

Another world *is* possible: Countering the (il)logic of political violence

By Iain Murray

On September 1, two days after an estimated 500,000 people took to the streets in New York to peacefully protest George W. Bush's disastrous presidency, a chapter from Craig Rosebraugh's book *The Logic of Political Violence: Lessons in Reform and Revolution* was quietly posted, alongside a 1995 pro-violence tract by William Meyers, on the website of the libertarian *Alternative Press Review*.

This marks the most significant appearance yet, on the internet, of Rosebraugh's advocacy of political violence, and if the recent history of global activism is anything to go by, precedes the circulation of this text as quasi-intellectual justification for violence in the same way that Meyers' pamphlet was used to bolster the "Diversity of Tactics" argument during the peak of the global justice movement between 1999 – 2001.

As a new generation of activists swelled the ranks of the movement in the streets of London, Seattle, Washington and Genoa, autonomous communication networks, of which Indymedia remains the most prominent, facilitated a dizzying global exchange of information and ideology, strategies and tactics. Where previous generations of activists relied on pamphlets, newspapers, books and meetings to share ideas and debate the merits of one strategy or another, the post-Seattle generation has access to technology which allows ideology to jump from one continent to another like a bushfire jumping a river.

As the new activists faced down the pepper spray, tear gas and batons of police forces around the world, one of the dominant themes played out through activist networks, both electronic and face to face, was the debate over "Diversity of Tactics" (often abbreviated to "DoT"). The doctrine of DoT, which has more than a little in common with the call to "Do Your Own Thing" which echoed through counter-cultural circles as the civil rights and anti-Vietnam movements splintered and collapsed during the late 1960s and early 70s, holds that the protest movement cannot afford to exclude tactics of violence or property destruction from its metaphorical "toolbox".

The intellectual basis for the DoT approach was provided, in some part, by the publication of academic and Native American activist Ward Churchill's 1998 book, *Pacifism as Pathology: Reflections on the Role of Armed Struggle in North America*. Churchill, who is also a recognised expert on the FBI's covert counter-intelligence program, COINTELPRO, spoke on the theme of his book – broadly, that pacifism is a kind of psychiatric illness – at college campuses around the United States.

As Churchill's arguments began to filter down into activist circles, the text of a pamphlet entitled "Nonviolence and Its Violent Consequences", written by former Earth First! activist Bill Meyers in 1995, began circulating through activist e-mail lists. At the time, suggestions that nonviolence might have strategic merit were frequently answered by posts which linked to – and occasionally included the entire text of – Meyers' pamphlet.

Because nonviolence, by definition, excludes particular tactics such as physical violence, verbal abuse and most forms of property destruction, the acceptance of DoT as a central tenet of the global justice movement effectively ended discussion and debate around the relative strategic merits of nonviolent approaches.

G8, S11 and the contemporary peace movement

The death of 23 year-old student Carlo Giuliani, shot by Italian police during the G8 protests in Genoa in June 2001, brought the new generation of activists face to face with the reality of state-sanctioned violence, and exposed the "hit and run" tactics of the anonymous, masked Blac Blok to criticism on the grounds that their methods provided a convenient cover for *agents provocateur* and a trigger for the appalling over-reaction of the police to the predominantly nonviolent protests.

The events of September 11 momentarily shocked many activists into silence and inaction. But the train of events that led from September 11 to the United States invasion of Iraq sparked, on 15 February 2003, the greatest single global deployment of nonviolent protest in history. Against a background of shocking political violence carried out by a small group of organised martyrs and the opportunistic brutality of the US government's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, fighting for peace made about as much sense – to cite an oft-copied piece of graffiti – as fucking for virginity.

But, to the despair of those of those who took to the streets in peaceful protest that day, the invasion went ahead. And despite continued revelations of brutality by the occupying forces and the exposure of one falsehood after another concerning the justification for the invasion, the occupation of Iraq continues.

Perception of failure

To students of social movements, the present moment in the cycle of popular struggle will have an air of familiarity. Bill Moyer, a US social change activist who spent two decades refining and teaching his strategic model for nonviolent social movements, would no doubt tell current peace movement activists that their struggle is somewhere around stage five of what he dubbed the "Movement Action Plan" (MAP).

The MAP sets out eight stages that Moyer believed most social movements pass through on the way to success: *Business as Usual, Normal Channels Fail, Conditions Ripen, Take Off!, Activist "Failure", Win Majority of Public, Success!* and *Moving On*.

Moyer believed that the strategy of powerholders, when confronted by massive nonviolent protest as the movement "takes off", is to maintain an outward appearance of "business as usual" for as long as possible, in an effort to demoralise and weaken the movement. As activists involved in long-term struggle have been known to observe, victory often takes the movement by surprise. After all, it is not in the interests of powerholders to tell their opponents when they are succeeding.

