

ANARCHISM, PACIFISM & THE USE OF FORCE

Readings for Fantin Discussion Night – January 16th, 2010

“On violence against the police”

Originally published by The Commune, a London-based libertarian communist group, this piece was written by a participant in the December 9 demonstrations in Parliament Square against the English governments education cuts and fees about the use of political violence and condemnation of it in the media.

Source: <http://thecommuene.co.uk/2010/12/10/on-violence-against-the-police/>

The condemnations are as predictable as they are boring. The public-school educated Sun hacks, who write like some coked up parodies of proletarian semi-literacy, refer to “louts” and “hooligans”. The Daily Mail complains about someone urinating against Churchill’s statue, and the Telegraph is dismayed that Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall were “attacked”. Probably by a “baying mob”. Meanwhile, someone in a moustache on The Guardian talks about how, no doubt, this will provide a “distraction” from the “real issues”, whose repetition ad nauseam presumably has some intrinsic value for the solemn liberal contingent.

I can’t even be bothered to look up the precise terms of the condemnation this time. It’s always the same. A dash of the royal family, veneration for some long dead racist, shakes of the head from the banal but well intentioned. Is anyone still listening? Haven’t we read all this before?

The NUS and UCU are of course, for “peaceful protest”. What is the effective record of “peaceful protest”? How does social change happen? Is it always peaceful? Are kettles acceptable, and is it reasonable to try and break them? Such questions are politely neither asked nor answered: that would be politics – we’re just about protecting our reputations. Thanks.

One of the oddest, least remarked upon, features of contemporary capitalism is the way it systematically enlists all its main functionaries in

talking nonsense on a day to day basis. The police don’t really believe that the “kettle” is a necessary response to violence.

It seemed more to be motivated by traditional aims of kettling that are rarely stated: to demoralise protesters so much that they are dissuaded from taking part again, and to exhaust them physically so that they go home quietly (not that there was any need for the latter by this stage of the night). While queueing to leave Parliament Square, a woman next to me jokingly told a police officer that if they let us go, she would promise that this would be her last demonstration. The officer replied, “That’s the point.” [Guardian]

OK. Now we know that. They know that. We know they know we know that. But, of course, they can’t say it, officially, in public. That’s against the rules. It’s like the “have you ever taken any illegal drugs” question on a job application form. No one expects you to answer truthfully: it’s a test, the real content of which is: “are you a fucking idiot?” No? Well go right ahead them. As long as you can play the game, it’s all ok.

Another recent example: Wikileaks cables shows that the US finds the obsequious grovelling of Conservative politicians “humorous”. But of course, Atlanticist politicians on both sides leap to say how important “the special relationship” really is to America. Of course they do. It’s the same rules we learned at school: deny everything, keep looking straight ahead and there’s nothing anyone can do.

We all have our own stories from last night, no doubt. A girl had a clump of her hair pulled out. A 20 year old is in hospital, having had to have life-saving brain surgery, amongst 43 hospitalised protestors. I’m sure it says somewhere that “there will be an investigation”. (Tomlinson, cough, Menezes, cough, etc. cough.) “My 19-year-old sister was forced to the floor by police when caught in a crowd and when attempting to get up was punched in the face by a male officer. She is sporting a black eye this morning” says one. Another: “a guy running away from police along Whitehall getting being unable to run further because of a stray barrier. Before he could jump over, two police charged into him with their shields and repeatedly hit him with their shields, against the barrier.”

Fair-minded people are against “disproportionate”, “provocative”, or “brutal” policing; and presumably in favour of a polite push and shove. This is an appealing message (and it may make sense to accentuate it to the cameras), but is more or less a fiction. Of course, there are incidents here and there where we can say that particular police could have been less brutal. But if the direct action we defend has any content at all, it must

mean we supported, and support, concrete attempts to stop the law being passed, up to, including, and beyond the invasion of parliament – and we are in support of people trying as hard as possible to do that. And it is a fiction that the police could have tolerated that, or that preventing it could ever have been done gently. If it could have been, we wouldn't have really been trying. If the police hadn't been at parliament square last night, and if they hadn't been prepared to act brutally, parliament would have been stormed, and legislation to triple top-up fees and abolish EMA would not have been passed. The brutality of the police is not incidental to the nature of the state, it is essential to it.

