deems pointless. Yet, it is obvious that these phrases need further clarification in order to really mean anything – such clarifications, of course, can only come from collective debate.

little, not too much unity. Gelderloos writes: "Any practice that attempts to impose homogeneity in the name of unity violates the sense of solidarity and mutual respect necessary for diverse currents of struggle to coexist." (p. 281) I would reformulate thus: "Solidarity and mutual respect come to life in any serious attempt to create unity in diverse currents of struggle without imposing homogeneity."

5. Here is how Gelderloos explains the notion of "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." (p. 18) That's a fine recognition. Yet, who would deny that? If the proponents of nonviolence did, they wouldn't criticize other methods of struggle – they would simply ignore them. What is at stake is not only to recognize the existence of different methods of struggle, but to collectively assess which of these methods we want to use and combine.

6. This process obviously requires widespread discussion, but widespread discussion only works if all participants and their views are taken seriously. But is there anything that the proponents of nonviolence have to tell "us", the "combative" activists? I believe so. Nonviolent activists remind us that in a liberated society – that is, according to my understanding, a society in which individuals can develop freely on the basis of social justice – it is not just authority, hierarchy, patriarchy, or racism that have to go, but also violence (and, as I explained above, I do think that violence exists). This means that nonviolent activists provide an important moral compass for our actions, and it also means that they have an ethical advantage in our discussions on tactics. "Combative" activists might have a strategic (and perhaps aesthetic) problem with people holding hands and singing folk songs against the war, but these people are hardly doing anything that in itself violates our vision of a liberated world (save perhaps some of those songs). Injuring or killing someone, however, does, which is why actions that might imply such consequences require a proper explanation for why we accept to engage in them nonetheless. So, when Gelderloos writes, "It does not matter in the least which ... activities are 'violent' or 'nonviolent'" (p. 242), he

is right in that the categorization does not matter, but it does matter whether we are talking about wanting to form a picket line or to kneecap someone. These actions have different ethical implications that require different forms of explanation.

7. If we are not willing to differentiate between different forms of actions according to their ethical implications, the danger of trivializing violence is always looming. There are some semantic mirror images of Gelderloos's contention that "Violence doesn't exist" that are popular in radical circles as one-size-fits-all justifications for "combative" action, such as "Violence is everywhere" or "We live in a violent society". In the worst case, such credos can be pretty scary.

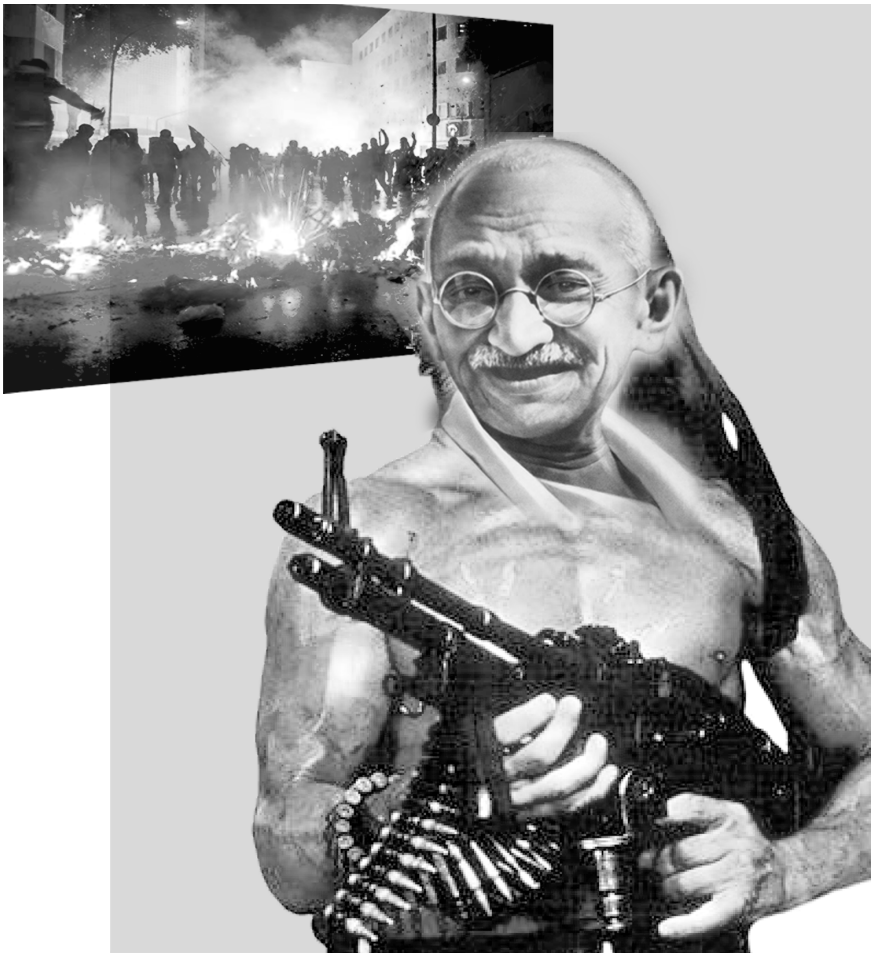
8. There is also a danger of underestimating the psychological impact of certain "combative" methods. This, for example, is an element I would add to Gelderloos's criteria for evaluating the effects of social movements. The use of methods that do physical harm to people, spread fear, and intensify an already existing situation of social insecurity and hostility – no matter how justified and necessary they are, and no matter whether we call them "violent" or "combative" or something else – rarely leave people unaffected: the perpetrators, the victims, and everyone in-between. Yes, billions of people are subjected to structural violence every day. But if you're engaged in physical confrontation every day, if you must wonder whether you make it back alive every time you leave the house, if arrest is a constant concern, it will wear you and your community down in particularly gruesome ways. Again, under certain circumstances paying this price might be inevitable and necessary to make life for you and your community better in the long run. But it's nothing that can ever be taken lightheartedly. And it's crucial to reflect on all possibilities to avoid such situations.[12]