It is during stage five of the Movement Action Plan – Activist "Failure" – that movements are most vulnerable to marginalisation. One of the factors in this process of marginalisation and alienation is the emergence of what Moyer describes as "negative rebels", who are frequently accompanied in their calls for violence by state-sponsored *agents provocateur*.

According to Moyer:

[Negative rebels] interpret the movement's successful progression to the stage of acceptance by the majority of the public as an indication of the failure and demise of the movement. They become demoralized because

the powerholders fall to change their policies, even though a majority of the public has adopted the movement's goals for change.

In other words, internal perceptions of failure, even while the societal conditions for ultimate success are being laid, leaves the movement vulnerable to demoralised and desperate participants who urge others to adopt tactics which, in violating deeply-held societal values, alienate and marginalise the movement from its base of support.

The Logic of Political Violence

Almost on cue, as the peace movement wound down from its exhilarating peak, Craig Rosebraugh, vegan baker and one-time spokesperson for the so-called Earth Liberation Front, published his book *The Logic of Political Violence*. Rosebraugh, whose lecture to a small audience at a Portland bookstore had been released as a spoken-word CD, is the co-founder of a small organisation called ARISSA, which, with its open embrace of political violence and overblown revolutionary rhetoric, is an uncanny throwback to the Weather Underground, the doomed middle-class radicals who failed to bring on the revolution but succeeded in blowing up three of their own while experimenting with explosives as a tool of liberation.

In the excerpt from *The Logic of Political Violence* published on the *Alternative Press Review* website, Rosebraugh surveys the use of violence within a variety of popular struggles, while airing many of the arguments that anyone who has discussed nonviolence in activist circles will be familiar with: nonviolence didn't save the Jews from Hitler, nonviolence won't work against brutal opponents etc. In a bizarre late-60s *deja-vu*, Rosebraugh even quotes Frantz Fanon, the Martinique-born psychiatrist whose incendiary tract *The Wretched of the Earth* proclaimed political violence as a form of post-colonial therapy.

Unlike Fanon, however, Rosebraugh and Meyers both believe that violence is an abhorrent, but necessary tactic of last resort when peaceful methods fail. They claim that violence and nonviolence are both legitimate tools in the "activist toolbox", and that those who advocate an adherence to nonviolence do so out of a naïve idealism which assumes, in Rosebraugh's words, that "an oppressive agent in any and every case has the ability to see the evils in his/her own actions and voluntarily change."

Knocking down a straw man

If advocates of nonviolence have a common failing, it is their instinctive, exclusively moral response to pro-violence arguments. Moral arguments frequently fail: in the mind of the would-be violent insurgent, the wrong they seek to overcome through political violence is greater than the wrong of violence itself (a logic, incidentally, that is shared by the proponents of institutional and military violence).

In their attacks on nonviolence, Rosebraugh and Meyers are indulging in the time-honoured rhetorical tactic of setting up and then knocking down a straw man. While Gandhi and King professed their faith in the ability of nonviolent struggle to spark empathy amongst of opponents – and this psychological dynamic is certainly fundamental to the effectiveness of nonviolence at the level of individual human relationships – contemporary nonviolence theorists maintain that nonviolent movements rarely, if ever, depend on the good conscience of powerholders to succeed.

To effectively respond to Rosebraugh and Meyers' mischaracterisation of nonviolence as a passive, ineffective game for middle-classes liberals, advocates of nonviolence need to remind themselves of the pragmatic, strategic justifications that underlie the effectiveness of popular nonviolent struggle. The next section of this essay sets out some of those arguments, drawing primarily of the work of political scientist Gene Sharp.

Asymmetrical conflict and the idea of power

An asymmetrical conflict is one where there is a significant discrepancy in apparent power between the opposing sides; in other words, a David and Goliath scenario. Most popular struggles against governments fit this description, as governments are able to deploy police, military and all of the apparatus of state repression to quell civil unrest. In other words, the ability of governments to violently repress mass movements is far greater than the ability of citizens to defend themselves using violent means.

Sharp, drawing upon the insights of military historian Basil Liddell-Hart, argues that nonviolence engages the opponent on grounds in which popular struggles have a significant strategic advantage. Conversely, Sharp says, "[b]y placing confidence in violent means, one has chosen the very type of struggle with which the oppressors nearly always have superiority."

Liddell-Hart, who interviewed a number German generals about their reaction to the popular resistance they faced during World War II, concluded that the mixture of violent and nonviolent methods delivered them a significant strategic advantage:

They were experts in violence, and had been trained to deal with opponents who used that method. But other forms of resistance baffle them - and all the more as the methods were subtle and concealed. It was a relief to them when nonviolent forms were mixed with guerrilla action, thus making it easier to combine drastic and suppressive action against both at the same time.

