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Why the 1% Love "Anarchist Violence"

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From the trashing of downtown Oakland after the General Strike to burning cars and looting in Rome during a huge anti-capitalist demonstration by the Indignati, no one should be surprised by the militant vandalism of self-described Anarchists dressed in black - or by the police violence they provoke. Protesters of a certain age have seen the pattern too many times, especially in the violence that paid provocateurs created in the 1960s as part of the FBI's Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). Hopefully, today's nonviolent mass movements can learn from our mistakes, as many in Occupy Oakland seem to be doing.

Strange as it might now seem, many of our problems in the past grew out of the complexities of the civil rights movement, where so many of us got our start. While the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others had strong philosophical commitments to Gandhi's principles of nonviolence, large numbers of southern blacks owned hunting rifles and shotguns that they used to defend their families against attacks by white vigilantes. Most often, this armed self-defense coexisted with the public nonviolence of the marches and voter registration drives. But sometimes the disconnect showed.

The best-known example involved Robert Williams, a veteran of both the Army and Marine Corps who headed the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Monroe, North Carolina. Williams led armed black activists in driving off the local Ku Klux Klan, and spoke openly of what he called "armed self-reliance," which he saw as necessary when the nonviolent marches had ended and the television cameras went home. Fearing the loss of white liberal support, NAACP officials suspended Williams, worked with the FBI to discredit him, and convinced the NAACP convention in 1959 to vote overwhelmingly to confirm his suspension.

The FBI subsequently accused Williams of kidnapping, falsely as it turned out, and he and his wife fled to Cuba in 1961 and later sought refuge in China. His book "Negroes With Guns" appeared in 1962, and greatly influenced Huey Newton and the Black Panthers. Both Malcolm X and Rosa Parks also sided with Williams, who became an icon to black nationalists.

Williams was a fascinating character, and his lynching by the NAACP dramatized an obvious truth. Dr. King's nonviolence, though undoubtedly sincere, served as a control mechanism to assure whites, especially those in power, that he would hold their worst fears at bay. With King on top, the 1% of the day could hope to contain a massive black revolt and a violent backlash by whites, all displayed to the world on international television.

For young white activists, this Realpolitik strengthened our tendency to see nonviolence as a pragmatic choice of tactics, not a philosophic commitment that most of us never embraced. Our stance faced an interesting test at Berkeley just before the Free Speech Movement's big sit-in on December 2, 1964. Joan Baez, the popular singer and committed pacifist, had agreed to take part, but suddenly suffered second thoughts. The evening before the sit-in, it somehow fell to me to field a call from her mentor Ira Sandperl, a Gandhi scholar who had marched for civil rights with Dr. King. "Would we commit ourselves to remain strictly nonviolent?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "We can't."

My bluntness surprised us both, but FSM was a democratic movement and we would make our own decisions. As diplomatically as I could, I told Ira that we were a broad coalition of groups, from Goldwater Republicans to revolutionary socialists, and I could hardly speak for them all. But, as of our last meeting, we were planning to use non-violent tactics for our occupation of Berkeley's administration building, Sproul Hall.

A great soul with a superb sense of whimsy, Ira heard what he needed to hear. Joan came to the sit-in, sang her songs, and had her say. "Muster up as much love as you possibly can, and as little hatred and as little violence, and as little 'angries' as you can - although I know it's been exasperating," she told us. "The more love you can feel, the more chance there is for it to be a success."

By contrast, our own Mario Savio had already launched us onto a less loving path. "There is a time," he declared, "when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; you can't even passively take part, and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus and you've got to make it stop."

From soul force to political bludgeon, these differing approaches to nonviolence all appealed in varying degree to individual activists. But, as a group, we came to a post-Gandhian mix and match, never codified except in practice. We transformed Joan's call for love into a pragmatic openness toward potential antagonists, whether football cheerleaders, Christian evangelists, or sometimes even the police. And, we followed Mario's lead in rejecting for all time any Socratic call to uphold the state's authority by willingly submitting to punishment for whatever laws we might break. Goodbye bitter hemlock, catch us if you can.

Our thinking continued to evolve as we used our hard-won freedom on campus to launch nonviolent demonstrations against the rapidly escalating war in Southeast Asia. We stopped troop trains and marched on the Port of Oakland, bringing on dramatic confrontations with the Oakland Police, who once sent the Hell's Angels to attack us. Throughout, we remained democratic and transparent and tried our best to let individual participants decide for themselves how much risk they wanted to take.

But somewhere along the way, I think we fell into a trap. We began to view our nonviolent demonstrations as an almost military bludgeon to create disruption, and we failed to define ourselves politically as separate from the antiwar vandalism and violence all around us.

Our failure became clear at Stanford in the spring of 1968. We were holding a peaceful sit-in when word came that someone had set fire to the campus ROTC building. Many of the students wanted to issue a statement denying that we had done it. Along with others, I successfully argued against the denial, which I felt would only confirm the suspicion that we had set the fire and were now lying about it.

I think we were right, but only in the very short run. The problem was that none of us ever found a positive way to distinguish ourselves and our nonviolence from the ROTC fire and similar incidents at several other locations around campus. Instead, we tried to have it both ways. As one truly pacifist comrade told a university trustee at a large public meeting, "I'm nonviolent, but I have friends who are not." Naturally, we all laughed in support.

Years later we learned that an FBI provocateur had created the ROTC fire and the other incidents. In other words, in our silence, the FBI was defining us in ways that did not help us to build a larger and more effective antiwar movement.

Flash forward to Occupy Oakland and the Indignati in Rome. At this point, we do not know whether the vandalism came from paid provocateurs or sincere anarchists. Looking back at my own failures, I would argue that the distinction does not make much difference. Whatever the source, the police and those for whom they work will use even the slightest deviation from a very visible nonviolence and non-vandalism to discredit, attack, and eventually remove our occupiers.

That will be their game plan. Ours will evolve, but it has to include defining ourselves by our actions and using

nonviolent tactics to isolate the vandals, as many in Occupy Oakland tried to do. I hope we can do it without sounding defensive and with as much creativity and good humor as we can. Letting the world know who and what we are, and who and what we are not, is a necessary step on the way to winning the support we need from the rest of the 99%.

Post-scriptum :

A veteran of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and the New Left monthly Ramparts, Steve Weissman lived for many years in London, working as a magazine writer and television producer. He now lives and works in France, where he writes on international affairs.