So you have to pick: the state, and horse charges against children who object to having their pockets robbed; or against the state (which means: against capitalism, for social revolution); and against the police too; brutal or otherwise. Polite fudges are polite – but more or less part of the continuous stream of liquid nonsense which constitutes the news media.

Next time, we should bring masks to give out. Just like on the Gaza demos in 2009, too many young people are going to get arrested because their faces appear on police footage – and in the photographs of the numerous “independent” photojournalists who sell images to the right-wing press, many of whom should arguably be looked on as police evidence gatherers.

Someone has to say it: mass violence against the police is necessary as part of any social struggle. We wish it wasn't but it is. The reason is simple: the police defend the state unconditionally, the state defends capital unconditionally, and capital attacks us without remorse – or even a second thought. Reasonable liberals yearn for a compromise: but the state isn't listening. Neither should protestors.

When Charles and Camilla were ambushed, or a fence was thrown at police, or a crowd broke the thin blue line: those were good things, and we support the people doing it. They are by no means sufficient, nor are they particularly helpful as isolated acts. What is important is that they establish the movement on new terrain. They represent the conscious willingness to defy and confront state authority, and state power. And that is the beginning of everything hopeful.

“Violence and Nonviolence”

Alfredo M. Bonanno is an insurrectionary anarchist from Italy. This excerpt is from the pamphlet *Revolution, Violence, Anti-authoritarianism: A Few Notes*.

Full text is available at <http://digitalelephant.blogspot.com/2010/08/revolution-violence-anti.html>

The question of the difference between ‘violence’ and ‘nonviolence’ is usually posed wrongly because of the class interests and emotive reactions it triggers off.

State violence and the terrorism of the bosses knows no limits or moral obstacle. Revolutionaries, and anarchists in particular, are quite justified in responding to this violence with revolutionary violence.

Complications arise when we examine the positions of those who support nonviolence. In appearance only do they choose peaceful methods, which when seen in isolation are not violent, i.e. do not physically attack the adversary. When seen within the general framework of the struggle, their interventions (apart from those of organisations who use nonviolence as an alibi to leave things as they are) turn out to be just as violent as those carried out by the supporters of ‘violence’.

A march of ‘pacifist’ demonstrators is itself a violent event which upsets the order of exploitation. It is a demonstration of strength, a show of force. It does not differ from the ‘violent’ demonstration, at least in the choice of objective. From the strategic and revolutionary point of view, the idea of a violent demonstration capable of winning and holding a military victory is unthinkable today. In so saying, we do not mean that we should refuse revolutionary violence. We only mean we must be clear so as to avoid sanctifying the machine gun on the one hand or becoming the policeman of the situation on the other.

A purely verbal distinction between violence and nonviolence is a false one. A well-fed bourgeois can easily ‘theorise’ the most unchained violence against the boss class but only with difficulty will he put it into effect in conditions requiring total dedication to the revolutionary task. Most often his violence is purely verbal. In practice he prefers things to remain as they are because, among other things, that allows him to continue to exercise his fiery rhetoric.

Another equally well-fed bourgeois might feel himself transported to an exaltation of nonviolence, but still as something theoretical, something condemning the negative ‘instincts’ of struggle and violence and sanctifying the positive ‘instincts’ of peace and brotherhood. Only with difficulty however will this bourgeois put his nonviolent ‘principles’ into practice in a total daily involvement in the social struggle. He will prefer the comfort of the situation as it is, where he can carry on with his reflections on peace and brotherhood.

Before speaking of violence and nonviolence a distinction should be made as to whether the question is being applied to a real situation, or whether it is simply an abstract theory and there is no intention of actually applying it. Only in the case of the former is it possible to discuss the strategic and military conditions that render nonviolent methods less effective and more easily overcome by power. But this discussion is one which comes afterwards, it is a question of method and never an abstract one.

