COUNTERINSURGENCY

DOUSING THE FLAMES OF MINNEAPOLIS

DETRITUS BOOKS

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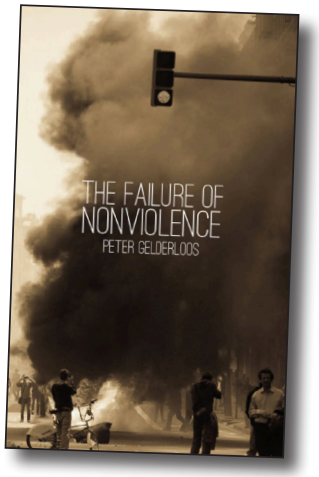
As people rise up against police violence and structural racism, what counterinsurgency techniques is the state deploying to attack and undermine the movement?

How Nonviolence Protects the State

Since the civil rights era, the doctrine of nonviolence has enjoyed near-universal acceptance by the US Left. Today protest is often shaped by cooperation with state authorities—even organizers of rallies against police brutality apply for police permits, and anti-imperialists usually stop short of supporting self-defense and armed resistance. How Nonviolence Protects the State challenges the belief that nonviolence is the only way to fight for a better world. In a call bound to stir controversy and lively debate, Peter Gelderloos invites activists to consider diverse tactics, passionately arguing that exclusive nonviolence often acts to reinforce the same structures of oppression that activists seek to overthrow.

The Failure of Nonviolence



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.

promoted anti-Semitic confabulations, it was based on a high valuation of North American lives and absolute apathy to a much greater number of Iraqi and Afghan lives lost, it distracted from the anti-war movement, and it led to the creation of a "Deep State" paranoia that Trump and similar right wingers use constantly.

THE STRUGGLE IS RIGHT IN FRONT OF US

There is no hidden truth to discover. The reality is right in front of us. Police murder Black and brown people every day. They murder trans people. They murder folks with mental health problems. They murder homeless people. They enforce inequalities that allow some to amass insane amounts of wealth, leaving many more with no access to good healthcare or decent housing.

The movement that is fighting back against this reality is legitimate. The methods it is developing are legitimate.

There will be conflicts, there will be differences, but that is okay. What we cannot do is aid the counterinsurgency strategies that help the state divide and pacify this movement. The most important victories will be accomplished in the streets, in moments of conflict and in moments of creation. But how we talk about the movement, the stories we share, the narratives we create and the enemies and allies we identify, will determine whether the struggle becomes isolated and divided, or whether it continues to grow.

The uprising that has spread across the United States since the police murder of George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis has, like any rebellious movement, met with police strategies for counterinsurgency. It is well documented how modern police forces systematically use counterinsurgency strategies against their own populations.

The most visible counterinsurgency measure so far has been the campaign of straightforward, brutal repression: the thousands of people arrested and injured by police and National Guard across the country, as well as the handful of Black people who have been murdered since May 25, shot to death by cops or white vigilantes.

Nonetheless, people have courageously held their own, staying in the streets, redistributing wealth through looting and mutual aid initiatives, supporting one another with horizontally organized first aid and legal support, disabling police vehicles and infrastructure in order to physically remove cops' ability to cause harm, and destroying many of the businesses that led to gentrification, exclusion and police violence in the first place.

Needless to say, this is an incredible feat. Amidst such a dangerous, brutalizing, potentially traumatizing situation, collective strength is what gets people through. That is why it is the other side of counterinsurgency, the one that divides movements against themselves, that is the most pernicious at times like these — especially since it is often movement participants who enable and reproduce such measures.

NONVIOLENCE

Since British colonial wars in Kenya and India, police strategists have identified the need to keep resistance movements arrested at the level of nonviolence or simple verbal dissent. This is a fundamental function of counterinsurgency: treating society like a hostile population and keeping it from rising up.

In earlier rebellions against police murders, mayors, police chiefs and would-be protest leaders were united from the very first hours in declaring that only symbolic protest was a legitimate response. This happened in Oakland after the murder of Oscar Grant, and it happened in Ferguson after the murder of Mike Brown. Fortunately, we have come a long way. People have seen that the only time cops get charged for killing is if people riot. And we have also recovered histories of struggle that the dominant institutions had tamed and manipulated.

Now, we once again remember that nearly all our victories in the past, whether in the labor movement, anti-war movements, or even in the Civil Rights movement, came from riots, rebellions and wildcat actions, specifically those moments when we were *uncontrollable*.