9. Finally, there is an aspect to Gelderloos's writings about "combat-

12 That I'm not the only one supporting "combative" tactics who is experiencing this is proven by important pieces such as "After We have Burnt Everything" – a text, which, unfortunately, Gelderloos only mentions in passing.

ive" forms of resistance, which I find curious: he writes almost exclusively about riots and black blocs. To me, this is far from the most interesting part of discussing "non-nonviolent" approaches to protest. Admittedly, I don't really understand the excitement on either side. The moral outrage these activities cause among politicians, the media, and dogmatic nonviolent types is laughable. On any given Saturday night, there was more property damage, unruly behavior, and fighting with cops in the Tyrolean beer tents I frequented as a youth than there is in most black bloc protests. Plus, who really cares about a window at McDonald's?

Yet, that's exactly why the political ramifications of such acts must not be overrated either. Riots serve many purposes: they empower people, they vent anger, they make problems obvious, they can temporarily turn power relations upside down, they politicize, they inspire, all of that. Yet, there is a difference between strongly sympathizing with Rancid singing, "I'm a kid who's got a lot of problems – if I throw a brick maybe the brick will go and solve them" ("I Wanna Riot"), and believing that this might actually be true. The brick might cure some of the problems' symptoms (which is great), but it's not gonna eradicate the root. In order for this to happen, we need to achieve radical social change; and to achieve radical social change we need tactics that do more than "fuck shit up". In other words, I think we need in-depth evaluations of ALF and ELF tactics used in the 1990s and early 2000s, reflections on the complex of imperialism, liberation struggle, and guerrilla warfare, and discussions on armed struggle in the metropolis, rather than more black bloc debates and defenses of riots. This would give our discussions of "combative" forms of resistance a different dimension.



Beyond Dichotomies

Gelderloos laments that "direct debate between the idea of nonviolence and that of a diversity of tactics has become increasingly rare" (p. 14). He hopes that "we can develop a more solidaristic communication on both sides" (p. 285). He also speaks of a need

to "support one another's forms of participation in the struggle" (p. 265). Finally, he makes it clear that "my aim with this book is not to convert or delegitimize every person who prefers nonviolence" (p. 19). This is all very honorable. Yet, what is his contribution to making it possible?

It is clear for Gelderloos who the good guys and who the bad guys are in the (non)violence debate: "Over and over again, nonviolence proponents put all their emphasis on an authoritarian insistence everyone adopt their form of protest, often devoid of any content. Even in the heart of nonviolent movements, one is often hard-pressed to find any real articulation of a critique against exploitation, domination, or the power structures that create these problems. Those who support a diversity of tactics, on the other hand, tend to remain on point, with no alienation between their ideas and methods, attacking capitalism in their discourse as well as in moments of protest and action." (p. 138) It is the nonviolent activists who "have injected an implicit hierarchy into the conversation that arises when two different moods of action conflict" (p. 267); it is them who "have created the exact sort of polemicized environment that 'nonviolent communication' tries to avoid, in which two sides close ranks and face off" (p. 30). With verbal broadsides like this, it doesn't make much of a difference if Gelderloos every now and again provides some band-aids by conceding that "people who personally favor peaceful tactics, and even those whose concept of revolution is to work for peace, who follow a philosophy of doing no harm, should be respected as part of the struggle" (p. 241).[13] It's a little like saying:

13 Another example is the following: “By placing more importance on some of them than on others, those who fetishize illegal and combative tactics miss out on the richness of struggle, and the ways by which struggles regenerate. They reproduce the dynamic in which pacifists isolate themselves and seek some discourse to justify their own superiority, as opposites always recreate each other.” (p. 242) This sounds reconciling. Yet twenty pages later, any such sense is wiped away by the following comparison: “There are a number of errors that people who use combative or dangerous tactics can commit that damage mutual respect or solidarity. – On the other side of the line, there are a great many things that peaceful protesters do that are an absolute breach of respect and solidarity.” (p.

"All Americans suck – although some are really nice." It's the first part of the message that sticks, not the second.

