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Towards a Transformative Anti-Fascism

The Relevance of Radicalized Peacebuilding to Antifa
Praxis

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this work and grow with greater insight through each round of theory and practice. Honest praxis, determined and gritty resistance, and transformative tactics can continue to feed our antifa efficacy's.

A big thanks to Andrew Conway who takes time from his retirement vacation along the canals of Britain to edit my screeds. Emma Buck I appreciate your critical and guiding feedback tremendously. Also thanks to my interviewees, those who helped me network, and those who engage regularly with me in these and other important conversations! Cover photo comes from a "Strike!" magazine article about the Clapton Ultras.

Note: I refer to nazism and fascism with lower case letters as a sign of disrespect and antifa (anti-fascist) with lower case as a sign of decentralization, as in there is no one 'Way of the Antifa'.

Context

Shortly after getting into a car accident recently I looked up and saw a youngish white male with a giant swastika and nazi eagle with the bold letters "skinhead" beneath it¹ across the entire back window and trunk of his car. There was no crypto-fascism. This was broad daylight. I tried to take a picture but failed. I tried to memorize the license plate in lieu of a picture but my brain mixed the numbers and letters up in my head. I wanted to throw a brick through the window or at least flick them off but I felt helpless as they drove by knowing that I'm an unarmed individual with little strike capacity and he's an armed member of a militant network.

The thing about this is, the (racist) skinheads are basically just a fascist, nazi street gang but, never in my life, despite hav-

¹There are also incredible antifa and anti-racist skinheads such as SHARP and RASH although I still think the phrase "Redskins" referring to (non-native) anti-racist leftist (red) skinheads is atrocious even if it's lineage is European. Many argue that skinheads was first an anti-racist phrase before it was white supremacist. In these antifa communities racist skinheads are called Baldies. A great documentary with a look at this in the French punk context is here.

ing lived in lots of areas with prominent gang control, have I ever seen a giant “MS 13” or whatever logo covering the entire window of a car. I’ve seen countless gang tattoos of various different race or neighborhood gangs. I’ve seen skinhead tattoos as well. But I’ve never seen such a large advertisement out *standing alone*, the proclaimers without their backup, in the streets. A tattoo can be covered up. This is somebody’s vehicle. It had a license plate. You could wear a long sleeve shirt to cover a gang tattoo but you can’t just cover your whole back window. This shows how brazen of an act this is. This shows that he feels untouchable by the police, civilians, or other gangs. This is just the small visible mushroom popping up above a dense mycelial network of underground roots. One wouldn’t necessarily fly a different gang’s advertisement on a car like that because it draws too much attention and risk from police, rival gang members, etc. Then in many other places, you wouldn’t fly that nazi shit because you know you’ll just get killed. It takes a learned confidence to be that blatant of a shitlord. He feels safe. He has safe spaces.

Fascism and the broader far-right are ideological movements with differing beliefs in tactics but a generally conservative, xenophobic, authoritarian, nationalist, and violent epistemology and set of goals. We must counter the belief that far-right and fascist white terrorism is a “small problem” that we can just ignore or relegate to a minor clean-up duty that we can keep in the back of our minds as we pursue more important tasks. The U.S. has a far-right problem even beyond the systematic and sometimes obscured violence against black and brown folks. Lately you can see more and more outlets for them in the United States currently as they get more and more emboldened, likely as a result of Trump’s presidential candidate. Trump’s just the singing tea-kettle of the boiling pressure and networks beneath and he’s close to having one of the biggest platforms for violence in the U.S. This is how it started in nazi Germany and fascist Italy and many have pondered the question of how

even heard the term antifa which certainly isn’t a crime but raises an eyebrow. Such is their right but at the same time, we need to constantly stake and re-stake our territory while at the same time keeping it as inclusive and welcoming as possible, especially to people that feel consistently alienated by certain white, straight, cis, middle-to-upper class, colonizer, or masculine left communities. If we’re alienating the communities that we claim to fight for, then what the fuck are we even doing?

CONCLUSION

To not integrate a wide variety of immediate and more transformative long-term strategies in anti-fascist work is to actually support fascism in an approach that says, “I’d rather fight fascism forever than try to end it.” This being said, not everyone has access to the type of time and energy it takes to do the long-game work beyond just street level repression of fascist normalization. We have such a plethora of tactical diversity at our disposal, so while I do not suggest stopping street protests, I do suggest that we practice a radical creativity and empathy that allows us to create real-world solutions to our problems. It’s a kind of rudimentary consequentialist logic, or even Bayesian rationality, I’m following that says we need to also check the impact of our actions and deeply integrate that new information honestly into our paradigm if we hope to be successful at all. Obviously humans and the issues we create and try to survive, are dynamic and complex. There are no clean answers but, we can still try to build resilient ethics through diversity of tactics and meaningful solidarity. I want to make fascism associated in the popular imagination with something so asinine it could only be considered viable by those that are horribly confused and misguided. I want to destroy whatever ‘cool’ is associated with crypto-fascism. I want to take the foundations out from under white supremacy. We can continue to do

as anti-fascists. Despite our anti-authoritarian stance we often have blowhards, sexists, racists, transmisogynists, sociopaths, and bigots hiding within our own ranks. Our job is to bring them to accountability or remove them from our movement. There is no time to let those most vulnerable within our own groups fall victim to the social capital of those more powerful or manipulative. There are great needs for deep introspection into our own internal conflicts as we parse through our values in interacting externally with the world. This is a never ending process but listening to victims and subverting the concentration of social capital and power of those around us is a good start. Mediators are often incredibly useful, to the extent that they understand the power dynamics that can be subtly re enacted if one is not careful. We shouldn't tiptoe around our own violence and dominative tendencies. We should face it head on and together wherever possible. Even though many antifa groups do have explicitly anarchist and non-hierarchical organization structures, issues of coercion can and do often come up, such that we need ongoing processes to eliminate concentrations and abuses of power.