For the first few days after the murder of George Floyd, hardly anyone was openly advocating nonviolence, because of how clearly that would sound like putting property over Black lives. Even the mayor of Minneapolis, after block stores and a police station was burnt down, claimed to empathize with the anger of rioters.

To pacify this movement, subtler strategies were needed. In came the *outside agitators*.

ABOLITIONISTS AND CRIMINAL IMMIGRANTS

The concept of the outside agitator is a very old trope. Some of its first uses were to delegitimize the rebellions of enslaved people, hardly omnipotent puppet masters. Cops are often not all that intelligent. In fact, the 1905 Revolution in Russia was triggered in part by a police informant who got carried away. We need to be focusing on our own choices, our own needs, and our own strategies.

Without losing sight of our own goals, it helps to have an awareness of the enemy. It is probably no coincidence that progressive politicians, right-wing politicians and police chiefs all want us to be nonviolent. This does not mean we should blindly do the opposite of what we think they want, but neither should we be blind to what they are trying to do to us. The point of a counterinsurgency strategy is to pacify a rebellion that would be too difficult or too costly to annihilate through pure military force. Our goal should be to allow these rebellions to grow and express themselves freely, attacking oppressive structures and prefiguring the world we want.

To do that, it is necessary to raise awareness about how counterinsurgency strategies work. In a digital age, one of the most vital areas for improvement is to teach one another how to recognize conspiracy theories, and how to apply basic standards of evidence.

Just because someone on social media says a video is from a certain place or time, or shows a certain thing, does not mean this is true. In fact, social media "evidence" is extremely prone to suggestion. As documented here[1], the rumor that a black bloc protester was unmasked as a cop went viral after a 2012 protest in Madrid. It did not matter that in the video, one can see that the cop is not actually wearing a mask, and not dressed in typical black bloc fashion. The simple fact that the message accompanying the video made a claim about the cop's appearance changed the perception of the hundreds of thousands of people who saw it.

It needs to become standard procedure, when people start spreading rumors based on flimsy evidence, to call it out and shut it down.

We will be in a much stronger place once everyone recognizes that conspiracy theories are a right-wing tool, even when they seem subversive. Who can forget the 9-11 Truther movement. What could be more subversive than accusing the government of murdering almost 3,000 of its own citizens? Over time, the right-wing bent of the conspiracy movement became undeniable: the theory

1 https://violentanarchists.wordpress.com/2012/12/31/soy-companero/

There is yet another problem with the provocateur trope: it spreads the idea that the police need a justification to attack demonstrators and kill people. That is the common element to this conspiracy theory, after all. Why are police supposedly smashing windows or leaving an empty patrol car for protesters to burn? So they can have a justification for breaking up the protest.

When have police ever needed a justification? It is an absolute whitewash to claim that police even pretend to be reactive, only breaking out their arsenal when there could feasibly be the perception that they have a good reason to do so. What planet are these people living on? How many unarmed Black folks need to be murdered, how many peaceful protests have to be attacked by visibly sadistic cops for folks to get this notion of "justification" out of their heads? The idea that police are reactive, even if it is in a nefarious way, runs directly counter to the struggle to abolish the police.

CONSPIRACIES THAT UNDERMINE ACTION

This kind of conspiratorial thinking also spreads the idea that we do not have agency, that the cops are the all powerful puppet masters and anything we do plays into their hands. This view decenters our own choices for how to respond. The most important question is not, what do the cops want us to do? The most important question is, how do the people most affected — Black and brown folks — need to respond to this systemic violence? And secondarily, what strategies do other folks have to support them, and to also push back against forms of state violence that do affect lighter-skinned people, given the complex intersections of oppression.

The cops are not infallible. They do use infiltrators. Most often to gather information, sometimes to carry out arrests, occasionally to provoke an action that can entrap people. Even if cops do engage in property destruction, this pales in comparison to all the times they urge protesters to be nonviolent. And when they infiltrate, they are

suggesting that Africans would not want to rebel on their own or would not be smart enough to do so, and were instead led into rebellion by nefarious white abolitionists from the North. Another early use was against anarchists, who were frequently immigrants, especially in the US movement, and as such, subject to xenophobic prejudices.