Another central tenet of Sharp's pragmatic approach to nonviolence concerns the nature of social power. Power does not, as Mao Tse-Tung famously asserted, come from the end of a gun. It comes, instead from the degree in which individuals and institutions are able to gain the consent, co-operation and assistance of others to act upon their wishes.

Even under dictatorships, where power appears to be exercised through inflicting torture, imprisonment and murder upon citizens who express their disagreement with the dictates of the state, rulers depend on the obedience and co-operation of the population in order to carry out their decrees. When citizens overcome their own fear, and disobey rulers even in the face of repression, the power of the ruler is undermined.

In contrast to Gandhi's revolutionary optimism towards his opponents, Sharp argues that a change in conscience on behalf of rulers is the rarest path to success for nonviolent movements. More common than this (which Sharp calls *conversion*) are *accommodation*, *nonviolent coercion* and *disintegration*.

Accommodation results where the opponents compromise to achieve a resolution of a conflict. *Nonviolent coercion* results where the leadership may retain titles and identity, but their ability to control economic, political and social processes is undermined. *Disintegration* is said to occur where the disobedience is so complete that even surrender becomes meaningless as the role of the leader is repudiated by former supporters.

Telling the Lion's story

Perhaps Sharp's greatest contribution to the scholarship of nonviolence is his re-appraisal of 20th century history through the lens of strategic nonviolence. In his landmark 1971 work, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Sharp began to document the history of nonviolent movements, his case studies forming a counterpoint to the predominant acceptance within Marxist circles of the necessary accompaniment of revolutionary societal upheaval by the violence of the rebelling class.

According to Sharp, the neglect of nonviolent action within mainstream historical study is reflective of the way that the historical record is shaped to serve the interests of elites. There's an ancient African proverb that expresses the essence of what Sharp has to say about history in this way:

A young boy went to his grandfather ...

He said, "Grandfather, is it true that the lion is the king of the jungle?"

The old man looked at his grandson curiously and said, "Yes, my son, this is true, but why do you ask?"

"Well, Grandfather," said the young boy, "if this is true, then why is it that in all the stories I read and all the ones I hear, man will defeat the lion? How can this be true?"

The old man looked at his grandson lovingly and said, "And, it will always be that way, my son, until the lion tells the story."

Much as the lion's failure to tell his story guarantees that the hunter's version of events will always prevail, the erasure of successful nonviolent movements from the historical record denies subsequent generations the knowledge of how the methods of nonviolent action operate.

When the success of a nonviolent movement is too great to ignore, mainstream history characterises that success as the product of a charismatic, saintly leadership, thus denying us the chance to learn about the strategies behind their success. Even during his life, Gandhi acquired, to his chagrin, the title "Mahatma", or "great saint". And Martin Luther King, a target of FBI counterintelligence operations who was demonised as a "communist" and "sexual degenerate", is today considered as close to contemporary sainthood as any modern martyr. Meanwhile, James Lawson, dubbed "the leading theorist and strategist of nonviolence in the world" by King on the eve of his assassination, continues to teach nonviolence at monthly workshops at his Los Angeles church, but remains, in comparison to King, a relative unknown.

Sharp, in documenting more than 200 cases of nonviolent popular struggle, has arguably done more than any single scholar to reverse this historical blindspot, and facilitate the transfer of knowledge concerning the methods of nonviolent action across cultural and generational barriers. More recently, nonviolence scholar Peter Ackermann and broadcaster Jack Duvall brought the history of 20th century nonviolence to a wider audience through the PBS documentary and book *A Force More Powerful*.

Targeting the peace movement

Rosebraugh, on the other hand, through the publicity arm of the ARISSA, intends to tell the same story as those who hold the reigns of military power – that true power can be exercised only through violence.

The text of a poster available for download from the website of the ARISSA Media Group LLC, with a design somewhat reminiscent of an optometrist's wall chart, features the words "I am for peace ..." positioned in large bold type above a photograph of an attractive young woman with the CND ("peace") symbol drawn on her forehead. "But as of lately [sic], I am feeling a bit, well, frustrated," begins the fine print, before lapsing into a desperate rant about the ineffectiveness of nonviolent methods.

The author of the poster shows an instinctive understanding of the target audience most vulnerable to calls for more "extreme" action. Preliminary research on the profile of participants in the massive peace protests of February 2003 indicates that a substantial minority – in the case of available data from surveys of protestors in Glasgow, Scotland, around 35% – had never participated in a protest before. This group of newer protestors, according to the Glasgow survey, "tended to have decided to take part relatively late in the day, had generally less interest in politics, and were slightly younger than the rest of the demonstrators."