This is also where the semantic drift of "antifa" comes into play. We can fail to call out fascist or authoritarian tendencies within our own ranks if we assume we're all under the same banner of 'antifa' and fighting the same cause. It's no secret that I'm opposed to the authoritarian left and extremely skeptical of the statist left (and everything to the right of that as well including liberals). The drive for concentrated power is one that we have to subvert in our own communities and ourselves just as much as we do in the world. To the other extreme, just about anyone can call themselves antifa, just like anyone can take up the mantle of anarchism without any clue of what that really means. At a recent protest I ran into these masked folks who have AFA flags in english and German. When I began talking to them I realized that they don't organize and aren't really involved in anything they just have the flags. They'd never

similar this time period in the U.S. is to the Weimar period in Germany. That vocal pull to the right then opens the door and pushes your average GOP a bit farther to the right as everyone shuffles to keep up with the "in" discourse. This is called, the Overton Window concept, the window of what is considered acceptable and what is extreme in public discourse and how it shifts continuously relative to the discourse of the moment. Well, our Overton window is shifting, so that, before we know it, we have a mainstream U.S. presidential nominee who shuts out press outlets, encourages violence against protesters, and makes blatantly racist claims about huge swaths of religious and racial groups. Neo-nazis are taking note and seizing the opportunities Trump presents them with. I've personally seen far right militias and active white supremacist movements recruiting and flying their symbols (such as large tattooed swastikas) at Trump rallies. There's an international neo-nazi and white-supremacist forum called Storm Front started by Don Black who was a member of David Duke's Knights of the Klan. Stormfront that has started actively endorsing Trump in a lot of its annals. David Duke himself is a firm Trump supporter and even Trump himself generally refuses to explicitly condemn Duke's views. That Trump phone worker with the Nazi tags that came out a while ago is just a piece of data in a larger pattern. This is, of course, not to say that every Trump supporter is a fascist. Of course, most are not. But there is a certain growing tolerance for his sometimes fascist rhetoric and many have questioned whether Trump wields fascist, proto-fascist, or nativist-populist potential or power.

You can also track the increases in white supremacist groups over the past few years through a 14% increase in the number of hate groups and a steady rise in the google searches of known far-right terms such as "white genocide", "pro-white", "black on white crime", "alt-right", etc. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) tracks around 892 hate groups in the U.S. (not counting the police or big banks or wall street or *indiscriminate* anti-civ

eco groups). We've got 992 far right "patriot" groups and a 42% increase in anti-Muslim hate groups since 2014. These groups have highly armed anti-government right wing militia members that historically and currently are first in line to partner with white supremacist movements, if they are not already the same people. These groups have broad appeal and reach within certain demographics, and the narratives they share gain similarly popular traction. The 11% United Patriots group has 15,000 members on facebook. The "Christian American Patriots Militia" page has nearly 20,000 members. I've been following it regularly as they decry a Black Lives Matter, Black Panthers, and Obama conspiracy to bring Shariah law to the United States and begin a race war targeting whites. Many openly demand that it is a religious duty to arm and fight against this including, as many suggest, deporting or killing Muslims. All of these pages are completely trumped by the over 500,000 likes associated with the Oath Keepers page. This is all just looking at militia organizations. The propaganda machines of white nationalism such as the alt-right are also rapidly growing and radicalizing people towards nazism through the internet. With the first rule of the internet being it is orders of magnitude easier to produce bullshit than to refute it, their reach is incomprehensible but likely over 10 million sympathetic ears of potential recruits in the U.S. alone. Of course these are all very inaccurate methods and numbers but at least they can begin to give a sense of scale, even if only approximately.

I don't want to be alarmist or give the skinheads and right-wing militias more power than they have. First of all, this is not a united front of hundreds of thousands of people: there are huge internal differences between many different racist-skin groups and right wing militias such as different opinions, degrees of organization, motivations etc. For example, some 'patriot' movements even have their own brands of anti-racism. Further, the U.S. neo-nazi movement and the patriot movement, although often overlapping, tend to have significantly

will bemoan their current situation as temporary in their quest for return to power. Religious fanatics are lucky in that they can just make up a chosen glory in heaven and use the entire difficulty of life as the chosen trauma (suffering is your debt owed to god). The entire thing is quite evangelical in structure. The neo-nazi will talk about the disgrace and chosenness of the Aryan people just like the nazis before them except they now have the fall of Third Reich as an additional chosen trauma and its rule as a chosen glory. Now before you get disgusted with 'them' over there doing this. We do the same shit as anarchists and antifas. We celebrate May Day, or International Workers Day in the U.S. as a joint chosen trauma (murder of four anarchists) and chosen glory (birth of the 8-hour work day). We use it as a rallying cry every year. We share stories of famous Nazi hunters such as Lyudmila Mikhailovna Pavlichenko or The YPG/YPJ in Rojava in our own propaganda. We watch videos on the Antifa International facebook page of our comrades valiantly pushing back Nazis on streets across the world. The famous chant "No pasaran!" itself is a chosen glory. My only heed here is that we're conscious of what we're doing. Are we making myths? If so, why are we doing it? What are our myths? Are those myths true? If not, is there any benefit or risk in continuing to use them? Or most importantly, are we being manipulated by any charismatic social capital carrying "anarchist" leaders with tales of our past glories and traumas? These are important questions that I think are too contextual to be answered in full here.

The Need for Internal Conflict Transformation

I'd be remiss if I did not also point to the endless cycles of violence and conflict that we perpetuate within our own radical ranks as another area of potential growth in our efficacy

Formation of Group Identities: Chosen Glories and Chosen Traumas

Vamik Volkan is a conflict transformation practitioner and theorist who coined the terms “chosen glories” and “chosen trauma” to describe the stories that a collective consciousness latches onto especially at the behest of an authoritarian leader. The chosen trauma is the story of which we constantly rehash of our collective loss. The battle where we were unfairly harmed. Our martyrs. It is our collective resentment and sense of victimhood. The chosen glory is the story where we triumphed. It is the story that shows our much deserved victory in the past and how it will be re-made in the future. For two sides in the same conflict these may even be the same day. A chosen trauma of Palestine is Nakba which is the same day as the Israeli chosen glory of independence. An authoritarian leader or cult of personality manipulates these mythologized stories to harness action from their populace in something that Volkan describes as “time collapse” where a group is thrust from the present moment into the sensations of as if the great tragedy or victory was happening right then. The U.S. leaders do this to a degree, even in intentionally vague forms such as, “Make America Great Again” which just lets people draw their own associations to latch onto, but the phenomena is even more pronounced in say Europe or the Middle East, where collective memory stretches thousands of years beyond the colonization of the Americas and U.S. independence from Britain.

