The Failure of Gelderloos

The question of violence and nonviolence within anarchism has been one that's been active since Errico Malatesta wrote that it was a necessary evil.[1] David Graeber ("*Direct Action: An Ethnography*", pg. 180) writes that this can be attributed to the position of prefiguration common within anarchism and its contest with a social revolution. Prefiguration is the practice of implementing future goals into today's world; for example, if one wished to be in a society where racial minorities were not oppressed, one could start by respecting and treating these minorities as equals. In the context of anarchism, prefiguration is especially present when it comes to discussing how to reach a stateless society with those who advocate for utilizing the state for this goal[2], where the anarchist would ask how it makes sense to achieve statelessness using the state, which is something that is supposed to be gone in a stateless society. Graeber explains that this logic works naturally towards the question of violence; since anarchists want a society without war or violence, it would make sense that one must not practice violence. However, Graeber points out that to many anarchists the pervasiveness of capitalism and the state seem as if a violent social revolution is necessary. This kind of conflict is what has characterized most of the discussion between pacifism and anarchism.

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[1] Malatesta was an anarcho-syndicalist that was highly influential in Italian anarchism, and is one of the most widely read anarchists today. In *Anarchy and Violence*, Malatesta writes: "I repeat here: as Anarchists, we cannot and we do not desire to employ violence, except in the defence of ourselves and others against oppression. But we claim this right of defence—entire, real, and efficacious. That is, we wish to be able to go behind the material instrument which wounds us, and to attack the hand which wields the instrument, and the head which directs it.... For as a fact, the bourgeoisie is in a permanent state of war against the proletariat, since it never for one moment ceases to exploit the latter, and grind it down." ("*The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader*", pg. 151)

[2] These people are classified usually as Leninists; Marxists who subscribe to Lenin's idea that a state is a necessary institution to protect oneself against opposing interests like counterrevolutionaries or the bourgeois. Some sects of this include but are not limited to Marxism-Leninism/Stalinism, Trotskyism, Mao Tse-tung Thought/Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, and Ho Chi Minh Thought.

Peter Gelderloos, the author of *How Nonviolence Protects The State* and *The Failure of Nonviolence*, is one anarchist who has dedicated a portion of his writing and activism to the question of nonviolence. His books on the subject have become popular among modern anarchist communities as arguments against pacifism, showcasing that it is ineffective and thus bigoted to assert the position. This is helped by the fact he is also the author of *Anarchy Works!*, a book that answers common questions regarding anarchism with real-life examples, which is also well known between anarchists. The lack of critique of his claims and arguments on nonviolence contributes to the atmosphere of validity in Gelderloos' work; those who have criticized Gelderloos' first book on nonviolence have been given close to no attention[3], and there seems to be only two reviews focused on critiquing the second book printed online.[4] With the capability of the internet to spread works and repeat quotes from them like wildfire, these criticisms of nonviolence have been approximate to the most common position of anarchists regarding the question of nonviolence with what appears to be not even a peep from others.

It is because of this minimal criticism and wide praise, however, that many valid criticisms of Gelderloos' claims, arguments, and overall presentation are overlooked. The focus of this paper will be on the second book, *The Failure of Nonviolence*, as there is a severe lack of criticism compared to his first book (which does not amount to much in the first place). In the second book, Gelderloos relies a lot on unreliable sources and evidence, if he uses sources at all

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[3] The notable criticisms against the first book have been from Brian Martin ("*How Nonviolence is Misrepresented*") and Sherbu Kteer ("*Why pacifists aren't as bad as Peter Gelderloos says they are*"). Gelderloos has responded to Kteer on libcom.org, an online platform dedicated primarily to libertarian communism and where Kteer originally published the critique, however Gelderloos has not responded to Martin since the printing of his criticism. Some central concerns are the lack of sources for many of Gelderloos' claims and the lack of critical engagement with pacifists, especially radical pacifists.

[4] The works in reference are Gabriel Kuhn's review of *The Failure of Nonviolence* ("*Violence Sells... But Who's Buying?*") and Elizabeth Frazer's review ("*The diversity of tactics: Anarchism and political power*"). Gelderloos has written a response to Kuhn ("*Misrepresentations, but Substantial Differences as Well*"), and Kuhn has replied back addressing Gelderloos' concerns ("*Diversity of Tactics, and more*").

in certain points, and his discussion about pacifist figures and nonviolent movements are wholly misrepresentative. This is shown in how he talks about violence, important figures in pacifism, and empirical data that goes against his line of thought, where he demonstrates most plainly severe errors in the way he researches for this book. Along with his weaknesses, this paper will address certain concerns he finds critical for pacifism, demonstrating that pacifism is still worthy of consideration when talking about activism, that there are successes that can be attributed to nonviolence and that the theories behind it are coherent. All the page numbers cited from this point on will be from the version of *The Failure of Nonviolence* published on The Anarchist Library unless written otherwise.

Combined with a lack of critique, it is essential to critique Gelderloos' work as he is still highly influential within anarchism to this day when discussing nonviolence, even though the second edition of *How Nonviolence Protects The State* was published in 2007. Gelderloos in *The Failure of Nonviolence* cites his main arguments in the introduction as criticisms that pacifists have not yet addressed (pg. 7)[5], showing that he still stands by these arguments to this day.[6] It becomes an imperative for radicals who are interested in seeing nonviolence become a more common method of activism, then, to address these arguments levied by Gelderloos and to see whether pacifism and nonviolence still stand their ground. This paper is an attempt to levy a critical pacifist lens, rather than Kuhn's non-pacifist lens[7], on *The Failure of Nonviolence* and to determine whether there is a genuine concern brought to the discussion.

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[5] It is important to note that, as demonstrated before with Martin's critique, pacifists have addressed these concerns. Gelderloos does not seem to be aware of his critique, or if he is, then he is omitting Martin for no clear reason.
[6] He also still recommends people to read both books, particularly on the pinned tweet, originally posted in September 2022, of his Twitter account.
[7] As Kuhn explains in his essay on Gelderloos' response, he is also in favor of the same diversity of tactics approach that Gelderloos advocates for. The difference then comes how bad pacifists actually are, and how effective their methods actually are.