Many first time protestors, no doubt, were appalled and confused by the apparent failure of the leaders of the free world to listen to their calls for peace. Many of those with some prior involvement in social change, however, would have recognised the unprecedented public opposition to war as a far more accurate indicator of the movement's relative success than the façade of invulnerability projected by powerholders.

It can also be no accident that the poster bears an image of female beauty, rather than of the crusty, bearded crankdom that one might otherwise associate with the advocates of revolutionary violence. The use of a young woman's face to sell the pro-violence message subtly echoes the sexual overtones and imagery that accompanied the Weather Underground's desperate spree of violence in the 1970s. In his 2001 book *Fugitive Days*, ex-Weatherman Bill Ayers, recounting his then comrade (now wife) Bernadine Dohrn's address to the 1969 "Days of Rage" riot, recalls Dohrn's "short skirt and high stylish black boots ... Her blazing eyes ... allied with her elegance, ... a stunning and seductive symbol of the Revolutionary Woman." And who better to appeal to all of those frustrated young Revolutionary Men than a stunning and seductive Revolutionary Woman?

"I mean, I am just wondering why nothing is working," continues the text of the ARISSA poster. The further one reads, the less one hears the voice of the pretty young peace activist, the text lapsing into the characteristic tone of Rosebraugh and his ilk – angry, hectoring, desperate and frustrated. It's the voice of someone so absorbed in their own self-definition as an outsider, and so overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenge that faces them in transforming society, that they cannot acknowledge the power and success of a peace movement that mobilised 11 million citizens in opposition before the invasion had even begun. "I cannot feel good about myself while this political structure continues intact and unchallenged," the poster concludes. "For once I really want to change things. Don't you?"

Negative rebels or agent provocateurs?

One of the most confronting aspects of the emergence of "negative rebels" is that they play essentially the same role within a movement as *agents provocateur*: state sponsored infiltrators who provoke violence in order to discredit a social movement.

It has been claimed that as many as one in six participants in anti-war protests at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago were *agents provocateur*. The street-fighting outside the convention, in which more than 200 police and protestors were injured, was later termed a "police riot" by the Walker Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence.

At the time, though, the violence at the convention alienated the movement from a public whose opposition to the war had steadily increased, and ushered in the presidency of Richard Nixon, whose carefully crafted appeal to an audience of insular, uncertain voters he termed the "Silent Majority" took advantage of the images of violence that smeared the anti-Vietnam movement from 1968.

Despite the similarities between naïve "negative rebels" and deliberately destructive *agents provocateur*, there is little to be gained from labeling disruptive movement participants as infiltrators. Chip Berlet, a veteran of the anti-Vietnam war movement who specialises in researching right-wing organisations, advises against "agent baiting" and recommends dealing with the behaviour of those who engage in or encourage violence, rather than the intent. He does, however, make the point that every group has the right to set principles for agreed behaviour: "If your group is devoted to nonviolence," Berlet says, "then a person who continuously suggests trashing store windows probably is in the wrong group."

Another world is possible

The degree to which groups are able agree on nonviolent principles is central to their ability to curtail the disruptive impacts of both "negative rebels" and *agents provocateur*. While precedents do exist for large groups of protestors achieving agreement on nonviolent principles (during the 1977 anti-nuclear protests at Seabrook, New Hampshire, for instance), a globalised, grassroots peace movement faces significant challenges in this respect.

One of the challenges that contemporary social movements face is the tendency to anonymity and inherent impermanence of the medium that has become the key organising tool of the new activism: the internet. Many of the activist websites which hosted impassioned debate over "Diversity of Tactics" have disappeared as the collectives which maintained them dissolved, robbing subsequent generations of the opportunity to learn from the experience of those that went before.

And while the internet offers the ability to exchange information and strategies with impressive speed, the anonymous nature of the medium provides the perfect cover for modern day *agents provocateur*. Like the masks of the Blak Bloc, the website of the Earth Liberation Front has almost certainly provided anonymity not only for naïve (and mostly, one suspects) young men, alienated and disempowered enough to believe that torching an SUV is the only way that they can make their mark on the world, but for the government agents, industry front groups and paid provocateurs who know that in the post-September 11 political environment the surest way to undermine a successful social movement is to tar it with the brush of "terrorism".

Another world is possible. This slogan, most popular at the peak of the global justice movement, summed up the optimism of a generation of activists who, like their late 60s predecessors, had seen through the lies of "the system". The history of nonviolent struggle, viewed alongside the spectacle of 11 million global citizens taking to the streets to oppose war, confirms that another world is indeed possible, and can teach us much about the extraordinary power of people who pursue justice using means which are consistent with that end. Rosebraugh, and the prophets of political violence in whose company he stands, offer us only more of the same.

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