A fascist or even a tankie will allude to the ‘good old days’; whether those be of Stalinist Russia, the Great Leap Forward (only 3.5 million dead... But that was just the Bourgeoisie right?), the Third Reich, or of a ‘purer’ time (this can refer to racially, religiously etc and examples abound from not only the west) as a source of hope for their enchanted followers. They

different political aspirations (even though they are known to collaborate). Some of these groups are infamously prone to infighting and drunken exploits, as the Malheur occupation showed. Many are generally not the brightest crayons in the box, as one could easily deduce due to their belief in widely discredited ideas such as scientific racism, but yet more frightening are the ones possessed by clever rhetoric and manipulated nuance who often serve as the charismatic leaders of the others. These groups also generally tend to have a monopoly on recruiting former military and police which means they have access to martial knowledge. The combination of shared narratives like “white genocide”, scapegoats like Muslims, and access to weapons has such potential for mass carnage. It only takes one well orchestrated or lucky attack to kill countless people. As tragic as Orlando and Charleston are, they are tiny compared to what is possible.

I don’t know how to say it other than this: this is not a small issue, y’all. It’s time to “ring the alarm”. This undercurrent of extreme far right racist violence feeds and does the dirty work of the statist violence. It has to be stopped, but I feel that the discourse and practices most often available to those of us on the anti-fascist left fail on many fronts even as they succeed amazingly on others. I’d like to present an approach that I think will work better than the practices of some more protest-focused antifa groups that fail to attend to the deeper and yet less glorious work such as long-term intelligence research, organizing, and counter-recruitment that any truly effective antifa group has taught. To do this I will draw on my lessons working in the field of conflict transformation in large scale and protracted violent conflict such as I witnessed from the Syrian border. I will apply these lessons to the tactics and effectiveness of crucial anti-fascist organizing and militant activism.

Anti-fascism and Peacebuilding

Anti-fascism, despite much semantic creepage on this word, is generally seen as an essential direct intervention into the symptoms of larger racist and structural violence but it also has the potential, and at times has been, completely transformative in a way that we should emphasize and prioritize whenever possible. This strong definition of conflict transformation comes from Tatsushi Arai and is: “A sustained process of examining conflict sources and contexts systematically and developing relevant means to redirect its momentum into constructive relationship-building and social change.” This is a deeper level of analysis than what is often pointed to by the broad term, ‘peacebuilding’ which is often associated with the maintenance of stable economic liberalism through cessation of hostilities. Liberal peacebuilding has so much blood on its hands from inaction and protection of the state that it could stand to learn from anarcho-antifas but it also has a track record of ending violence when nothing else could and attempting at times to undermine the deeper ideologies behind the violence. Together, they present useful parallels and contrast for larger praxis against fascist violence. In spite of their differences, the field of peacebuilding can offer insight to antifa organizing that can improve the antifa politics and tactics and better achieve the goal of a future without fascism.

Divergent Tactics

I’ve been thinking a lot about how to combat the creeping trends of fascism and about the justifiability of various tactics of resistance (pushing back or repressing) and subversion (transformation). I have two primary competing threads in my mind that are quite at odds with each other. One is conflict transformation and one is militant anti-fascism. Conflict

official national border policy as enforced by the Border Patrol, the biggest branch of our law enforcement. I believe that this kind of life-saving border work such as food, medicine, and water drops is an example of an antifa and direct-action strategy coherent with anarchist open-border ethics even though it has nothing to do with directly confronting fascist groups. It’s not even necessarily transformative in the sense that it is a somewhat never-ending endeavor but it is still of immediate importance.

Conversely, in peacebuilding, getting groups to dig beneath their own rhetorics and discover what they truly need and want is often a tactic for building bridges between warring parties because more often than not, no matter how divergent, they often share at least some common goals. It can be scary to think that an enemy may share really similar needs and values as you and that you might just disagree wildly on the means. When I talk about needs here I don’t just mean the basics such as food, water, shelter, and the like. Sometimes a basic human need is dignity, or freedom of motion, or feeling safe in public. What we hold most dear is different to different groups and different individuals. Although we may die first of dehydration, the loss of dignity may be the thing that could truly destroy us. The fascist need for security, order, and control could be a reflection of a very basic fear of instability, complexity, and chaos. More often it’s just people manipulated by a figurehead though, and these people can often be made to see that they’ve been swindled and that the allegiance they pledged is actually ensuring the instability and insecurity of their own, already complex, lives.

selling them basic survival food and water at exorbitant rates. When myself and a couple friends started raising money to send to the Madaya local council to buy food and water (because it was there, just expensive) a few (non-Syrian) people started critiquing us saying that the money would go straight to Hezbollah and encourage the regime to besiege other cities similarly. This is a legitimate concern aside from the facts that the regime was already going to continue besieging cities as they'd been doing and further, we had community still inside Madaya that we wanted to survive. But the issues and ethical dilemmas of humanitarian aid are endlessly complex as this small example begins to highlight. As I mentioned previously, control over humanitarian aid is often a huge racket and even hugely powerful organizations like the U.N. can become beholden to the demands of the cruelest of dictators and armed groups in their seemingly benevolent quest to deliver lifesaving aid. Because after all, who survives in a war, whether through medicine, food, or water, is itself an entire issue concerning war theory. Starving or dehydrating territories into submission is a classic technique not just in war but also in police and swat crackdowns of building occupations and the like. I remember several times in the bay where anyone caught trying to bring water or food into protester occupied areas (acknowledging this is all settler occupied) would immediately be arrested and charged for conspiracy and aiding and abetting even if the charges were dropped. In the U.S. borderlands with Mexico, Border Patrol and right-wing militia groups have been caught red-handed and on camera slashing water tanks put out by No Mas Muertes and other groups, that save migrant lives who are crossing the border. One way of looking at this is murder, but they prefer to consider it part of their "illegal crossing deterrence" campaigns which basically just mean make the risk of death as high as possible to try and deter people from crossing. Although the minutemen and other fascist groups are quite active down here, this isn't even their policy. This is the

transformation has the primary goal of transcending the matrices of conflict by appealing to the needs of all parties in order to produce a sustainable peace: i.e. the end of violence on multiple levels, including structural. Anti-fascism has as its primary goals ending targeted violence and authoritarianism through the repression and transformation of fascist ideologies and groups. These goals are interrelated but their means are quite different.