We are not interested in philosophical discussions on violence that lead to theories of the hereditary biological violence of the species, etc., which stink of theology. What is important is to approach the struggle in its reality. The rest is a question of choice of means and the best way to put them into effect.

If we are personally convinced that nonviolent methods are unsuitable in the social struggle today, not for this are we against the comrades who see their own dimension of struggle in nonviolent methods. What is important is that the struggle be engaged in seriously, that it not be limited to speaking of ‘nonviolent struggle’ as an alibi so that the police will leave us alone.

Abstract discussions on violence (nearly always fiery and bloody) and just as abstract discussions on nonviolence (nearly always idiotic and paradisiacal) are equally disgusting. We can only respond effectively to the historic crime of exploitation, terrorism, and institutionalised violence with struggle, using any means we choose. The violence (or nonviolence) of words and speeches will change nothing.

“The Comfort Zone”

This excerpt comes from Ward Churchill’s essay *Pacifism as Pathology*. It was written in 1986 as a response not only to Churchill’s frustration with his own experience as an activist, but also to a debate raging in the radical and academic communities at the time. He argues that pacifism is in many ways counter-revolutionary; that it defends the status quo, rather than leading to social change.

The full text is available at: <http://zinelibrary.info/pacifism-pathology>

Regardless of the shortcomings of pacifism as a methodological approach to revolution, there is nothing inherent in its basic impulse which prevents real practitioners from experiencing the revolutionary ethos. Rather, as already noted, the emotional content of the principle of nonviolence is tantamount to a gut-level rejection of much, or even all, that the present social order stands for — an intrinsically revolutionary perspective. The question is not the motivations of real pacifists, but instead the nature of a strategy by which the revolution may be won, at a minimum sacrifice to all concerned.

This assumes that sacrifice is being made by all concerned. Here, it becomes relatively easy to separate the wheat from the chaff among America’s proponents of “nonviolent opposition.” While the premise of pacifism necessarily precludes engaging in violent acts directed at others, even for reasons of self-defense, it does not prevent its adherents from themselves incurring physical punishment in pursuit of social justice. In other words, there is nothing of a doctrinal nature barring real pacifists from running real risks.

And indeed they do. Since at least the early Christians, devout pacifists have been sacrificing themselves while standing up for what they believe in against the armed might of those they consider wrong. Gandhi’s followers perished by the thousands, allowed themselves to be beaten and maimed en masse, and clogged India’s penal system in their campaign to end British rule. King’s field organizers showed incredible bravery in confronting the racist thugs of the South, and many paid with their lives on lonely back roads.

Another type of pacifist action which became a symbol for the nonviolent antiwar movement was that of a Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, who immolated himself on a Saigon street on June 11, 1963. Due’s protest against growing U.S. involvement in his country was quickly followed by similar actions by other Vietnamese bonzes and, on November 2, 1965, by

an American Quaker, Norman Morrison, who burned himself in front of the Pentagon to protest increasing levels of U.S. troop commitment in Indochina. Whatever the strategic value one may place upon the actions of Morrison and the Buddhists - and it must be acknowledged that the U.S. grip on Vietnam rapidly tightened after the self-immolations began, while U.S. troop strength in Southeast Asia spiraled from some 125,000 at the time of Morrison's suicide to more than 525,000 barely two years later - they were unquestionably courageous people, entirely willing to face the absolute certainty of the most excruciating death in pursuit of their professed ideals. Although the effectiveness of their tactics is open to question, their courage and integrity certainly are not.

In a less severe fashion, there are many other examples of American pacifists putting themselves on the line for their beliefs. The Berrigan brothers, Phillip and Daniel, clearly qualify in this regard, as do a number of others who took direct action against the Selective Service System and certain U.S. military targets during the late '60s and early '70s. Cadres of Witness for Peace placed their bodies between CIA-sponsored contra guerrillas and their intended civilian victims along the Nicaragua/Honduras border during the '80s.[53] Members of Greenpeace, Earth First!, and Friends of the Earth have been known to take considerable chances with their own well-being in their advocacy of a range of environmental issues.