When it comes to judging the political record of nonviolent activists, Gelderloos pulls no punches either: "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." (p. 18) Or: "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..." (p. 11)[14]

252/261, my emphases)

14 Some of Gelderloos's critiques of nonviolent activists backfire. For example, he suggests that NGOs "flock to protests where there will obviously be riots so they can subsequently monopolize the media attention that follows – since they are incapable of doing anything interesting enough to generate attention on their own" (p. 278-279). When did media attention become the ultimate measuring stick for doing something interesting? Is this the same media that, according to Gelderloos, spreads "the typical clichés of nonviolence" (p. 148) and must be "abolished" (p. 175)? I'm at a loss here. The relationship between anarchists and

Gelderloos wants others to "sympathize with the reasons why many of us are angry about this topic" (p. 285). The reasons being, as I understand them, the treacherous attitudes of nonviolent activists. Okay. But how does he expect nonviolent activists – treacherous or not – to feel after reading paragraphs such as the above? Happy?[15]

In his "Comments on How Nonviolence Protects the State", Gelderloos addresses concerns about the tone of his critique as follows: "I find it essential to avoid an academic politeness in these debates, as though we were talking about abstract concepts and not matters of life and death. I think that in the face of hypocrisy, manipulation, lies, collaboration with the authorities, and cowardice dressed up

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the media is tricky. Perhaps that's why unsettling truths sometimes fall under the table. With respect to the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle, Gelderloos, crediting the "combative" tactics being employed, writes that they "did more to spread an awareness of the antiglobalization movement than any other summit protest in North America or Europe" (p. 94). Yet, this is only half the truth. The other half is that no other summit protest – "combative" or not – has received that kind of media attention.

15 Here, I would like to return once more to having a different framework of experience. Gelderloos writes: "What if those who favor combative tactics started denouncing peaceful protesters for 'ruining our riot'? What if we tried to make people feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, or even criminal if they showed up to 'our' protest and did not also pick up a rock or a can of spraypaint? The fact that this has never happened shows that we are not dealing with a symmetrical conflict between two conflicting sides. On the contrary, those who favor nonviolence have often based their very practice on a total lack of respect for others and an attempt to dominate an entire movement." (p. 267-268) Hmm. To begin with, Gelderloos's entire book feels like a complaint about how nonviolent protestors ruin our riots. More importantly, though, this passage suggests that there is no contempt for peaceful protestors in the "combative" protestors' ranks. Is that true? I can think of numerous derogatory terms used for protestors not willing to engage in "combative" demonstrations in the circles I've moved in for the past twenty-five years – "liberal", "coward", and "hippie" are among the most harmless. To give another example: Whenever I attend talks by people advocating "combative" tactics in front of a home audience, a simple reference to "the folks with the signs" and a suggestive smirk always gets the crowd roaring. My point is: Does it really add to the credibility of our position if we blame the "opposite side" for everything that's gone wrong in this debate?

as sophistication, outrage is not only permissible, it is necessary." (p. 285) The "matters of life and death" part might be a touch overdramatic when mainly discussing black blocs (especially when calling the difference between dictatorship and democracy "fictitious" at the same time), but that has no relevance for the argument itself. Perhaps it really is necessary to be this outspoken when tackling the issue. Still, the question remains: Can this, in any way, help us bridge divides? I have my doubts. I rather believe that it will reinforce them.

In the "Comments on How Nonviolence Protects the State", Gelderloos characterizes people who have expressed general agreement with the book's points but discomfort with the way they were presented as folks who "wanted to piss in the stream and drink from it too" (p. 285). How about: No one pisses in the stream and we all drink from it?

Conclusion

Peter Gelderloos essentially says two things: 1. Nonviolent resistance is not effective. 2. Nonviolent activists (all or many or some – as stated in the beginning, this is not entirely clear) are dogmatic. Let's say, for the sake of the argument, that Gelderloos is correct on both counts. But then what? In fact, Gelderloos himself points the way: "We need to develop a collective intelligence about when is the right moment to attack, when is the right moment to hold our ground, when to shout and make noise, and when merely to be present. Sometimes we must take to the streets to celebrate, other times to mourn. Sometimes to attack and destroy, other times dance, or occupy, or break the asphalt and plant a garden." (p. 267) I hope that these are the exact questions he will tackle in his next book, with the same eagerness and thoroughness he has mustered to save us from the threat of nonviolence.[16]

No one with the slightest interest in revolutionary activism and the "violence vs. nonviolence" debate will regret reading *The Failure of Nonviolence*. Whether it helps you confirm your "combative" beliefs and practices or challenges you to defend and sharpen your "nonviolent" ones, you will not make it through the text without

16 I'd also encourage Gelderloos, or anybody for that matter, to elaborate on the following: "I'll just ... 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." (p. 30) Now, that, I'd find really exciting.

wanting to gather your friends and comrades for long, long hours of discussions. Again and again. Guaranteed. What more could you want from a book?

Gabriel Kuhn
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