The antifa tends to value a military approach and believe that the only way fascism and nazism have ever been stopped is by using force, at times martial, which historically is generally, but not always, true. The spectrum of antifa work is on an escalator ranging from internet quibbles to all out war, but also, most strong antifa groups dedicate the majority of their time to various forms of intelligence research and propaganda as well. This is a militant ideology shared to varying extents, not only by Unite Against Fascism (UAF), Anti-Fascist Action (AFA), Anti-Racist Action (ARA), Red and Anarchist Skinheads (RASH), Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice (SHARP), but also organizations and militias such as the Yugoslav Partisans and Josip Broz Tito, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) in Spain, and other autonomous anarchist Antifa mobilizations. The peacebuilder, by contrast, tends to value agreements, discourse, and cessation of hostilities more. Both of these ideologies have persons and groups within them that can handle with nuance and delicacy issues of strategy and efficacy of various means through radical analysis. There are peacebuilders who recognize the necessity of transforming structural oppression or even structural violence and there are anti-fascists who recognize the importance of education and dialogue for counter-recruitment and other purposes.

“Liberal” Peacebuilding vs. “Radical” Antifa

Peacebuilding has been at times a critical arm of neoliberalism and colonial power despite its attempts to mask itself with ‘neutrality’. Despite this, many have managed to subvert or critique from within the liberal (both political and economic) tendencies in order to create a more radical and structurally transformative peacebuilding. Often peacebuilding is practically about the dishing out of territories amongst warring parties, but it has the capacity to be, and is at times, a much more transformative approach than this when it truly deals with the deep causes and finding common ground in an attempt to build a sustainable peace. This being said, the Peacebuilding-Industrial Complex, like non-violence, has to address claims that, aside from profiting from prolonged war and misery, they also often de facto maintain oppressive regimes or structures of statist violence in their efforts towards creating dialogue with key warring parties. Conversely, the radical antifa groups of the world, have at times, quite ironically, been labeled as fascistic themselves for their employment of unyielding force and assumed constant moral authority. Some antifa groups are so positive that they are always correct, or are just so violence-worshipping, that they fail to acknowledge the deep ethical questions inherent within violent and repressive means. But, at the same time, without your ‘friendly neighborhood antifa’, you could face a completely unfettered rise of nazis in your neighborhood such as the Christian Identity and Aryan Nation movement in Hayden Lake, Idaho. This unfettered rise is contrasted with what was seen in the racist history of Portland, which was in part combatted by the rise of such imperfect and essential antifascist groups as Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice and Rose City Antifa in addition to the antifa history of cities like Chicago or NYC.

Despite all of these intricacies, peacebuilding, in general can be considered more so within the liberal tradition, with anti-

and critical thinking so they become very afraid and take up arms. I mean it’s shitty but at the same time, the average foot soldier, which is who we’re mostly fighting, is not generally our true enemy. Our enemies are their demagogues, funders, and writers. Our enemies are the structures that support white supremacy and the culture that turns a blind eye. So yeah, we keep fighting in the streets because it’s important to do so, but we also start to think beyond the protest. How can we really get at that roots of this thing and start to unwind it from its core? How can we make sure that if we topple this organization, its most marginalized members don’t get dropped on their heads and just become further radicalized even if they just go into hiding? These are a very different line of thinking than just the immediately pertinent, ‘let’s take an axe to their amplification cords’ approach. This is similar to how violence against Muslims by far-right British groups fed the network of extremist Imams recruiting from the most marginalized Muslim neighborhoods. Of course many antifa groups are already thinking and acting in a sort of deep and transformative way. People are actually creating protection committees for mosques and planned parenthood clinics. People are counter-recruiting. People are writing literature in a language that working class whites can understand. These are invaluable additions to the battlefield tactics of the street.

Meeting Basic Human Needs

Knowledge of, and control over, a group of people’s basic human needs can be a bridge, or a weapon of the deadliest grade. Most recently highlighted in Madaya, Syria, but as is happening across the country, regime and Hezbollah blockades control the movement of food and water into rebel held areas. In Madaya, people were seen boiling tree leaves and eating grass as the regime tried to starve them out, while simultaneously

will surely vindicate our martyrs. We fail to deeply consider that this process is the exact same thing that they're doing. I'm not saying this graphical tool is a perfect match for anti-fascist work but to the extent that we are no longer fighting fascism, and are instead just engaging a cycle of revenge against "that guy and his buddies who threw a bottle at our friend after we threw a chair at them" we are not even actually stopping or preventing fascism. Obviously this is only one faction of antifas, but for those who it applies, we're just engaging in violence for the sake of violence. That's the thing about a cycle of revenge. It never ends on its own. Something has to happen in order for it to shift. Either everyone from one side dies or somewhere along the line people try to start transcending their conflicts and working towards united goals. What happens most often though, at both smaller and larger scales, is something quite a bit more heinous. Often what happens is that one group does something so terrible, usually involving innocents and civilians, that the other side is forced to stop fighting back. The peak example of this is the unforgivable use of a nuclear weapon by the United States against Japan. The fact that we did it twice only amplifies the cruelty. In gang wars it's often the same thing, you threaten or kill someone's family. The more bizarre and personal a violence is, the more effective it is. It's a terrible strategy though, because it doesn't end the violence, it just postpones it. The resentment will always be brewing because a group can never really kill all of its opponents, especially if the opponent is an ideology.

Obviously we will likely never support fascism as an ideology, but that's rarely what is really at the roots of what far right-wing people are on about. There are many reasons that people are drawn into it, such as that poor whites are losing jobs and they want someone to blame so they get manipulated into believing it's the fault of liberal multiculturalism and diversity. Then someone tells them there's a white genocide and they don't know shit about research and verification

fascism more so residing in the radical tradition. My hope is that peacebuilding can be radicalized and that antifa work can generate transformations in favor of actual consequentialist efficacy. Although much of modern antifa work happens on the streets and in the background organizing, historically, this struggle is extended onto the battlefield when fascists and nazis actually gain power. I am here considering antifa as a whole to be on the militant spectrum, even though I recognize that the type of antifas who act with minimal foresight I sometimes critique here are just one piece of a diverse antifa movement.