The list of principled and self-sacrificing pacifists and pacifist acts could undoubtedly be extended and, ineffectual or not, these people are admirable in their own right. Unfortunately, they represent the exception rather than the rule of pacifist performance in the United States. For every example of serious and committed pacifist activism emerging from the normative mass of American nonviolent movements since 1965, one could cite scores of countering instances in which only lip service was paid to the ideals of action and self-sacrifice.

The question central to the emergence and maintenance of nonviolence as the oppositional foundation of American activism has not been the truly pacifist formulation, "How can we forge a revolutionary politics within which we can avoid inflicting violence on others?"

On the contrary, a more accurate guiding question has been, "What sort of politics might I engage in which will both allow me to posture as a progressive and allow me to avoid incurring harm to myself?"

Hence, the trappings of pacifism have been subverted to establish a sort of "politics of the comfort zone," not only akin to what Bettelheim termed "the philosophy of business as usual" and devoid of perceived risk to its advocates, but minus any conceivable revolutionary impetus as well. The

intended revolutionary content of true pacifist activism — the sort practiced by the Gandhian movement, the Berrigans, and Norman Morrison - is thus isolated and subsumed in the United States, even among the ranks of self-professing participants.

Such a situation must abort whatever limited utility pacifist tactics might have, absent other and concurrent forms of struggle, as a socially transformative method. Yet the history of the American Left over the past decade shows too clearly that the more diluted the substance embodied in "pacifist practice," the louder the insistence of its subscribers that nonviolence is the only mode of action "appropriate and acceptable within the context of North America," and the greater the effort to ostracize, or even stifle divergent types of actions.[56] Such strategic hegemony exerted by proponents of this truncated range of tactical options has done much to foreclose on what ever revolutionary potential may be said to exist in modern America.

Is such an assessment too harsh? One need only attend a mass demonstration (ostensibly directed against the policies of the state) in any U.S. city to discover the answer. One will find hundreds, sometimes thousands, assembled in orderly fashion, listening to selected speakers calling for an end to this or that aspect of lethal state activity, carrying signs "demanding" the same thing, welcoming singers who enunciate lyrically on the worthiness of the demonstrators' agenda as well as the plight of the various victims they are there to "defend," and - typically - the whole thing is quietly disbanded with exhortations to the assembled to "keep working" on the matter and to please sign a petition and/or write letters to congresspeople requesting that they alter or abandon offending undertakings.

Throughout the whole charade it will be noticed that the state is represented by a uniformed police presence keeping a discreet distance and not interfering with the activities. And why should they? The organizers of the demonstration will have gone through "proper channels" to obtain permits required by the state and instructions as to where they will be allowed to assemble, how long they will be allowed to stay and, should a march be involved in the demonstration, along which routes they will be allowed to walk. Surrounding the larger mass of demonstrators can be seen others — an elite. Adorned with green (or white, or powder blue) armbands, their function is to ensure that demonstrators remain "responsible," not deviating from the state-arm-banded-sanctioned plan of protest. Individuals or small groups who attempt to spin off from the main body, entering areas to which the state has denied access (or some other unapproved activity)

are headed off by these arm-banded “marshals” who argue — pointing to the nearby police - that “troublemaking” will only “exacerbate an already tense situation” and “provoke violence,” thereby “alienating those we are attempting to reach.” In some ways, the voice of the “good Jews” can be heard to echo plainly over the years.