Violence as a Malleable Solid

In chapter one, *Violence Doesn't Exist*, Gelderloos makes the case that "violence" as a term is a useless one for analysis; it is loaded with moral qualities that were created and are ultimately in favor of the powerful. Thus, to use it within one's own analysis is to have "fallen into the trap" (pg. 15) to give credence to categories created by the powerful that are then used against the powerless.

First is the claim that violence does not have an agreed-upon, constant definition. Gelderloos first proposes that violence is a social construct; it is not a tangible object that one can grab and analyze, but rather is a concept made by humans that can differ in its application. His support for this comes from him asking people in workshops on nonviolence about what they understand as violence, which was done by giving them various situations like "a person killing someone trying to rape them," "carrying a gun in public," "paying your taxes," and "driving a car" (pg. 12). In his experience, what people described as violent depended on the groups they were in; for example, those who are in college don't see paying taxes as violent and advocates for small farmers and rainforest protection would see soy factory production as violent (pg. 13). Gelderloos also extends the question of what is violent to natural disasters, asking if it is violent if a predator eats prey or what "the relationship between this fear of violence and a fear of the naturalness and inevitability of harm and death" (pg. 13) implies for pacifism. After this, he then questions the validity of defining violence as "causing harm," asking if participating in involuntary systems that cause harm would count those participating as violent, as if it did then it

would "make a joke of nonviolence" (pg. 14) as it would present those passively acting in these systems as nonviolent compared to those trying to change it.[8] After all of this pondering, Gelderloos concludes that nonviolence, being unable to understand violence as an objective thing, is not really about being rid of violence; rather, it is "an attempt to resolve, transform, or suppress those things in our society and in our social movements that appear to its practitioners to be violent" (pg. 14). As Gelderloos claims, pacifists focus on eliminating obvious forms of violence such as dictatorships and open war, but downplay more subtle forms of violence like patriarchy or capitalism.

Gelderloos then concludes the discussion on defining violence as such:

> *Violence is so vague, so hard to define, it is useless as a strategic category. It would be silly to abolish it as a word, because it can succinctly describe a certain emotional reality. But to use it analytically, to use it as a guiding criterion for our strategies of struggle, is an invitation to confusion.*
>
> *It can take hours of debating and only sometimes will a group of people agree to a common definition of violence. But they have accomplished nothing, because some of them will still not be convinced whether "nonviolent" lines up with "good" and "violent" with "bad" as they are intended to. In other words, they still will not have learned anything about the proper methods for struggle. And more importantly, nearly everyone else in the world will still be using another definition.* (pg. 15)

[8] Although most pacifists are not advocates of nonresistance and make a distinction between violence and force, a criticism an advocate can make of this claim by Gelderloos is that to reduce nonresistance as making a joke of nonviolence downplays the natural conclusion of being against violence to then being against force in general, including forcing one's beliefs onto another. Adin Ballou in *Christian Non-resistance* gives arguments in favor of nonresistance from a Christian anarchist standpoint, although this predates Gelderloos.

After this exposition, Gelderloos then questions where this "category of 'violence'" (pg. 15) came from. To this, he answers that the media is the origin as it constantly restricts and limits the scope of movements, and being accused as "violent" is one of many added to the list. He connects this to moral panics of the 19th and 20th centuries to expose "violence" as a euphemism for fear from the ruling class of a movement that challenges them and their systems, ignoring their own violence. When activists started taking this euphemism seriously, the ruling class could then determine what movements were more suited towards their favor and thus "The category of violence belongs to them" (pg. 16).[9] Gelderloos, after leaving the definition of violence to the elite, thus absolves himself from the claim that he advocates for violence; instead, he sets his focus on a diversity of tactics broadly, and if necessary, "'illegal,' 'combative,' 'conflictive,' or 'forceful' actions" (pg. 17).

Before criticism is levied, one should acknowledge that the media does play an influential role in characterizing how movements function in the eyes of the general public. In fact, it is enough of a boilerplate point within radical spheres that the phrase "manufacturing consent" is as popular of a shorthand to refer to this phenomena as is the book that coined the phrase, *Manufacturing Consent* by Noam Chomsky. Pacifists certainly don't disagree either, as it is a common point that nonviolent movements can counter narratives that paint a negative image

[9] The overall analysis is comparable to the one given by Walter Benjamin in *Critique of Violence* ("*Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1*", p. 236). In this, Benjamin explains that natural law makes the assertion that a citizen of a state must give up always having a right to violence. With this, he then makes the case that the state through legal law is interested in protecting its monopoly over violence. This makes violence outside of the state a threat to its monopoly, and thus illegal; the creation of new laws ensures new protections for a new ruling class. This continues until it is broken by extra-state violence, or "pure immediate violence" and "divine violence" (pg. 252) as Benjamin calls it, then it brings about a new age of history. Through his exposition, Benjamin then makes the case for a general strike revolution. Jacques Derrida in *Force of Law* terms Benjamin's position in this article as "messianico-marxist or archeo-eschatological" ("*Deconstruction and The Possibility of Violence*", pg. 62) due to the similarities in his language about history and Marxism with standard Jewish or Christian messaging about the second coming or the end times ("*Notes on the Thought of Walter Benjamin: Critique of Violence*", Larson).

towards them in order to bring about more awareness and thus more support.[10] Omar Wasow (2020) also demonstrates when activists take advantage of the media, allowing them to "seed" certain opinions and influence how the news report movements, using the Civil Rights movement as an example. Where the conflict comes in then is whether "violence" as a term is useful for activists and theorists to use.