The trope of the outside agitator is a psychological operation meant to suggest that those who rebel have no legitimacy. Those who *come from outside* threaten the closed, localized system of oppressor and oppressed. The outsiders are imputed with evil, ulterior motivations, whereas the authorities are simply motivated by a desire to protect that closed system. And of course they want to protect it: as the oppressors in the closed system, they are the ones who benefit from it. Solidarity and collective power are discouraged, as people are impelled to distrust anyone who does not come from within a very small circle, family member or immediate neighbor. Obedience is normalized while rebellion is portrayed as something sinister.

Another disturbing element of the trope is the suggestion that white people are being irresponsible if they also want to fight against slavery, and people born in other countries are suspect if they also claim to suffer under capitalism. The racist, classist implications translate well to the modern uses of the *provocateur* bogeyman.

The logic of counterinsurgency is spread across the political spectrum: everyone who has an officially recognized right to comment on the unfolding rebellion, everyone given a bullhorn by the mainstream media, has been warning about outside agitators. Trump does it, most police chiefs do it, Democratic mayors do it, even the progressive wing of the Democratic Party like Ilhan Omar and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez do it. The right wingers add the obviously anti-Semitic suggestion that George Soros funds these agitators, the "professional anarchists," but all of them, nonetheless, are using a trope that is irremediably racist.

WORKING FOR THE COPS

The most common iteration of this conspiracy theory that circulates among people who actually participate in movements against police brutality suggests that the outside agitators are actually the police themselves, *agent provocateurs*. How could blaming the cops for the violence possibly play into their hands?

This is in fact one of the most effective and also pernicious iterations of counterinsurgency discourse, precisely because people who spread it do not realize that they are favoring pacification and doing the cops' work.

If it is just media and politicians claiming that our movements are invalid or our methods too extreme, that actually does not matter a lot, because in order to make a revolutionary change in society, we need to be strong enough to go against the media and the government anyway. It is when the movement turns against itself that we lose.

As I documented in *The Failure of Nonviolence*, signaling protesters as infiltrators, even when it is done by pacifists, exposes them to violence. It is a signal to the crowd that the person singled out is a threat, and also an unreasonable force: they are not who they say they are. Rioters can in fact be both reasonable and polite. It is not all uncommon, in the midst of a riot, bonfires blazing, to hear people say things like, "don't set that one on fire, it's a cheap model, that's not a rich person's car," or "hey, let's grab those fire extinguishers, there are apartments above this bank office and we don't want the fires getting to big." Of course, more often than not, such conversations happen non-verbally, but commonly, part of the beauty of the riot is that strangers take care of one another.

However, when someone is accused of being an infiltrator, a false protester, dialogue becomes impossible because, *a priori*, honest communication is precluded by *who they supposedly are*. Those who spread this kind of accusation are actually hoping the crowd will rely on the uglier methods it has available to protect itself: beating up the supposed provocateur, and handing them over to the police.

This was exactly how the political parties imposed nonviolence on the Catalan independence movement in October 2017, using their massive resources to spread the rumor that police infiltrators were planning on committing violent acts in the protests. The degree of doublethink was undeniable: in the name of nonviolence, people assaulted those who began to carry out property destruction, proving that they did not logically believe such protesters were actual cops, or they never would have beat them up. Rather, the accusation of being a provocateur converted those protesters into *homo sacer*, people with no legitimacy or right to bodily integrity.

Ironically, those who engage in this kind of snitchjacketing are doing something very similar to what Amy Cooper did in Central Park, calling the police and lying about being threatened, knowing full well that the target of her accusation faced police violence.

And we have already seen how protesters in various cities have assaulted demonstrators and given them over directly to the police for damaging property, once again valuing capital more than human life, which is the very kind of thinking that gives us police murders in the first place.

Another problem with this discourse is how it distracts from the greater violence. Honestly, who cares if someone is smashing a Target or looting a convenience store? People are getting murdered. Black folks have to live every day under the threat of sudden death. Those who focus on property destruction should be shamed for having their priorities so out of line.

Yes, rioting can be done well and it can be done poorly, in a way that endangers others. However, social media is not the place to air those criticisms, especially since we can never know if the criticism is coming from someone who was actually there, nor is it possible to know what is left out of the video they are sharing as proof of their accusation.

Often, criticisms are shared in the moment of the protest itself, and this can be effective if people start communicating on a good faith basis. Sometimes, however, you cannot communicate well in the chaos of a demo under full police assault. But serious social movements have other spaces in order to talk about conflicts like this and to educate newer folks on the best ways to engage in protests. Accepting that social media is a terrible place for such conversations would make it much easier to shut down the rumor mill before it starts.