European and U.S. antifa

The antifa movement in Europe is, in many ways, more well organized than the antifa movement in the States, likely due to a more visceral collective memory of what fascism really is and looks like. Further, there is more of a clear fascist and neo-nazi thread in Modern European politics, as opposed to the disguised ideological thread of the conservative armed patriot movements of the United States. The U.S. though, does have its own long history of antifa movements stretching back even arguably to 500+ years of Native American resistance to (settler-)colonization or black resistance to white supremacy such as the Black Panthers.

One interviewee based in the UK describes antifascist organizing there as, *"I have experienced organised UK antifascism at the moment to be at its best—relatively inclusive, well-networked, and achieving the bare minimum of consistently smashing the fash and maintaining a network which is resilient enough to survive burnout and sustained repression. At their worst, groups are insular, self-aggrandising, overwhelmingly white, and seemingly lone bastions of 'manarchism' and/or 'brocialism' in an organising context that has at least in bits and pieces moved on."* This quote highlights the wide range of what is claimed under the

antifa umbrella in the UK which is also relevant to the U.S spectrum of antifa work. He went on to critique some parts of the UK movement, saying,

“There also seems to be an exceptionally limited range of tactics in use – basically stickers and counter-demos. (And also catfishing gullible fascists seems to be a big thing.) My biggest problem with this approach overall is that it arbitrarily isolates one expression of fascism and fascist violence from its myriad other manifestations in the UK, at its borders, and inside its burgeoning exclusion zones – carried out at the hands the state’s direct employees, and the private companies to whom much of their work is now outsourced. It means that communities most affected by and at risk of fascist violence, even those most actively organising amongst them, feel little connection in their lives and struggles to the organised antifa groups, and there is little exchange or mutual interest.”

This quote shows the many battlefields of antifa work and the necessary diversification of some groups’ tactics. This interviewee is showing that there are so many strategic points of resistance, vulnerabilities in the matrices of fascist systems and supply lines, that we can exploit. He is asking us to think about all these different points in a careful way to maximize impact. He also excitedly points to other groups not falling prey to these limits such as the Clapton Ultras who are, “A group of local football (soccer) fans who made an antifa fan club along the lines of the Italian brigadas. They have a very broad support base in my experience; of the handful people I know who are avid fans, not one is a cis white man!” There are also specifically black punks in Europe such as the Black Dragons in France that have organized anti-fascist action.

Europe is experiencing a rapid resurgence of far-right groups similar to the United States with such key parties as Golden Dawn, Alternative for Germany Party, National Front, Party for Freedom, Jobbik, Sweden Democrats, etc., with their own armed militia factions, just like in the United States. The

Perpetuating Cycles of Revenge

The picture below is taken Paula Green and the Karuna Center’s book, “Peacebuilding in Divided Communities”. It breaks down something called the “cycle of revenge” which is what allows something that may start as a small scuffle to become a century long war of which no one even remembers the original issue. As long as people are stuck in the inner circle of grief, anger, manipulation, and justified revenge there is little hope of the violence ending. Within this model various, often overlapping steps such as mourning, rehumanizing the enemy, engaging with the other, and creating various levels of justice are necessary in order to transcend the cycle of revenge. Please take a second to review and come up with your own ideas about this model before continuing to read this section. Think about where in the various points on this diagram you and your communities are. Think about where your enemies are.

Although it’s certainly not above critique, I have seen tremendously powerful realizations happen to people and groups from interacting with this idea. I attended an international summer workshop called CONTACT in 2014 that brought together persons from across various global conflict zones to work on skill building around conflict transformation. We made a giant version of this graph and taped it to the ground and had people stand where they felt like they were in their process. The activity brought up, at times an incredibly unwieldy amount of repressed trauma, but it also signaled the beginning of some incredibly unlikely and powerful dialogues such as between a former U.S. scout sniper and a Yemeni, Muslim activist. Most people don’t really like to think about where they are in relationship to the wars they’re fighting. In violent conflict we just want to think about our immediate community and the enemy. We want to think about how right we are and how wrong they are and prepare for the next battle where we

a colonially implanted ideology/power structure). Whereas, if I call a nazi a cockroach, it's because they are self-identified white supremacists. The power differential and the sensibility is different. White-supremacy has systemic state support, whereas antifa radicalism does not. State power is part of what makes othering so lethal and insidious. Words have more impact when they're backed by the violence of the state. I do not go as far as to claim that the police will *always* support white supremacists and *never* support antifa, as the U.S history in this regard is quite mixed, from the Greensboro massacre to Waco. This mixed history does not contradict the fact that "the state" does have a vested interest in maintaining some degree of invisible and visible white supremacy. There is additional complexity in that, the othering of an empowered agent of state approved violence such as cops (the blue militia), is not at all the same thing as a cop othering a disenfranchised civilian. If a cop dehumanizes a civilian they can get away with shooting them. If I say "fuck the pigs" it really won't have any impact on them. In terms of the academic theory side we might not even call the latter (FTP!) othering even though it shares so many of the same behaviors and traits because it lacks the systemic punch. antifa members can strategically utilize othering of these grossly empowered fascists as a tactic but they must be aware of the potential negative consequences of that tactic such as decreased ability to counter-recruit, decreased ability to understand the "enemy" enough to strategize effectively, or the loss of perspective when it comes to ethics around violence. To see the slipperiness of the slope, consider for a moment– if fascists are just "cockroaches" at what point does it become genocide rather than just 'pest elimination'? This regression doesn't mean we should abandon violence all together in some hand-waving idealism. It just that we need to maintain ethical and intellectual vigilance when utilizing tactics such as "othering" in our work.

largest difference is that the Second Amendment culture of the U.S. makes it somewhat easier for the far-right to obtain access to armament.² Finally, as in the United States, but perhaps to an even greater degree, many of these white-supremacist nationalist parties– both henchmen and leaders– are taking major seats in government and occupying the ranks of common police forces. As recent U.S. violence targetting police has begun to upswing in response to police violence against communities of color, many far-right groups have pledged loyalty to and offered to protect the police through vigilante methods. This could symbolize or lead to a growing relationship between the two, representing a shift as historically, many far-right groups often fought against the police. In the United States, the far-right has a notable lineage and relationship to Libertarianism, Constitutionalism, "scientific"-racism/race-realism, and in more recent years, the neo-reactionary (NRx) movement, whereas, in Europe, the influences are to some extent more diffuse and relate to a longer historical memory but often vacillate between strong nationalism and anti-immigration rhetoric and violence as can be seen in the events leading to and immediately following Brexit. This is of course acknowledging that both forms of fascism share many of these traits in varying degrees and are widely internally varied and dynamic.