As one reads the first chapter, it may strike as peculiar the idea that violence is something that cannot be defined. In a sense, Gelderloos is right; to give a strict definition to "violence" that everyone follows is a futile effort. This analysis is not unique, since this is the case with any word with any human language. Cojocaru et al. (2012) demonstrates language's ability to shift and create perceived realities and thus the varied understanding of language in the context of organizations, using a methodology informed by social constructionism to see how members view their organization via metaphors and then to motivate those members. Even acknowledging this, then, should not affect our discussion of violence; even Gelderloos agrees with this when discussing the term "revolution" (pg. 19). As Kuhn explains in his essay,

> *When we say, for example, "Be careful when arguing with John, he can get violent", we pretty much all know what that means: if John doesn't like what we say, he*

[10] This recognition has gone through various stages. Richard Gregg first coined the phrase "moral jiu-jitsu" in the context of Gandhi and his activism to refer to when one stays nonviolent in the face of violence ("*The Power of Nonviolence*", pg. 43), making the attacker question whether the violence is justified and thus "causing the attacker to lose his moral balance" (pg. 44). Gene Sharp adapted this to outside the moral conflict, coining "political jiu-jitsu" to describe the same effect but in political and social realms, when violence against a group causes other groups to dissociate from the attackers out of disgust ("*The Politics of Nonviolent Action*", pg. 657); elsewhere this has been termed "the paradox of repression" ("*The Paradox of Repression and Nonviolent Movements*," Kurtz and Smithey). Brian Martin has since adapted both of these to a more general method for any movement, terming "the backfire dynamic" ("*Civil Resistance: Comparative Perspectives on Nonviolent Struggle*," Schock, pg. 152) for when victims refute the narratives of attackers after repression and the repression is made unsuccessful, thus giving potential for the repression to not only reflect negatively but to also make more people aware of the repression.

> *might smash our nose in. When we speak of a less violent society, we speak of an end to domestic abuse, gun killings, fist fights at the county fair, and so forth. I think we also have a pretty common understanding of what it means to have violent parents, a violent partner, to grow up in a violent neighborhood, or to fall victim to a violent crime.* ("*Violence Sells... But Who's Buying?*")

This is only a small concession, however; one can make a coherent argument without giving ground due to the fact that many coherent definitions have been given in defining violence, even in the context of activism. Joseph Llewellyn, an anarcho-pacifist, gives a Gandhian definition of violence as the restriction of human flourishing ("*Envisioning an Anarcho-Pacifist Peace*", pg. 28), which he compares to the definition of Johan Galtung, a peace theorist, as "avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs or, to put it in more general terms, the impairment of human life, which lowers the actual degree to which someone is able to meet their needs below that which would otherwise be possible" ("*Kulturelle Gewalt*", pg. 106)[11]. The World Health Organization also defines it as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation" ("*World Report on Violence and Health*", pg. 5). Erica Chenoweth, a social scientist that Gelderloos focuses on in a later chapter, defines it in *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know* as "an action or practice that physically harms or threatens to physically harm another person" (pg. 145) and in *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* they list examples of violent tactics like "bombings,

[11] This is as quoted in *Structural Violence as a Human Rights Violation* by Kathleen Ho, published in 2007.

shootings, kidnappings, physical sabotage such as the destruction of infrastructure[12], and other types of physical harm of people and property" (pg. 27). To give up the goal in reclaiming our ability to analyze the world and concede to the ruling class seems weak for an anarchist to do, ever so dedicated to reclaiming many parts of life that have been forgotten under hierarchy. The credit of the category of violence to the media also seems weak, as this would not explain why Leo Tolstoy was a staunch advocate for pacifism in late 19th century Russia, before the kind of media as covered in *Manufacturing Consent* would've been common.

One may mention that although we have given definitions that do work, they all do still differ in terms of where they come from; many definitions of violence come from a pragmatic nonviolent lens, while Llewellyn takes inspiration from Gandhi and the WHO define it in the context of public health. We have already conceded that the definitions of words, and thus of violence, can already vary from person to person. Would it, then, be arguing over an ant hill of differences on whether violence can be defined? In objection to this, one would understand better the issue of defining violence if we take definitions of words not as something to vary drastically from person to person, but rather to have variations around a base idea, not unlike malleable solids like gold or aluminum. Although the specific formulation of the definition and the ideological background of it can vary, we still can note a general sphere of ideas that take up violence, namely intentionality, harm, and barring others from experiencing a fuller life than one

[12] The classification of property damage as violence is a contested definition within radical pacifism, as it is not directly attacking a person. Chenoweth clarifies in *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know*, "When it is disciplined and discriminating, and sends a clear message, property destruction can be considered a nonviolent method of sabotage. But when it's undisciplined or indiscriminate, or sends an ambiguous message about whether its perpetrators intend to harm people, property destruction can be a gray area for many, even if it's not technically violent" (pg. 57).

would experience without this harm. This should be a reasonable base to build our understanding of violence, and thus nonviolence, on.

Gelderloos also implies that nonviolence can only work within a legal framework that is friendly to states, as indicated by replacing "violence" as a term with tactics that are illegal or forceful. What this ignores is that nonviolent resistance is quite often forceful, and even illegal at certain points. Barbara Deming, a radical pacifist and feminist, says "To refuse one's cooperation is to exert force. One can, in fact, exert so very much force in this way that many people will always be quick to call noncooperation violent" ("*On Revolution and Equilibrium*"). As Chenoweth further explains:

> *...[nonviolent] resistance is deliberately disobedient, acting outside of existing institutions, laws, and larger systems that have become widely viewed as unjust or illegitimate. Civil resistance often works to openly challenge, contest, undermine, subvert, divide, or replace such institutions. Voting, holding campaign rallies, writing and collecting petitions, lobbying, calling one's member of Congress, and organizing legal advocacy campaigns are typically not considered civil resistance—since all of these actions occur within the system.* ("*Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs To Know*", pg. 3)

We encounter more linguistic issues with the fact that after the dispense of "violence" as a term, Gelderloos still uses the word "nonviolence" to refer to the body of work dedicated to it.

By still referring to it as a strategy, method of activism, or form of analysis (in the form of pacifism), he still operates under the same violence/nonviolence binary he claims to reject.[13] Nonviolence implies having an understanding of what it is against by virtue of the "non-" prefix, namely violence, and an understanding of the attention that violence and nonviolence have gained over time. Otherwise, what is Gelderloos writing about? In fact, one of the chapters in this book is titled *How the peaceful can benefit from violence* (pg. 172); in it, Gelderloos explains that "Even those who believe they do not like violence benefit from the more dynamic space that is created when a diversity of tactics is at play" (pg. 172).

