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May 21, 2012



Derrick Jensen

Pacifism as Pathology (Introduction)

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This is just the introduction to Ward Churchill's book "Pacifism as Pathology", and it's not the entire thing. Its just excerpts of the meat of the argument.
Retrieved on October 7, 2009 from fnordspot.blogspot.com

One cannot solve abusive or psychopathological behavior through rational means, no matter how much it may be in abusers or psychopaths interest for us to believe so. (As author Lundy Bancroft has noted, “in one important way, an abusive man works like a magician. His tricks largely rely on getting you to look off in the wrong direction, distracting your attention so that you wont notice where the real action is. He leads you into a convoluted maze, making your relationship with him a labyrinth of twists and turns. He wants you to puzzle over him, to try to figure him out, as though he were a wonderful but broken machine for which you need only to find and fix the malfunctioning parts to bring it roaring to its full potential. His desire, though he may not admit it even to himself, is that you wrack your brains in this way so that you wont notice the patterns of logic of his behavior, the consciousness behind the craziness.”)

Grotesquely exploitative behavior is not something to be figured out. It is something to be stopped.

I’ve heard Ward [Churchill] describe the dominant culture as being like the fictional character Hannibal Lector from *The Silence of the Lambs*: “You’re locked in a room with this psychopath,” I’ve heard Churchill say, “And you will be on the menu. The question is: what are you going to do about it?”

I have, in my life, been in a few relationships i would classify as emotionally abusive. It took me years to learn very important lesson: you cannot argue with an abuser. You will always lose. In fact you’ve lost as soon as you begin (or more precisely as soon as you respond to their provocations). Why? Because they cheat. They Lie. they control the framing conditions for any “debate,” and if you deviate from their script, they hurt you until you step back in line. (And of course we see this same thing on the larger scale.) If this happens often enough they no longer have to hurt you, since you no longer step out of line. And if this really happens long enough, you may come up with a philosophy or a religion that makes a virtue of you not stepping out of line. (And of course we see this same thing on the larger scale, too).

Another reason that you always lose when you argue with and abuser is that they excel at creating double binds. A double bind is a

situation where if you choose option one, you loose, if you choose option two you loose, and you can't withdraw.

The only way out of a double blind is to smash it.

It's the only way.

A double bind. One of the smartest things the nazis did was make it so that at every step of the way it was in the jews rational best interest to not resist. Many jews had the hope- and this hope was cultivated by the nazis- that if they played along, followed the rules laid out by those in power, that their lives would get no worse, that they would not be murdered. Would you rather get an I.D. card, or would you rather resist and possibly get killed? Would you rather go to a ghetto (reserve, reservation, whatever) or would you rather resist and possibly get kill? Would you rather get on a cattle car, or would you rather resist and possibly get killed? Would you rather get in the showers, or would you rather resist and possibly get killed?

But I'll tell you something important: the Jews who participated in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, including those who went on what they thought were suicide missions, had a higher rate of survival then those who went along. Never forget that.

The only way out of a double blind is to smash it. Never forget that either.

I recently reconnected with an old friend. In the years since we last talked, he has, it ends up, become a pacifist. He said he thinks its possible to reach anyone if you can just make a convincing enough argument.

"Ted Bundy?" I asked

"He's dead"

"Back when he was alive"

"Okay, i guess not."

"Hitler?" Silence from my friend.

I said, "Gandhi tried. Wrote him a letter requesting he please stop. Was evidently surprised when Hitler didn't listen to him."

"I still think," he said, "that in most cases you can come to some sort of agreement with people."

"Sure," I responded. "Most people. But what if someone wants what you've got, and will do anything to take it?" I was thinking of the words of the Oglala man Red Cloud, who spoke of the insatiability

no wrong choices?' they can say, while in reality facing no choices at all. And of course they actually are making choices. Choosing inaction -or ineffective action- in the face of exploitation or abuse is about as impure an action as action as anyone can conceptualize. But these ineffective actions can provide the illusion of effectiveness: no matter what else can be said pacifism, even with the gigantic problems we face, pacifism and other responses that do not threaten the larger concentration camp status quo are certainly achievable. That's something, i guess. But it all reminds me of those who go to therapists to create the illusion they are doing something, rather than the few who actually work to face their fears an patterns and take an active role in transformation.

"Pacifism is a toxic mimic of love, isn't it? Because it actually has nothing to do with loving another. Could it be said that toxic mimics are toxic in part because they ignore responsibility, they ignore relationship, they ignore presence, they substitute control for fluidity and choice? Toxic mimics are of course products and causes of insanity. Could it be said that a lack of responsibility, relationship, and presence and the substitution of control for fluidity and choice are causes and products of insanity?"

