

The Failure of Non-violence

Book review

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a review of

The Failure of Non-violence: from the Arab Spring to Occupy by Peter Gelderloos, Left Bank Books, Seattle, 2013, 306pp. leftbankbooks.bigcartel.com

Peter Gelderloos's *The Failure of Nonviolence* is a thought-provoking invitation to authentic debate.

This kind of discussion is especially relevant for those of us who welcome the recent worldwide social insurgencies, and are not committed to pacifism as an ideology. The book focuses on tactics and strategies used by social movements, and encourages critical debate about defining success and evaluating which struggles have been successful and which ones have not.

Gelderloos challenges the superficial and artificial character of the dichotomy between violence and non-violence, and critiques the accepted myths of the role of non-violence in various struggles.

It is clear that the book was largely inspired by what he views as the destructive interventions of pacifists in various popular social movements since 1989, including the most recent upsurges in Spain and the U.S. He specifically highlights the authoritarian character demonstrated by many pacifist organizers, and the importance of elite support for self-defined non-violent revolutions.

The book argues that what we mean when we talk about violence and non-violence is not really straightforward, is not meaningful outside specific contexts, and doesn't really deal with the issues of what kinds of oppositional activities (strategies and tactics) might be appropriate and/or acceptable for anarchists. Gelderloos examines the premises that non-confrontational protest is the only legitimate form of political contestation, and that the message of protests is distorted when a minority of participants engage in activities such as painting graffiti, smashing windows, building barricades, or directly confronting the police.

Gelderloos advocates a diversity of tactics that take into account context and timing, ways in which various activities complement and strengthen or erode and weaken social solidarity, challenges to hierarchies, and possible effectiveness.

He clearly values the support of those who are not involved in militant action as much as those who are, and challenges us to recognize the assumptions which divide participants into the important militant actors and less-important supporters and sympathizers whose contributions are either ignored or minimized because they may not directly participate in militant actions.

This book provides some interesting and informative descriptions of the "color revolutions," the Arab Spring, the Indignados in Spain, Occupy, and other significant mobilizations in various parts of the world, including both struggles that used a diversity of tactics and those that defined themselves as nonviolent. All of these call out for further elaboration and debate.

In his previous book, *How Non-violence Protects the State*, Gelderloos had an extensive discussion of the relationship between what could be judged as the successes or failures of earlier social movements, and their use or refusal of a diversity of tactics.

In this book he continues that discussion, utilizing examples of resistance movements from World War I, the interwar period, through World War II and beyond. In keeping with his authentic concern for dialogue on this subject, he indicates how his understanding has grown and where he feels his critics have not changed his mind.

However, applying his evaluative framework to social insurgencies may be misleading without taking into account the complexity of the historical context, including the relative prevalence of anti-authoritarian or authoritarian practices within a movement.

For example, Gelderloos states that the IWW “renounced sabotage” (what could be characterized as violence) during and after World War I, contributing significantly to the organization’s decline. But, we should consider the fact that in this basically decentralized organization, the public backing off from advocacy of sabotage did not necessarily commit individual IWW members to non-violence, and many continued to act just as they had earlier.

The erosion of the IWW also needs to be understood with reference to the growth of the FBI and the generally increased government repression of the period, the imprisonment of many Wobblies for opposition to World War I, stepped-up deportation of suspected and known radical immigrants, severe restrictions on entrance of new immigrants starting during the 1920s, as well as the negative effects of economic restructuring of industry and commerce during WWI and the 1920s. The rise of the self-proclaimed successful revolutionaries (namely the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Communist party in the U.S.), as well as the active intimidation that Communist Party members used against non-Communist IWWs at meetings and elsewhere also contributed to the erosion of Wobblie strength.

So, there were too many external and internal factors that impacted the organization to blame its weakening primarily on the backing away from publicizing sabotage as meaningful commitment to militant activities.

Gelderloos also seems to be under the impression that the pacifists of the 1960s and 1970s were playing the role of the “peace police” less than those of the past twenty-five years. This is not surprising, since most histories of the earlier period gloss over the various authoritarian machinations of the pacifist organizations, such as the New Hampshire-based Clamshell Alliance’s coercive ways of relating to those who disagreed with their chosen ways of protest.

Anarchists who were not involved in the anti-nuclear movement of the time are generally unaware of this behavior, or of the articles about it by several people actively involved, such as by the famous Murray Bookchin [1] and the not-so-famous Rudy Perkins. [2]

To his credit, Gelderloos is aware that many myths about previous struggles remain to be challenged in order for us to be able to realistically evaluate their successes and failures.

While this book might not convince committed pacifists, it is a well written overview of the issues related to the discussion of violence and non-violence movements of the last 25 years and well worth reading.

Endnotes

1. “Murray Bookchin on consensus” (pt.indymedia.org/conteudo/newswire/4835?page=200). See also: “Reflections: Murray Bookchin” (http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/CMMNL2.MCW.html)

2. Rudy Perkins, “Groups Excluded; Cooperated With Authorities at Seabrook: Did Pacifists Block Militant Action?”, *Fifth Estate* #285, August, 1977, Vol. 12, No. 9, page 5 (<http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/rudy-perkins-did-pacifists-block-militant-action>).

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/392-fallwinter-2014/failure-non-violence>
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