Another important point is that "diversity of tactics" does not really point to anything concrete. Every sensible activist would agree that sticking specifically to one tactic is a death wish; nonviolent activists agree as well, but they only differ in wanting to use nonviolent tactics. As Kuhn explains:

> *Unless a movement is really exclusively nonviolent (are there that many?), the nonviolent tactics are a part of the puzzle of a diversity of tactics, and the relevant question would then be which role they play in this patchwork and how they relate to other tactics…. But to state that a "diversity of tactics" works better than the dogmatic use of one particular tactic is a bit of a no-brainer and puts us back to square one: Which*

[13] Although not of focus, it is important to note that Gelderloos claims that pacifists see nonviolence and violence as black and white, as two distinct categories. This is a mischaracterization of the pacifist position; pacifists recognize the distinction as something more comparable to a bimodal system where there are varying degrees of each. Nonviolent activists have historically also given leeway to those who used violence in defense, like when the leader of the Congress for Racial Equality James Farmer said he didn't have a moral objection to people calling for the Deacons of Defense during the Civil Rights movement ("*Did civil rights need Deacons for Defense?*", Lakey). People like Farmer would say their violence didn't compare to the violence of the attackers, leading to a further muddying of the supposed binary.

> *tactics – or which combinations of tactics – are the most effective in a specific historical situation?* ("*Violence Sells... But Who's Buying?*")

It seems that he is avoiding using the term "violence" not as a product of deep analysis, but rather to avoid the negative connotations of "violence" or "advocating for violence." Gelderloos recognizes such connotations when he dedicates most of the text to the negative connotations of the term and how the media takes advantage of it. "Diversity of tactics" then could provide an avenue for Gelderloos to avoid this problem of perception, as it dispenses with the negative connotations; it appears more neutral, more professional, and more ambiguous, thus it allows Gelderloos to avoid saying that he advocates for violence. The discussion that Gelderloos has about nonviolence, however, betrays this hidden goal. Throughout this book and the last book, Gelderloos argues against nonviolence as a method and implies if not outright exclaiming that violence is a necessary condition in order to overthrow the state. It is as if although Gelderloos has painted his gold gray, the makeup of the actual solid is still gold; although he holds to a "diversity of tactics" to open up avenues for activism, his arguments still point to the direction of advocating for violence primarily, if not only.

Engaging With The Opposition

A criticism of the last book, as given by Sherbu Kteer ("*Why pacifists aren't as bad as Peter Gelderloos says they are*", pg. 3), is that Gelderloos had not sufficiently engaged with pacifist literature; this allegedly led him down to making strawmen of pacifism that would not have been made otherwise. In this book, Gelderloos aims to meet this standard by engaging with "those individuals who have been most influential, either on a world scale or domestically, in spreading the exclusive insistence on nonviolent tactics, or in providing a functioning example of nonviolent action" (pg. 101). He also focuses specifically on Gene Sharp and Erica Chenoweth, the latter of which this paper touches on in the next section. Before one engages with specific criticisms of any list of pacifist figures, one should take a look at the list that the critic has created, of which Gelderloos' table of contents provides. The first target of chapter 8 is Gene Sharp. This is understandable, since excluding someone like Gandhi or MLK, he is the most influential theorist of nonviolence to date; if one wanted to go to school to study movements and organizing, Sharp would almost inevitably be mentioned. However, with the US military as the next example of pacifism, Gelderloos soon demonstrates a lack of familiarity with pacifist literature simply by what he showcases as influential pacifists.[14]

One would hope that Gelderloos picked theorists or activists like A.J. Muste, David Dellinger, Barbara Deming, Brian Martin, or Bill Sutherland; instead, many of these are either influential for other reasons or are just simply not pacifist in the case of the US military. In fact, in the first footnote for chapter 8, he mentions there are those "who deserve mention, such as George Lakey, Helen Woodson, or Roy Bourgeois" (pg. 101), but he doesn't want to give an

[14] Although the others mentioned by Gelderloos aren't discussed in this paper, some choice names that are listed are George Soros, the Dalai Lama, and "movement musicians" (pg. 116).

exhaustive list. A hint of a better reason why Gelderloos does not list these people can be gleaned from his description of pacifists in the introduction:

> *Most proponents of nonviolence have been smarter, and they have avoided any level playing field. They have not chosen the terrain of the movement itself, because collective experiences repeatedly prove them wrong. Instead they have turned towards the elite and gotten support from the system itself. Mainstream, forprofit (sic) publishing companies print out their books by the millions, in a stream of titles that increases as combative social movements gain more ground. Mainstream, for-profit media give nonviolent activists interviews while they demonize the so-called violent ones. University professors and NGO employees living off of grants from the government or wealthy donors…, also tend to weigh in on the side of nonviolence, bringing a hefty array of institutional resources along with them.* (pg. 9)

Consider Woodson, who was arrested with three other activists in 1984 for damaging the concrete lid over a silo made for Operation Plowshare as an act against nuclear weapons for the Silo Pruning Hooks.[15] Consider Lakey, who not only is a veteran of the Civil Rights movement, but also was a founding member of Movement for a New Society[16] which went on to become a supremely influential organization for the New Left.[17] An important thing to note as well is that

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[15] "In November of 1984, Helen was part of the Silo Pruning Hooks action. She went to a Missouri nuclear missile silo along with Larry Cloud-Morgan, Fr. Carl Kabat OMI and Fr. Paul Kabat OMI. With sledgehammer and jackhammer, the group followed the biblical mandate of Isaiah to turn swords into plowshares. They were convicted and received a varied number of years of prison time for their action. With the exception of a few days, Helen has been in prison ever since.... She is scheduled to be released in September of 2011 after 27 years behind bars." ("*Plowshares Prisoner Helen Woodson to be released*")

[16] Andrew Cornell's *Oppose and Propose: Lessons from Movement for a New Society* gives a comprehensive history of the organization, along with a discussion on what movements can learn from it.

[17] Although I do not touch on Roy Bourgeois, as he was the founder of School of America Watch, an organization that Gelderloos holds much dismay for based off of how often he cites his experiences from it in *How Nonviolence Protects The State*, it is important to note that Bourgeois had been excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church for ordaining a woman priest ("*Defiant Fr Roy Bourgeois Dismissed from Maryknolls. Soon from the Priesthood?*") and still advocates for gender equality in the Roman Catholic Church.

none of the people mentioned in the footnote are NGO employees or university professors, published by mainstream publishers, or platformed by mainstream news networks; these are bonafide activists that have continued advocating for nonviolence since the late 20th century. Another is that these three "have faced grave consequences for their commitment to nonviolence" (pg. 101) and have seen little recognition from broader society. In short, these are radical pacifists. This is in comparison to people like Gene Sharp or Mark Kurlansky, who are a general nonviolent advocate and a liberal pacifist[18] respectively. What Gelderloos has done is actively exclude radical pacifists from his analysis, and instead focus on the most obvious targets or those that he personally dislikes.