This is a necessary book, a book that grows more necessary with each day that passes.

say it squarely: the fact that this power, this force, this entity, this monstrosity called the state maintains itself by physical force, and can be countered only in terms that it itself dictates and therefore understands.

“It will not be a painless process, but, hey, newsflash: It’s not a process that is painless now. If you feel a relative absence of pain, that is testimony only to your position of privilege within the Statist structure. Those who are on the receiving end, whether they are in Iraq, they are in Palestine, they are in Haiti, they are in American Indian reserves inside the United States, whether they are in the migrant stream or the inner city, those who are ‘othered’ and of color, in particular but poor more generally, know the difference between the painlessness of acquiescence on the one hand and the painfulness of maintaining the existing order on the other. Ultimately, there is no alternative that has found itself in reform there is only an alternative that founds itself — not in that fanciful word of revolution- but in the devolution, that is to say the dismantlement of Empire from the Inside out.”

A while ago I received this email from a friend:

“There are so many people who fear making decisions and taking responsibility. Kids are trained and adults are encouraged not to make decisions and take responsibility. Or more accurately they are trained to engage only in false choices. Whenever I think about the culture and all the horrors it perpetrates and we allow, and whenever i consider our typical response to being faced with difficult choices, it seems clear to me that everything in the culture leads us to ‘choose’ rigid, controlled, unresponsive ‘responses’ over fluidity, real choice, and personal responsibility for and to those choices. Every time. Every single time.

“Pacifism is but one example of this. Pacifism is of course less multifaceted in its denial and delusions than some aspects of the culture (in other words, more obvious in its stupidity), but its all part of the same thing: control and denial of relationship and responsibility on one and versus making choices and taking responsibility in particular circumstances on the other. A pacifist eliminates choice and responsibility by labeling great swaths of possibility off limits for action and even for discussion. ‘See how pure i am for making

and abusiveness of members of the dominant culture: “They made us many promises, more than i can remember. But they only kept one. They promised to take our land and they took it.”

My friend said, “But whats worth fighting for? Can’t we just leave?”

I thought of many things worth fighting for: bodily integrity (my own and that of those i love), my landbase, the lives and dignity of those i love. I thought of the mother bear who charged me me not one week ago, because she thought i was threatening her baby. I thought of the mother horses, cows, dogs, cats, hawks, eagles, chickens, geese, mice who have in my life attacked me because they thought I’d harm their little ones. I thought: If a mother mouse is willing to take on someone eight thousand times her size, what the hell is wrong with us? I said “what if they want everything on the planet? The planet is finite, you know. Ultimately you can’t just run away.”

My friend wasn’t such a good pacifist after all, for he said, “I guess at some point you got to fight back.”

I have a friend, a former prisoner, who is very smart, and who says that dogmatic pacifists are the most selfish people he knows, because they place their moral purity — or to be more precise, their self-conception of moral purity — above stopping injustice.

That’s a Problem.

Neither Ward nor I are arguing against people being peaceful. Nor is either one of use arguing against those who choose to personally pursue social change through peaceful means. We need it all. We need people filing lawsuits, and we need people working at battered women’s shelters. We need people working on permaculture. We need educators. We need writers. We need healers. But we also need warriors, those who are willing and ready to fight back. That’s the good thing about everything being so fucked up: no matter where you look there is great work to be done.

There is a difference, however, between being personally peaceful and being a pacifist. The sort of pathological pacifism Ward’s writing about, that “ideology of nonviolent political action” which “has become axiomatic and all but universal among the more progressive elements of contemporary mainstream North America,” is

not merely a personal choice or proclivity, but rather an obsession, a monomania, a brittle religion or cult that like other brittle obsessions can brook no heresy. Not only are pacifists of this sort unwilling to fight back — which of course is their prerogative- and not only are they unwilling to consider fighting back- which is still their prerogative- but far more harmfully they cannot allow anyone else to consider fighting back either. All-too-often they do everything in their power to silence anyone who commits blasphemy by fighting back or even speaking of it.

Their first line of defense is often to simply shout down the offender. This has happened to me many times, and if you've spoken of fighting back I'm sure it happened to you, too. The shouts — or chants, really — come from the pacifist canon. Like any other fundamentalist religion, dogmatic pacifism has its articles of faith. And like many articles of faith, these don't really hold up to scrutiny. But once again like any other fundamentalist religion, whether or not the articles of faith correspond to physical reality matters not the slightest to the religion's true believers, nor to their enthusiasm, nor to their aggressiveness. Rebut an article of faith- rhetorically smash it to bits- and they'll simply say it again and again as though you never said a word.

Articles of faith.