On the other side of the ideological expanse, to contrast UK and US antifascism, in the UK, groups like Unite Against Fascism (UAF) pressure government politics while Anti-Fascist Action (AFA) works on the streets doing physical repression and ideological campaigns. By contrast, in the United States, the decentralized organization Anti-Racist Action (ARA), and various autonomous campaigns fulfill antifa services, but I have not heard of anything akin to UAF pushing strongly in U.S. electoral politics. An interviewee, Alexander Reid Ross, sug-

²This is not meant to be an anti-gun or pro-gun reform statement. Those are complex issues that I'm not getting into here.

gested that the ARA “both ARA and European antifa networks emerged through autonomist and horizontal punk networks, but the former adopted a more populist approach to take on the different character of the far right in the US.” He also added, in terms of the US as compared to European antifa, that, “I think a lot of antifas in the US are still growing and learning. The armed factor is totally different here, and there is far more of a paramilitary one that seems virtually impossible to counter when taken in whole. However, the smaller scale antifa stuff [like] outing the AFP [American Freedom Party], opposing Traditionalist Youth, drawing lines with murky punk and neofolk politics in the “scene,” and generally working to stamp down nazi violence before it leads to dead or brutalized black, brown, and queer people is obviously within the skill set of the larger growing movement. In Europe, antifas are doing similar work, just on a larger scale, because the problem there is more generally a clear nazi-fascist one, rather than “conservative revolutionary” and sheltered by the traditional mainstream right party.” This shows how the type of techniques needed in Europe and the U.S. are different both in scale and type of threat even if the overarching issues are largely the same: halting the rise of far-right militarism and power. We then went on to discuss the fascist evolution of the patriot movement from the Pelleyites, LK Smith & Christian Identity Movement (not to mention the Klan) and their relationship with white-supremacy, neo-nazis, and the far-right U.S. Libertarian movement with its roots in holocaust denial, American Freedom Party, and Stormfront. In the U.S. these types of groups have also mutated and informed the neo-reactionary, alt-right, etc. movements where so much of the battlegrounds, like in Europe, have started to have strong internet-to-irl (in real life) relationships Through these examples we can see how, despite differing context and at times levels or types of mobilization, the Euro and U.S. antifa movements have much to learn and collaborate from each other about.

tions of timing and safety that we deal with on a case-by-case basis.

An example of how this can and does occur is when, like in the film “When Tommy Met Mo”, every time a liberal swoops in to say that Islam is a religion of peace, but has never read the Koran, a right-winger, citing a sketchy memory of certain damning passages, looks with condescension and disbelief upon the ignorance and denial of the liberal. Alternatively, when a conservative, uses the behavior of a proportionately incredibly small section of people identified as Muslim, to malign the entire group, a liberal looks with condescension and disbelief upon the ignorance and denial of the conservative. Both think that the other is a monster bent on destroying and attacking their respective values. This pair may then be pushed farther to their respective extreme, with the right-wing conservative feeling increasingly only understood by extreme right wing nationalist groups, and the liberal feeling only understood by far leftists. This whole situation of anti-magnetism can be avoided through more nuanced and less polarized avenues for dialogue.

I’m not minimizing the importance of militant repression of fascism. There is much evidence that fascism flourishes in the sunlight and withers in the shadows because of its ideologies of: “We are temporarily oppressed by XYZ but we are the rightful heirs of everything great including dominance”. So generally, when we need to quickly stop a bunch of Nazi’s from harassing a group of Muslims or a bunch of right wingers assaulting women seeking an abortion, we don’t really think about their trajectory, or who they are as people, or how to undermine them in a more sustainable way. We just focus on stopping the shit they’re doing now because that is also important. In some ways, the rhetoric against dehumanization in peacebuilding applies to a different situation such as in Rwanda, where Tutsis were referred to as cockroaches by Hutus with relatively little by way of reason supporting this dehumanization (outside of

access to means that they believe that African Americans and Muslims are their problem". It's not impossible to still beat the shit out of that guy, but you're more likely to want to convince him that he's been seriously fucking hustled. So if our goal is to control and limit the number of fascists out there recruiting and terrorizing neighborhoods, then it is in some ways more effective to not really think about the humanity of those you would kill. I mean, I've never heard of an army that meditates before battle on the humanity of their enemy. Radical empathy has more to do with our approach to the entire situation though than just what we do on the streets. It means that we think differently about how to strategize against fascists and also how to engage with them in dialogue when it's appropriate. We can still throw a chair at someone we more deeply understand and empathize with. I mean, haven't you ever been to a family reunion?

This trend of oppositional identity extends so far that eventually it even gets into some nasty classism where leftists condescend to the ignorance of poor communities that are often manipulated by the GOP. We forget that your average Republican has a set of values and ethics: it is from a deeper understanding of what these values are that we can often convince them that the means they've chosen are not in line with the ends they seek. Arguments can then be made that modern capitalism is not in line with the values such as freedom and liberty set forth by the ideologues of capitalism because of a range of issues such as state-protected monopolies and a landed upper one-percent concentration of extreme wealth. Any right-wing aficionado with a basic grasp of Libertarian values will then perk their ears up and you begin to have the possibility of an actual conversation. Of course generally though, even the most militant groups practice basic propaganda and even the most pacifist groups wouldn't just try to talk sense to an armed right wing militia group. There are important and contextual ques-

Syria and my anti-fascism

I spent the 8 months last year living amongst Syrian refugees based in Turkey, hearing their stories, working side by side in various legal and illegal struggles, and trying to understand what this whole situation meant for my politics as an antifa and a peacebuilder. That time catalyzed and crystallized my understanding of the need for an essay on these topics.

