How Nonviolence Protects the State

Peter Gelderloos

2018-07

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—seen 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 only the way to fight 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.

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Since the 1990s, the term “nonviolence” has been widely used to describe a range of strategies and tactics employed by social movements around the world. However, the concept of nonviolence is complex and multifaceted, and its application in practice can vary widely. In this text, we will explore the nuances of nonviolence and its role in social change.

One of the key figures in the study of nonviolence is Peter Gelderloos, whose work has been influential in the field. In his book “How Nonviolence Protects the State,” Gelderloos argues that nonviolence is not just a strategy for achieving social change, but also a form of state protection. He contends that nonviolence can be used by states to maintain control and silence opposition.

To illustrate this point, Gelderloos draws on examples from history, including the use of nonviolence by the Red Brigades in Italy in the 1970s. The Red Brigades were a left-wing terrorist organization that used nonviolent tactics to express their opposition to capitalist modernity. However, their actions were not perceived as nonviolent by the state, which responded with violent repression.

Gelderloos argues that the use of nonviolence by social movements can be seen as a form of state protection, as it diverts attention from state-sponsored violence and creates a narrative of victimhood. This can be a powerful tool for states to maintain power and silence dissent.

The use of nonviolence by social movements can also be seen as a form of strategic nonviolence, as it can be used to achieve specific goals and influence public opinion. However, the use of nonviolence by states is often seen as a form of co-optation, as it can be used to silence opposition and maintain the status quo.

In conclusion, the use of nonviolence by social movements and states is a complex issue that requires careful consideration. While nonviolence can be a powerful tool for achieving social change, it can also be used as a form of state protection. As social movements continue to use nonviolent tactics, it is important to understand the nuances of nonviolence and its role in social change.