They tell us that by wanting to fight back, we are being dualistic, separating the world into us and them. "If someone wins," they say, "then someone has to lose. If we're all creative enough we can find ways so all of us can win." It's easy to speak of everyone winning when you make yourself blind to the suffering of those you exploit and those you allow to be exploited. There are already winners and there are already losers, and expediently ignored in all this talk of everyone winning is that the world is already losing. Further ignored is that when the world loses, we all lose. And also expediently ignored is that you cannot make peace with a culture that is trying to devour you. War has long-since been declared and is being waged against the world, and a refusal to acknowledge this was does not mean it's not happening.

They tell us that love conquers all, and that to even speak of fighting back is to not sufficiently love. If we just love our enemies

The same is true for the billions of passenger pigeons slaughtered to serve the economic system. The millions of prisoners stuck in gulags here in the US and elsewhere would be astounded to discover they can walk away anytime they want, that they are not in fact held there by force. Do the pacifists who say this really believe that people all across the world hand over their resources to the wealthy because they enjoy being impoverished, enjoy seeing their lands and their lives stolen- sorry, I guess under this formulation they're not stolen but received gracefully as gifts- by those they evidently must perceive as more deserving? Do they believe women submit to rape just for the hell of it, and not because of the use or threat of violence? One reason violence is used so often by those in power is because it works. It works dreadfully well.

And it can work for liberation as well as subjugation. To say that violence never accomplishes anything not only degrades the suffering of those harmed by violence but it also devalues the triumphs of those who have fought their way out of abusive or exploitative situations. Abused women or children have killed their abusers, and become free of his abuse. And there have been many indigenous and other armed struggles for liberation that have succeeded for shorter or longer periods. In order to maintain their fantasies, dogmatic pacifists must ignore the harmful and helpful efficacy of violence.

All of this closed-mindedness- This intolerance for any tactics save their own is harmful in many ways. First, it decreases the possibility of effective synergy between various forms of resistance. Second, it creates the illusion that we really are accomplishing something while the world continues to be destroyed. Third, it wastes valuable time that we do not have. Fourth, it positively helps those in power.

Ward Churchill puts it well: "There is not a petition campaign that you can construct that is going to cause the power and the status quo to dissipate. There is not a legal action that you can take; you can't go into the court of the conqueror and have the conqueror announce the conquest illegitimate and told to be repealed; you cannot vote in an alternative, you cannot hold a prayer vigil, you cannot burn the right scented candle at the prayer vigil, you cannot have the right folk song, you cannot have the right fashion statement, you cannot adopt a different diet, build a better bike path. You have to

(insofar as we can make a meaningful distinction) steals from someone. Violence can beget violence, as when someone attacks someone who fights back. Violence can beget a cessation of violence, as when someone fights off or kills an assailant (it's utterly nonsensical as well as insulting to say that a woman who kills a rapist is begetting more violence).

Pacifists tell us, "We must be the change we to see." This ultimately meaningless statement manifests the magical thinking and narcissism we've come to expect from dogmatic pacifists. I can change myself all I want, and if dams still stand, salmon still die. If global warming proceeds apace, birds still starve. If factory trawlers still run, oceans still suffer. If factory farms still pollute, dead zones still grow. If vivisection labs still remain, animals are still tortured.

They tell us that if you use violence against exploiters, you become like they are. This cliché is, once again, absurd, with no relation to the real world. It is based on the flawed notion that all violence is the same. It is obscene to suggest that a woman who kills a man attempting to rape her becomes like a rapist. It is obscene to suggest that by fighting back Tecumseh became like those who were stealing his people's land. It is obscene to suggest that the Jews who fought back against their exterminators at Auschwitz/Birkenau, Treblinka, and Sobibor became like the Nazis. It is obscene to suggest that a tiger who kills a human at a zoo becomes like one of her captors.

Pacifists tell us that violence never accomplishes anything. This argument, even more than any of the others, reveals how completely, desperately, and arrogantly out of touch many dogmatic pacifists are with physical, emotional, and spiritual reality. If violence accomplishes nothing, how do these people believe the civilized conquered the North and South America and Africa, and before these Europe, and before that the Middle East, and since then the rest of the world? The indigenous did not and do not hand over their land because they recognize they're faced with a better culture run by better people. The land was (and is) seized and the people living there were (and are) slaughtered, terrorized, beaten into submission. The tens of millions of Africans killed in the slave trade would be surprised to learn their slavery was not the result of widespread violence. The same is true for the millions of women burned as witches in Europe.

enough, we can sway them by the power of that love. They tell us love implies pacifism, and I think Mother Grizzly Bears will back me up on this one, as will all the other mothers I mentioned earlier.

They tell us you can't use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. I can't tell you how many people have said this to me. I can, however, tell you with reasonable certainty that none of these people have ever read the essay from which the line comes: "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House," By Audre Lorde (certainly no pacifist herself). The essay has nothing to do with pacifism, but with the exclusion of marginalized voices from discourse ostensibly having to do with social change. If any of these pacifists had read her essay, they would have undoubtedly been horrified, because she is, reasonably enough, suggesting a multivariied approach to the multivarious problems we face.