When living 60 km from the Syrian border, on the Turkish side, I was exposed to constant stories of an unfathomable degree of violence. The war had a lot of spillover into our Turkish city, Gaziantep, which was a hotbed for Islamists, foreign intelligence agents, NGOs, Regime opposition, etc. There were several daylight assassinations and bombings right in my area primarily claimed by ISIS/Da3esh.³ Members of my community were killed. There were streams of kidnappings of Westerners and non-Westerners alike in the border towns. One of my closest friends got emergency evacuated after he started receiving constant death threats from ISIS and other Islamic groups for his anti-ISIS activism and his Haram (against certain Islamic interpretations) marriage. This is not even mentioning the war against Kurds and the PKK by the Turkish government happening across the Southeast, but focused a bit farther east than we were. Nonetheless, Gaziantep was a Kurdish-majority city with a strong Turkish ethnic nationalist movement (also leftist-identified) that would loudly parade the streets at night terrifying civilians and making genocidal statements. One time, I looked out over Syria from the Kilis border mountains and heard the distant gunfire in Azaz. I wept uncontrollably for the next week, starting on the ride on the public bus back to Gaziantep. I didn't stay to witness the nightly bombings even though a friend did. It felt too wrong.

³This form of writing (Da3esh) uses "3rabeezee" which is a way to write in Arabic using the letters of the English alphabet.

The thing about war is that all of the worst sides of humanity come out to play. It's not just the killing. It's the rapes. It's the torture and kidnapping. It's the systematic disenfranchisement and forced migration. It's the incomprehensible loss of trust. It's the families and communities being torn apart. It's not being able to bury, much less mourn, your dead because the violence is so constant. One of the strangest aspects is the way that life just goes on and people get used to horrible things and keep moving. Many of the younger generation of antifas have not had to witness the *level* of violence that the older generation did on the front lines, even if the new generations carry in their hearts the stories of their parents and grandparents and have fought bravely and been injured in their own contexts. This is not to say that antifas across the world are not experiencing a rapid resurgence of far right violence against them, because of course there is; it's just that, in most places it is not all-out warfare as it has been and still is in some areas such as the Middle East.

I fear I'll be haunted by some of my darker memories of that time for the rest of my life (much of it was quite beautiful as well of course) even as my own experiences pale in comparison to those of my friends who lived amidst barrel bombs and the like. Being so exposed, even if largely indirectly, had contradictory effects on my politics around violence and confronting extremist right groups. On the one hand, it firmly implanted the understanding in my mind that the state will not protect us and that large military forces can spring from small pockets of fascist ideology quite rapidly, so, therefore, we must actively and constantly resist using the means available to us. On the other hand, it made me incredibly gun shy about violence and insurrectionary anarchisms because the complexities of war are such that no military force leaves without having done horrible things. Furthermore, I've seen how things can quickly accelerate and then become protracted to the point where most people aren't even fighting for their ideals any-

group-selfishness and manipulateness, then, to that extent, it reflects the sociopathic tendencies which we must undermine in ourselves. When I speak of empathy as a solution to this, I am not speaking of some brittle and impulsive visceral reaction, but rather of a sustained and conscious blurring of the self in order to better understand the "other". This does not mean that we lose ourselves in our process of recognition because, if our values are true, then they will always survive the encounter, no matter how deep. If we are afraid of encountering the "other," then it is because we are so afraid of inconsistencies within our own politics and values. If that's the case, then we'd be better off to make these inconsistencies visible and try to understand them, in order to begin undermining them. If you don't get behind empathy for some higher moral reason, then get behind it for the practical reason— the better you understand your enemy, the more effectively you can fight them. For instance, I personally empathize with the far-right poor white who wants to feel greater certainty in their ability to feed their family or feel safe in their community, even if I disagree with their understanding of how to get there. Further, from spending significant time around 'patriots' and libertarians I have learned of a great many common goals and values and of how to communicate through these frames of reference such as a basic anti-racist instinct in many of them (although it's often strangled or confused) or contradictions in the application of liberty as they describe it that can be pointed out to some effect. These are all potential bridges for practical real-life conversation.

Alternatively, antifa as a military praxis depends on a certain degree of dehumanization. We have to "crush the disease" of fascism. We have to "kill the nazis". This is the problem of having an identity based around being 'anti-' something else. An oppositional identity has a built-in requirement of its enemy to exist and it necessitates othering. It would seem quite strange if someone was like, "We need to kill the poor whites who got so convinced by their fear of death and increased restriction of

crimes of nations such as Saudi Arabia or many Shariah states. Antifas the world over are generally strictly opposed to ISIS for that reason and there are known antifa militants fighting ISIS alongside the Syrian-Kurdish military forces in the International Freedom Battalion. As far removed as we may be from each other on many issues, the overlap we do share is an important baseline in strategic thinking. Interests and values are important inner layers of the onion that we can peel and utilize to be more effective. The next section will discuss more in detail the risks and potential benefits of strategically utilizing shared values with the ‘other’.

Understanding the Other and Radical Empathy

Another example of conflict between peacebuilding and antifa praxis is in the realm of “othering”. Anti-fascists make regular and intensive use of “othering” tactics against fascist and white supremacist movements. Many anti-fascists make fascists into something that can never be understood but can only be hated and fought. This has strategic value. It’s harder to fight someone with whom you deeply empathize. Conflict transformation suggests something called “radical empathy” attributed to the powerfully brilliant Tatushi Arai, that allows one to strive to deeply understand the “other” and their needs, while not losing sight of the structural inequalities that influence and often create or maintain the violence. Radical Empathy is an ideal point of reference for antifa praxis against fascism, even though it is much easier said than done. As we struggle to subvert fascism in the world we must also expose it in ourselves. This vulnerability alone can be a source of empathy that allows us to recognize how one could fall into the memetic viruses associated with fascism and the like. If fascism is built on theories of dominance and a sort of narcissistic

more but just to survive or to help their closest ones survive. Warfare is a constant state of disillusionment and tragedy that aggregates into complex-PTSD. The spirals become contracted as revenge begets revenge and trauma obscures potential pathways for even temporary cease-fires. Then everything gets hijacked by international power players who use the fighters and dead bodies as pawns in a geopolitical project. I think people in the antifa movement, at least in the U.S., don’t realize how all of this carnage can happen, even in the United States. My Syrian friends mostly never saw a war in Syria coming. It always made sense to them for other places like Egypt or Tunisia but they somehow felt like it would never happen to them, until, of course, it did.