From this, it would almost feel like a betrayal to critical analysis and activism to engage with the list; why would someone entertain another's interpretation of the most influential pacifists if those listed are among the most peculiar people to consider influential?[19] Radical pacifists would be activists most affected by Gelderloos' criticism; their attacks of capitalism from a nonviolent lens would give Gelderloos enough literature to build a critique of pacifism from an activist perspective. Thus, it is an utter weakness to instead focus on pacifists who are not focused on overturning capitalism. Despite these concerns, this paper will focus on the section on "the Old School" and Gene Sharp, along with chapters 4 and 5 where Sharp and his theories are also discussed.

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[18] A liberal pacifist is a pacifist who is focused on comparatively reformist goals like regime change or ending civil wars; a radical pacifist in contrast is a pacifist who is focused on overturning socio-political structures ("*Revolutionary Nonviolence: Concepts, Cases and Controversies*", pg. 17)..

[19] Another issue comes in Kurlansky's section where Gelderloos spends 9 pages (pgs. 121-130) discussing native Americans, Nazi Germany, and the fall of the USSR and their relationships to nonviolence without citing any source apart from quotes from Kurlansky's book. It would be a pleasure to engage more deeply in this discussion, a necessary one at that, but Gelderloos' confidence in asserting the claims themselves to prove them prevents this discussion from taking place.

The section on "the Old School," the term given by Gelderloos to Christian pacifists, is the shortest line of criticism and thus will be approached first. Gelderloos attacks them on the basis that their direct action is "no more than charity reproducing preexisting power inequalities" and that they largely "have ended up as the reclusive, eccentric, and embarrassing uncle of the non-violence family," abandoned by the larger movement because they "suffer from a longstanding lack of strategy" (pg. 132). One would be inclined to treat this section as largely an oddity, as Gelderloos had previously considered these movements in a positive light. Even calling the Catholic Worker communities and Tolstoyan communities both anarchist successes, they were presented as examples that humans aren't naturally warlike in *Anarchy Works!* (pg. 23). Gelderloos goes even further to discuss how each of these communities protested their respective states, implying that their strategy was more fleshed out than he says in *The Failure of Nonviolence*.

Going into chapter 4 and thus his thoughts on Gene Sharp, one should note that Gelderloos runs through the hidden assumption that nonviolence relies on changing minds; this is explicitly mentioned in *How Nonviolence Protects The State* when he says "Nonviolence focuses on changing hearts and minds…" (pg. 59) and in this book when he says "The primary flaw in a majority of nonviolent discourses is to view revolution as a morality play" (pg. 20). However, it also relies on the assumption that it requires to specifically change the mind of the media and the ruling class. Speaking of the Color Revolutions, Gelderloos says:

> *In every single Color Revolution, the movement had a large portion of the domestic elite on their side from the beginning. This includes rich people, the owners of the mass media, opposition political parties, academics, religious authorities, and so on.*

No military organization in the world is going to open fire on protesters who are supported by the country's business elite. (pg. 64)

By attributing this to Sharp's strategies and saying "the unwritten part of Gene Sharp's method—reliance on businessmen, international media, and powerful governments—is the only thing causing an impact" (pg. 69), Gelderloos makes the primary mistake of understanding nonviolence, particularly from Gene Sharp. In fact, in *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, this result of nonviolence, what Sharp calls conversion, is "the least likely" and "in most conflicts this does not occur at all or at least not on a significant scale" ("*From Dictatorship to Democracy*", pg. 35).[20] Sharp has also warned against taking money from government apparatuses like the CIA, saying it could make a movement dependent on a source of income that could suddenly withdraw at any point ("*Did Gene Sharp work for the CIA? Correcting the Conspiracies.*").[21] Why would someone whose strategy secretly relied on gaining sympathy from the elite constantly advocate against relying on funds from governments and say that conversion is the least likely outcome of a nonviolent movement? It doesn't help that many claims made about the Color Revolutions by Gelderloos are left uncited, leaving the room for further discussion closed without any base to go off of.

A strange comment is made by Gelderloos regarding the overthrow of president Joseph Estrada, leading into a discussion about the democratic qualities of nonviolence:

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[20] Goerge Lakey also recounts in *The Black Panthers' 'militarist error'* how after the race riots of the 60s, the Civil Rights movement was divided and "The power-holders no longer needed to make significant concessions…. The interest in armed self-defense and the flirtation with violence, beyond dividing the movement, went nowhere."

[21] Although a source is given to a general article defending Sharp, the specific comments made by Sharp was in a talk with Frontline Club in 2012 about *How to Start a Revolution*, a documentary dedicated to his work.

> *To its credit, this method did lead to people in the Philippines overthrowing another unpopular government in 2001, though this lack of respect for democratic process that the use of disruptive mass protest evidently inculcates should be most embarrassing to Mr. Sharp, who holds democratic government as the highest good. When Filipinos used the methods of the Yellow Revolution to oust then-President Joseph Estrada…, many international and domestic critics regarded the 2001 movement as a form of "mob rule" and alleged a conspiracy among top politicians, business leaders, and military and church officials.*
>
> *With regards to nonviolent methodology, several questions arise that must be dealt with: if nonviolent regime change is best suited to achieving democracy, how can it be that the same method also tramples basic democratic principles like due process? If it is democratic to oust fraudulently elected dictators using mass protests and obstruction, but a "de facto coup" to oust an unpopular, corrupt but elected and impeachable president using those same methods, what is the line between dictatorship and democracy?... The answer to all of these questions is in fact simple, but not within the framework of Gene Sharp….* (pg. 62)

