

# How Nonviolence Protects the State

Review

Anne R. Key

2006

a review of

*How Nonviolence Protects the State* by Peter Gelderloos. Signal Fire Press. 2005. 180 pages. \$8. <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/peter-gelderloos-how-nonviolence-protects-the-state>

Being a person deeply committed to nonviolence, to spiritual anarchy, and to actively not going along with the status quo in any way, I have to admit I started reviewing this book with the intention of trashing it. Initially, my reaction was, "Oh, this is ridiculous; this is absurd; this is twisted." But the more I read it, and the more I talked with people about it, the more I came to agree with Peter Gelderloos. To a point.

Privileged white people "tsk-tsking" the reactions of those in situations unimaginable to upper class do-gooders—while safely ensconced in a system itself protected by violence—is not radical. While these people possess good intentions, there is always something vaguely repulsive about their reliance on voting, petitions, and demonstrations. Now I have a clear understanding of why.

The principle they are committed to, in reality, is pseudo-nonviolence. That's not good enough. It is, in fact, a lie. They are lying to themselves, and this is what protects the State. They want to do good, to affect change, but are too timid and too mediocre to examine their own belief system or make any real or profound changes in their individual lives. And if you can't change your self, you can't change the world.

Gelderloos produces his compelling argument for violent uprising and premeditated destruction. These activities are very persuasive and do create radical power shifts. They are important—but only in the proper context.

There are people practicing real nonviolence. They are forming communities, alternative economies and living out their nonviolent world-views. This is vitally important...maybe it's the most important.

Without models of how people may be able to live, instead, all anybody will ever hope to achieve from their militant or semi-militant tactics is a new kind of oppression, a better oppression. This is the place where oppression becomes internalized, where people begin oppressing themselves. And once they do that, they become better able to become, at some later date, oppressors themselves. It happens all the time, and it is not sustainable. How many times do we have to repeat ourselves?

Even though some of what Gelderloos says is true enough, it carries within it a dangerous lie. Anarchy cannot come about via one way only. It cannot buy into militarism. It can allow it, understand it, and forgive it, but it cannot buy into it—at least not without scrupulous self-examination. It needs many voices, from many different directions, coming together to get along. Dichotomizing does not work.

Those of us who espouse nonviolence should read this book. Not to get converted—but to look at our own motives and figure out a way to make them truly congruent with what we say we believe. It's not an easy or quick process, but it is crucial.

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