It has always seemed clear to me that violent and nonviolent approaches to social change are complementary. No one I know who advocates the possibility of armed resistance to the dominant cultures degradation and exploitation rejects nonviolent resistance. Many of us routinely participate in the nonviolent resistance and support those for whom this is their only mode of opposition.

Who is it that says we should not use the master's tools? Often it is Christians, Buddhists, or other adherents of civilized religions. It is routinely people who wish us to vote our way to justice or shop our way to sustainability. But civilized religions are tools used by the master as surely as is violence. So is voting. So is shopping. If we cannot use the tools used by the master, what tools, precisely, can we use? How about writing? No, sorry. Writing has long been a tool used by the master. So I guess we can't use that. Well, how about discourse in general? Yes, those in power own the means of industrial discourse production, and those in power misuse discourse. Does that mean they own all discourse and we can never use it? Of course not. They also own the means of industrial religion production, and they misuse religions. Does that mean they own all religion and we can never use it? Of course not. They own the means of industrial violent production, and they misuse violence. Does that mean they own all violence and we can never use it? Of course not.

But i have yet another problem with the statement that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, which is that it's a terrible metaphor. It just doesn't work. The first and most necessary condition for a metaphor is that it makes sense in the real world. This doesn't.

You can use a hammer to build a house, and you can use a hammer to take it down.

It doesn't matter whose hammer it is.

There's an even bigger problem with the metaphor. What is perhaps its most fundamental premise. That the house belongs to the master. But there is no master, and there is no master's house. There are no master's tools. There is a person who believes himself a master. There is a house he claims is his. There are tools he claims as well. And there are those who still believe he is the master.

But there are others who do not buy into this delusion. There are those of us who see a man, a house, and tools. No more and now less.

Pacifists endlessly repeat that it's much easier to make war than to make peace. The first twenty times i heard this i didn't understand it at all: whether war or peace is harder is irrelevant. Its easier to catch a fly with your bare hand than with your mouth, but does that mean it's somehow better or more moral to do the latter? It's easier to take out a dam with a sledgehammer than a toothpick, but doing the latter wouldn't make me a better person. An action's difficulty is entirely independent of its quality or morality.

If all they're saying, by the way, is that oftentimes creativity can make violence unnecessary, i wish they would just say that. I would have no problem with that, so long as we emphasize the word oftentimes.

Another item in the canon is Gandhi's line: "We want freedom for our country, but not at the expense or exploitation of others." I've also had this line crammed down my throat more times than I want to consider — Often paraphrased as "You keep saying that in this struggle for the planet you want to win, but if someone wins, doesn't that mean someone has to lose, and isn't that just perpetuating the same old dominator mindset?" And I've always found it both intellectually dishonest and poorly thought-out.

A man tries to rape a woman. She runs away. Her freedom from being raped just came at his expense: he wasn't able to rape her. Does this mean she exploited him? Of course not. Now let's do this again. He tries to rape her. She can't get away. She tries to stop him nonviolently. It doesn't work. She pulls a gun and shoots him in the head. Obviously her freedom from being raped came at the expense of his life. Did she exploit him? Of course not. It comes down to a basic truism: defensive rights always trump offensive rights. My right to freedom always trumps your right to exploit me, and if you do try to exploit me, i have the right to stop you, even at the expense of you.

Pacifists tell us the ends never justify the means. This is a statement of values disguised as a statement of morals. A person who says ends don't justify means is simply saying: I value process more than outcome. Someone who says ends do justify means is merely saying: I value outcome more than process. Look at it this way, it becomes absurd to make absolute statements about it. There are some ends that justify the some means, and there are some ends that do not. Similarly, the same means may be justified by some people for some ends and not justified by for others. (I would, for example, kill someone who attempted to kill those i love, and i would not kill someone who tried to cut me off on the interstate). It is my joy, responsibility, and honor as a sentient being to make those distinctions, and i pity those who do not consider themselves worthy or capable of making them themselves, and who must rely on slogans instead to guide there actions.

Pacifists tell us that violence only begets violence. This is manifestly not true. Violence can beget many things. Violence can beget submission, as when a master beats a slave (some slaves will eventually fight back, in which case this violence will beget more violence; but some slaves will submit for the rest of their lives, as we see; and some will even create a religion or spirituality that attempts to make a virtue of their submission, as we also see; some will write and others repeat that their freedom must not come at the expense of others; some will speak of the need to love their oppressors; and some will say that the meek shall inherit what's left of the earth). Violence can beget material wealth, as when a robber or a capitalist