This leads to more misunderstandings regarding the content and purpose of Sharp's theories. Similar misunderstandings are presented in chapter 8, when Gelderloos says that *From Dictatorship to Democracy* has "no critique of political parties" or "no criticism of capitalism" (pg. 103). The book is not meant to be a political thesis, dedicated to answering questions about the worth of democracy and why nonviolent movements are and should be democratic; Sharp had largely avoided giving a distinct political body to his nonviolent strategy. As Ruaridh Arrow,

director of *How to Start a Revolution* which was dedicated to Sharp, explains, “It's perfectly possible to use Sharp's work to fight for a communist utopia or an Islamic fundamentalist state if you so wished. There *is* an assumption that democracy is a good thing - that's not neo-liberal, it's just liberal... and democratic.” He elaborates:

> *Sharp is not prescriptive about the type of government which might come after a successful nonviolent resistance campaign. What he does say is that there must be a ‘vision of tomorrow’ but it's for the people to decide what form that government takes. If he had been prescriptive about the type of government the books would not be nearly as successful across different states, religions and cultures as it has been. The form of government Muslim activists in Sudan might seek is likely to be radically different from those in Ukraine. The idea that Sharp would be able to prescribe an ideal form of government for an array of countries and cultures or one single form that could fit all is ridiculous. The people decide.* (“*Did Gene Sharp work for the CIA? Correcting the Conspiracies.*”)

Relating again to accusations on the character of Sharp, Gelderloos goes on to claim that Sharp was funded by the government. He refers to Stephen Zunes’ article in Huffington Post in defense of Sharp, claiming that “Buried in a single paragraph in the middle of his 42-paragraph article” (pg. 64) he admits that the Albert Einstein Institute, an organization dedicated to nonviolence founded by Sharp, was funded by partisan NGOs and that Sharp was funded by the Defense Department. Gelderloos concludes that “these allegations are not so false after all” (pg. 64). This is a misrepresentation of what Zunes actually said in the article; to quote from the relevant paragraph,

> *Well prior to the Bush administration coming to office, AEI received a couple of small grants from the congressionally funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) to translate some of Gene Sharp's theoretical writings. Nearly forty years ago (and fifteen years prior to AEI's founding), Sharp received partial research funding for his doctoral dissertation from Harvard Professor Thomas Schelling, who had received support from the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the US Department of Defense to fund doctoral students.* ("*Attacks on Gene Sharp and Albert Einstein Institution Unwarranted*")

This indicates that the connections of Sharp to the government are tenuous at best; they are largely small funding initiatives that could not reasonably link someone conclusively to the government. Arrow further elaborates:

> *...his work in the 60's 70's and 80's* (sic) *wasn't focused on democracy groups bringing down dictators - which is the focus today - but on preventing a nuclear war. Sharp believed that by training ordinary people to nonviolently resist an occupation as the Norwegians had in Norway during WW2, they could make the costs of a Russian occupation of Western Europe so difficult that it would act as a deterrent to invasion equal to that of mutually assured destruction. He realised that simply protesting for peace was weak and unlikely to produce change so he actively pursued contact with the most influential figures in the defense establishment both in the UK and the US. His aim was to have nonviolent resistance written into official defense policy by governments believing that was the best way to avoid nuclear war. He wanted to replace violent weapons with*

nonviolent defense where possible. ("*Did Gene Sharp work for the CIA? Correcting the Conspiracies.*")

Gelderloos goes on to criticize Sharp's proposition of civilian-based defense to avoid requiring a strong military, only commenting that "nonviolence is a complement to the military, not a replacement" (pg. 103). This shows yet again a lack of engagement with Sharp's work (in this case, not going further with analyzing Sharp's *Civilian-Based Defense: A Post-Military Defense System*), an interpretation of decades of work that can only be interacted with if one completely accepts Gelderloos' grounds. If Gelderloos had wished to engage with a pacifist that did criticize centralization and capitalism or engage with social defense as a replacement for the military, then it would seem ridiculous to not engage with Brian Martin's anarcho-pacifist literature, who has put a portion of his writing to social defense, including a dedicated chapter in *Uprooting War* (pg. 21).

Criteria and Histories

Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan are two social scientists most famous for their studies on nonviolence and its effects on the success of movements. They became known through a paper and book by the same name, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, which showed that nonviolent movements succeeded twice as often as violent movements in goals including regime change and national liberation (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2008/2011). If accurate, this means disastrous consequences for Gelderloos' main assumption that nonviolence is ineffective in activism, in fact showing that *violence* was significantly more ineffective. Understandably then,

Gelderloos addresses Chenoweth's work in chapter 3, *The Revolutions of Today* (pg. 24)[22], along with creating an analysis of post-Cold War movements and whether they succeeded (pg. 29).

The criticism of Chenoweth starts with what determines the success of a movement. Gelderloos claims that they don't use "revolutionary criteria" (pg. 25) to determine success, instead counting reformist movements like the Color Revolutions as successes. This presents itself as if claiming this is an issue makes it an issue; Gelderloos has failed to establish why "revolutionary criteria" is necessary for understanding whether a movement is successful or not. [23]Along with this, Gelderloos claims that they do not define violence or give an original study of each of the movements they reference. He recounts how "after extensive searching I was unable to find [original narratives of the movements used by Chenoweth]" (pg. 25).

This is where the reader might realize that instead of referencing the book, published 2 years before *The Failure of Nonviolence*, Gelderloos has been referring to the paper, instead printed 5 years before *The Failure of Nonviolence*. This is strange for a book 6 years in the making to do, since he otherwise references in footnotes events that have happened in 2012 (pg. 6), just a year before the publication of this book. This becomes even more concerning as the 2011 book from Chenoweth addresses the exact concerns brought up by Gelderloos, in page 27[24]

[22] Gelderloos says that Chenoweth's study is the only empirical study to look at the efficacy of nonviolent movements; an important correction is that two other studies, one by William Gamson ("*The Strategy of Social Protest*", 1975) and one by Freedom House ("*How Freedom is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy*", 2005), have done smaller scale analyses and support Chenoweth's claim that nonviolence is more effective, as noted by Martin in his review of *How Nonviolence Protects The State* ("*How Nonviolence is Misrepresented*", pg. 245).

[23] A similar issue happens when Gelderloos claims that their dataset is too biased towards successful nonviolent movements (pg. 26), failing to demonstrate the validity of this claim.