At this juncture, the confluence of interests between the state and the mass nonviolent movement could not be clearer. The role of the police, whose function is to support state policy by minimizing disruption of its procedures, should be in natural conflict with that of a movement purporting to challenge these same policies and, indeed, to transform the state itself. However, with apparent perverseness, the police find themselves serving as mere backups (or props) to self-policing (now euphemistically termed “peace-keeping” rather than the more accurate “marshaling”) efforts of the alleged opposition’s own membership. Both sides of the “contestation” concur that the smooth functioning of state processes must not be physically disturbed, at least not in any significant way. All of this is within the letter and spirit of cooptive forms of sophisticated self-preservation appearing as an integral aspect of the later phases of bourgeois democracy. It dovetails well with more shopworn methods such as the electoral process and has been used by the state as an innovative means of conducting public opinion polls, which better hide rather than eliminate controversial policies. Even the movement’s own sloganeering tends to bear this out from time to time, as when Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) coined the catch-phrase of its alternative to the polling place: “Vote with your feet, vote in the street.”

“Arms and the Movement”

Below is an excerpt from a chapter in *How Nonviolence Protects the State*, a book by American anarchist Peter Gelderloos. The beginning of this chapter critiqued the nonviolent resistance of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. The included excerpt looks at the failure of contemporary popular non-violent tactics against the war in Iraq.

The full chapter is available at: <http://www.utne.com/2007-05-01/Politics/Arms-and-the-Movement.aspx>

Perhaps confused by their own false history of the peace movement during the Vietnam War, pacifist organizers against the invasion of Iraq seemed to expect a repeat of a victory that never happened. On February 16, 2003, as the U.S. government moved toward war with Iraq, Agence France-Presse hailed weekend protests as ‘a stinging rebuke to Washington and its allies.’ The protests were the largest in history; excepting a few minor scuffles, they were entirely nonviolent. United for Peace and Justice and some other antiwar groups even suggested that the protests might avert war. As we now know, they were totally wrong, and the protests were totally ineffective. The invasion occurred as planned, despite the millions of people nominally, peacefully, and powerlessly opposed to it. The antiwar movement did nothing to change the power relationships in the United States. President Bush received substantial political capital for invading Iraq, and was not faced with a backlash until the war and occupation effort began to show signs of failure due to the effective armed resistance of the Iraqi people.

A good case study regarding the efficacy of nonviolent protest can be seen in Spain's involvement with the U.S.-led occupation. Spain, with 1,300 troops, was one of the larger junior partners in the ‘Coalition of the Willing.’ More than a million Spaniards protested the invasion, and 80 percent of the Spanish population was opposed to it, but their commitment to peace ended there; they did nothing to actually prevent Spanish military support for the invasion and occupation. Because they remained passive and did nothing to disempower the leadership, they remained as powerless as the citizens of any democracy. Not only was Prime Minister Aznar allowed to go to war, he was expected by all forecasts to win reelection.

Until the bombings. On March 11, 2004, just days before the voting booths opened, multiple bombs planted by an al-Qaida-linked cell exploded on Madrid trains, killing 191 people and injuring 1,755. Directly because of this, Aznar and his party lost in the polls, and the Socialists, the major party with

an antiwar platform, were elected to power. The U.S.-led coalition shrunk with the loss of the Spanish troops. Whereas millions of peaceful activists voting in the streets like good sheep have not weakened the brutal occupation in any measurable way, a few dozen terrorists willing to slaughter noncombatants were able to cause the withdrawal of more than a thousand occupation troops.

So much for the victories of pacifism.

The Madrid bombings do not present an example for action, but rather, an important paradox: Do people who stick to nonviolent tactics that have not proved effective in ending the war against Iraq really care more for human life than the Madrid terrorists? From India to Birmingham, nonviolence has failed to sufficiently empower its practitioners, whereas the use of a diversity of tactics got results. Put simply, if a movement is not a threat, it cannot change a system that is based on centralized coercion and violence.

Time and again, people struggling not for some token reform but for complete liberation -- the reclamation of control over our own lives and the power to negotiate our own relationships with the people and the world around us -- will find that nonviolence does not work, that we face a self-perpetuating power structure that is immune to appeals to conscience and strong enough to plow over the disobedient and uncooperative.

We must reclaim histories of resistance to understand why we have failed in the past and how exactly we achieved the limited successes we did. We must also accept that all social struggles, except those carried out by a completely pacified and thus ineffective people, include a diversity of tactics.