[24] Their definition is brought up in the first section of this paper on page 9.

and in an online appendix respectively. The reason for referring to the paper, other than Gelderloos perhaps just not being aware of the book's existence, is not discernable.[25]

He then goes on to say that because he disagrees with experts on classifying movements like the Civil Rights movement or the Indian independence movement as nonviolent rather than utilizing a diversity of tactics, then "we can only assume that many of successful nonviolent campaigns on the list included armed and combative elements" (pg. 25). This represents a flaw that Martin wrote about in his review of the last book from Gelderloos on nonviolence ("*How Nonviolence is Misrepresented*", pg. 242); Gelderloos criticizes attributing the success of a varied movement to nonviolence, but then goes on to attribute the success to violence. If a movement was truly a diversity of tactics, why would one not avoid giving the credit of the entire movement to either side? It also represents Gelderloos' ability again to assert claims as if stating them makes them true; he has not actually given proof to show that most of the movements listed as nonviolent successes were really those who used a diversity of tactics.

Gelderloos then claims that Chenoweth contradicts their own research, saying "she commits the most basic error in statistics, confusing correlation with causation, to say that '*an armed wing can reduce popular participation* [her emphasis]' even though her own data do not support this assertion." He cites the article *Armed Wing in Syria: To What Effect?* to support his claim, but reading the article shows he gave a disingenuous reading of it. The relevant excerpt in question is this:

[25] The explanation that Gelderloos wasn't aware of the book doesn't hold up still, as in a 2020 restatement of the criticisms of Chenoweth (*"Debunking the myths around nonviolent resistance*"), Gelderloos still does not mention the existence of the book, 9 years after it was published in 2011.

> *In sum, having an armed wing is risky, but not necessarily decisive. The armed wing won't help the nonviolent movement in Syria. However,* ***as long as the movement remains mainly nonviolent in nature*** (their emphasis)*, the campaign may succeed regardless.* ("*Armed Wing in Syria: To What Effect?*")

Chenoweth in this excerpt does not say that an armed wing *can't* affect participation, but rather that as long as it does not make up a *majority* of the movement then it will not affect it.

After critiquing them, Gelderloos sets out to create his own analysis in the style of Chenoweth. Gelderloos wants to compare radical movements "with clear criteria and without double standards" (pg. 55) while moving past the usual, supposedly flawed, criteria of success (that is, did the movement achieve their goals?)[26]. Gelderloos gives four criteria:

1. "whether a movement succeeds in seizing space in which new relations can be put in practice" (pg. 28). Gelderloos clarifies that "new relations" refers to processes like common ownership, non-hierarchical decision-making, et cetera.
2. "to what extent a movement spreads awareness of its ideas" (pg. 28). Gelderloos clarifies that the information must be expressed as something worth fighting for, rather than as passive information.
3. "whether a movement has elite support" (pg. 28). Gelderloos is concerned with recuperation of radical movements into reformist actions, something that he claims is more common in nonviolent movements (pg. 22). He also says this can demonstrate whether the state wants us to be violent or nonviolent.

[26] Gelderloos does not elaborate much on why the criteria used by Chenoweth is flawed, apart from it not being revolutionary (a point that Gelderloos does not elaborate on either) or that "nobody has won, except for those who continue to rule us" (pg. 27).

4. “did a movement achieve any concrete gains that improve people’s lives” (pg. 28). He excludes reformist gains like transitioning into democracy as “this is a redundant victory that can only matter to those who have allowed themselves to believe that democratic government is somehow analogous to freedom or a better life” (pg. 28).

Using this criteria, Gelderloos goes on to analyze 30 movements from the 1990s to the 2010s, determining whether they were violent or nonviolent, and where they lie on the list offered by Gelderloos. He comes to the conclusion that nonviolent movements “have not succeeded in redistributing power in any meaningful way, or putting revolutionary social relations into practice, despite claiming victory numerous times” (pg. 56), and that “a diversity of tactics have been the most effective at seizing space and putting new social relations into practice” (pg. 56).

The first issue with this section comes from the criteria. Criteria like number 4 are hard to actually properly quantify (what does it mean to improve someone’s life?), and other criteria would be impossible to determine without first-hand experience in each of the movements, a credential Gelderloos cannot possibly have. The declaration that democratic reform doesn’t count as an improvement with regard to criteria 4, even going so far as to say “The line between democracy and dictatorship is fictitious” (pg. 65), is a ridiculous statement as well. Robert Dahl, a political scientist who has written extensively about democracy, has described many benefits of democratic governments, including greater personal freedom and no war among democracies (“*On Democracy*”, pg. 44). Baliga et al (2009) and Oneal and Russett (1999) confirm Dahl’s claim that democracy causes less war. Writing in the context of African politics, *Democracy*

Works: Re-Wiring Politics to Africa's Advantage demonstrates that democracies provide greater economic benefit and have a self-correcting mechanism (pg. 17), citing the transition away from Jacob Zuma in South Africa as an example for the latter claim. It has also been proven that democratic institutions help the environment (Winslow, 2005) and benefit public health (Safaei, 2006). The difference between democracy and dictatorship isn't simply "primarily one of formalism and ritual" (pg. 65); there are real, distinct benefits just from even a state being democratic, which gives hope for anarchism to adopt democratic institutions without a state.

Another issue, perhaps more damning, is that throughout the 30 movements he analyzes and the 26 pages (pgs. 29-55) he dedicates to this analysis, he has only seven sources, all of them being quotes. This leaves a clear vulnerability in the potential of his understanding of movements to be refuted. For example, he claims that the Zapatistas, an existing indigenous army in Chiapas, Mexico that was founded in 1994 as a reaction to NAFTA, utilizes a diversity of tactics (pg. 30), however Evans (2009) explains that they have been largely nonviolent, and subcomandante Marcos, the public face of the Zapatistas, has said the Zapatistas have been explicitly nonviolent since 2006 ("*Zapatistas' Marcos quits armed struggle for peaceful campaign*", Tuckman, 2006). Graeber also writes in *Direct Action: An Ethnography* from 2008 that "it's something of an open secret that, for the last five years at least, [the Zapatistas] have not even been carrying real guns" (pg. 184).

Gelderloos also claims that the 15-M movement failed after riots broke out in 2012 because pacifists had launched a campaign against activists who participated in riots (pg. 49) without a source to support this claim, however Muñoz and Anduiza (2019) focus on a riot that

happened within the 15-M movement in 2016, showing that the riot reduced popular support for the movement significantly without the need of pacifists criminalizing the rioters. Another study, Simpson et al (2018), confirmed that violent protest reduces popular support of a movement, using the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville and the anti-fascist response as a case study instead.

Because of a severe lack of sources to discuss movements, this paper cannot say more on any of the movements mentioned by Gelderloos, despite the desire to engage more deeply in the conversation. Gelderloos would make his arguments significantly stronger by sourcing his claims, thus providing a basis in which people can discuss his interpretations of various subjects.

Activist Sources?

A common theme this paper has touched on is the lack of sources used. This criticism that is levied throughout this paper was also given to Gelderloos' first book, primarily by Kteer. Although Gelderloos has seemed to recognize this, it is only to the extent that his historical references relied on too few references to violent movements:

> *Another error in* [*How Nonviolence Protects The State*] *I want to point out is a shortcoming in the range of historical references. Reflecting a weakness in a large part of the anarchist movement at the time—both in which books anarchist publishers chose to print and which stories the rest of us chose to get excited about—in talking about certain struggles I centered the focus on romanticized armed groups that saw themselves as the vanguard.* (pg. 182)

In response to Kteer, Gelderloos makes this comment regarding his historiography in *How Nonviolence Protects The State*:

> *The arguments I express in the book are based on countless debates, arguments, and conversations. If in S-k's mind this makes me a bad historian, I quite frankly shit on their elitist concept of historiography.* (comment on *Why pacifists aren't as bad as Peter Gelderloos says they are* from libcom.org)

As a defense of Gelderloos, one might say that the lack of sources is not indicative of a lack of research, but rather demonstrates that Gelderloos relies on sources that cannot be neatly listed. Although reading large written works is a primary source for anarchist theory, mediums like videos on YouTube, essays published online, and audiobooks are also widely common, especially today. This also should include discussions and lessons from activism that one learns from, as Gelderloos points out in the comment above, which might be termed overall anarchist oral traditions[27]. In fact, there are whole works dedicated to this kind of discussion between activists; collections like the Oral History of the American Left Collection in the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University have an abundance of anarchist oral history, and *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America* is a book dedicated to the subject. It would not be improper, then, to assume that Gelderloos has done just as he said; he has learned of these movements and of the ramifications of nonviolence through his discussions with other activists like him.

[27] This label might, admittedly, be the wrong one to use; although it would be an interesting subject, this paper must diverge away from what to term the discussion of movements that is separated from the written word.

Although a convincing proposition, this falls flat. The problem is that there is not simply an engagement with nonviolence; Gelderloos regularly makes wide claims about pacifism, including a dive into what he considers to be pacifist literature and Chenoweth's peer-reviewed study, and has an analysis of over 30 movements of which he makes no mention of talking to other activists for most of these. Considering Gelderloos was born around the start of the 1980s and many of these movements are in different countries, it is unlikely that he was involved to a major degree with more than half of the movements mentioned. Because of this, there is an imperative for accurate and credible sources about the history of each movement and the description of pacifism. By engaging with scholars like Sharp and Chenoweth, there is even more of this pressure to give credible sources.

One must then assume that the best solution to this is that if he did not cite credible sources or learn from discussions with activists from respective movements, he is engaged with activism in America and has learned from these experiences on the outcomes of pacifism. But even within his own books, his history of activism seems lacking. The most that is mentioned is the School of America Watch in *How Nonviolence Protects The State*, an organization that Gelderloos spends a good portion of the book critiquing. Other than that, in both books, we mostly see references to nonspecific protests he was a part of and workshops that he taught. How should we trust the word of Gelderloos when by his own recount he does not seem experienced in activism?

Conclusion

When civil war broke out in Spain during World War II, a collection of trade unions and popular militias teamed up to defend against Franco and the front of Spanish fascism using violence. Early on, they had shown impressive anarchist victories; they had a successful defense of Madrid in 1936 and places like Aragon and Catalonia provided the grounds for creating anarchist institutions, thus leading to the most cohesive attempt at an anarchist society in history. This, however, then came to a saddening end; they were eliminated by the communists in Spain in 1937, and the communists themselves were defeated by Franco. Combined with the hesitancy of siding with either the Allies or the Axis powers later on in World War II, anarchists soon started questioning the efficacy and legitimacy of violent struggle and war, leading to a radical exposition of the anti-war position. This would give breeding grounds to the first notable formulations of anarcho-pacifism.[28]

From this starting point, authors like Bart de Ligt, who wrote *The Conquest of Violence*, would give anarcho-pacifism some of its most notable works. Decades of literature on radical pacifism would soon flourish through many ideological variances, from secular individualist anarchism to Christian and/or communist anarchism. It is a shame, then, that Gelderloos does not engage with this body of work at all. He doesn't have an excuse for it either, as many sources documenting radical pacifism have been up for years before and after the publishing of these two books. It seems that instead of directly engaging with pacifists that would be in a similar line of thought with Gelderloos, Gelderloos has focused on criticizing those he personally dislikes and then applying that to all of pacifism. The pacifists that he has engaged with only serve as a medium to show how unfamiliar he is with the arguments, thus being unfit to properly critique it.

[28] This narrative is borrowed from Benjamin Pauli's *Pacifism, Nonviolence, and the Reinvention of Anarchist Tactics in the Twentieth Century* (pg. 62-64).

Pacifism has a large body of research to support itself; apart from Sharp and Chenoweth, authors like Joseph Llewellyn, Brian Martin, and Michael Beer[29] have been extensively advancing nonviolent research, and organizations like the War Resisters League have been keeping the radical pacifist spirit alive with documenting much of radical anti-war activism. The research shows consistently that nonviolent resistance is the most effective and justifiable form of activism, theoretically and empirically, and there have been plenty of books that teach activists how to do nonviolent activism. Because Gelderloos has not effectively addressed the claims of pacifism, it means that this conclusion is left untouched.

[29] Michael Beer is the author of *Civil Resistance Tactics in the 21st Century*, a monograph updating Gene Sharp's original classification of nonviolent tactics.

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