This is not where I give a lecture against violence though. I just think we need to understand the stakes at play in all things, as best we can, in order to make the optimal choices available to us. This often means that certain forms of violence can ultimately be less violent or oppressive than the alternative of pacifism or the like. Sometimes also violence just isn’t best, and we can’t be blinded by our team allegiances to other options outside of what is socially accepted in our circle. This is why I am advocating for considering the limits and benefits of conflict transformation praxis in antifa organizing. I certainly acknowledge that many antifa groups already employ a wide diversity of tactics but I am also pointing out any tendencies to become short-sighted and narrow focused within our ranks.

Sources and Case Studies

In addition to several interviews from experienced antifas and scholars across the world, my own experiences of organizing, and extensive conversations with key parties in both the U.S. and abroad, two movies will be referenced repeatedly in this essay. The first film is “Right to Left: March for

England” which is about English Defence League (EDL) and antifa clashes in Britain in which the filmmakers document clashes in a naive attempt to facilitate dialogue. The English Defense League is a far right, anti-Muslim, British Nationalist movement. This film is chosen because, despite a slight EDL bias amidst claims of neutrality on the part of the filmmakers, it shows a lot of actual footage of antifa showing up on the streets and militantly pushing back against the nationalist EDL known for its racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and for often attracting white nationalists and neo-nazis. The second movie I will reference is “Quitting the EDL: When Tommy Met Mo: When Tommy Met Mo” which is about the dialogues between the founder of the EDL, Tommy Robinson and Mohamed Ansar, a British-Muslim leader, that ultimately led to Tommy leaving the EDL. The movie shows that after quitting, Tommy joined forces with Quillam, a British anti-Islamic extremism and Muslim think tank formed by former Islamic extremist, Maajid Nawaz (coiner of the term ‘regressive left’) in order to try to confront extremism without supporting some of the nazi-ish overtones of the EDL that he allegedly opposes.

“Right to Left” is utilized, despite its biases, to show the limits and importance of street tactics. This movie shows the importance of not giving a free pass to nazi-welcoming movements. It shows how active and consistent disruption of fascist movements helps to deter their ability to organize, recruit, or maintain any veneer of respectability. In one moment they prevent a leader from being able to speak by distracting the crowd with trumpet playing until the speaker finally gives up. The EDL’s attempts at respectability politics is also seen in how they often claim that they want to distance themselves from the neo-nazis and white supremacists they share ranks with and yet the EDL continues to hold space for them. The EDL also attempts to hold a veneer of liberalism by touting values such as “democracy” and “British values” in their inclusion of, for example, a lesbian and gay wing of the EDL. “Right to Left,” however, also

The second film about Tommy quitting the EDL after discussions with (shocker) real life, *actual* Muslims, does well at showing how a long-term right-wing dialogue and counter-recruitment process such as through a leftist version of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration could potentially be utilized in an effort to undermine right-wing bleeding deacons. You may say this is absurd and unrealistic but I actually know of a number of Minutemen and Klansmen who were counter-recruited into left-wing, anti-racist community defense initiatives by the John Brown Gun Club (JBGC) through strategies such as tabling at gun shows and building long-term, trusting relationships and helping the poor whites realize they’d been hoodwinked (no pun intended). Then using the multi-racial armed collaborations they eventually created, the JBGC could provide at the request of these groups, extensive security and concrete protection for black churches, mosques, protests, abortion clinics and the like. These types of community defense is crucial antifa work. Reid Ross mentioned to me that, “For those I know in the struggle, antifa is a huge commitment and a way of life. It’s a form of community defense more than a typical NGO style mass movement.” This means that for many, being an antifascist is a 24/7 job in which we truly commit our lives to these various avenues for change and fascist repression in which any daily interaction may have the potential to become an aspect of our anti-fascism.

Both of these movies serve to remind us that there are semi-legitimate concerns lurking in the shadows of these far-right nationalist groups that we must address head-on if we hope to have any impact. By ignoring the semi-legitimate aspects of their claims, we just justify their entrenchment and ultimately feed their recruitment. Pamela Geller, in her classically vitriolic, sweeping, and propagandistic essay about Tommy Robinson leaving the EDL, may be surprised that many of the antifas who oppose the EDL and its Islamophobic ilk, are, for example, also vehemently opposed to the bizarre and heinous

asshole with the chair? That was awesome.” This just shows the danger of entrenched encampments of ideologies and how that process can become viciously cyclical. Of course this does not fairly represent the importance of placing constant civilian pressure on fascist groups, if taken in a spirit of openness, it does ring some bells about how sometimes street fighting tactics without a wide range of other tactics such as propaganda, counter-recruitment, grassroots organizing etc. can turn into a dangerous spectacle. Reid Ross accounts that. “There is a tendency to romanticize macho street violence without the requisite background research about the kind and level of threat. If you don’t know exactly what you’re up against (and who your allies are) you will make big mistakes, people could be unnecessarily hurt, and you could wind up with negative publicity.” Another interviewee describes this danger by relaying the experience of watching his friend catch a brick in the chest at a demo in Dover which led to an emergency room stay with a broken rib (he strongly suggested the wearing of helmets by antifas). The last bit in the quote about the role of the press is also important in terms of the public perception of antifa work. Reid Ross goes on to add, “Actions that gain the favor of the press are difficult and require a lot of planning and consideration. There is an assumption that the media will be negative anyway and that journalists are our natural enemies. I want to push back against that. Reporters can be on our side. We are fighting fascism which most people find important and valuable. When we have that us against everyone attitude we fall into a romantic trap that perpetuates the alienation of ourselves and our cause.” The press controls so much of how the militancy of a movement is perceived— whether as terroristic or noble— which can in turn contribute to recruitment and normalization of radical leftist efforts. Many groups are known for writing extensive propaganda and counter-recruitment material including their own newspapers and articles, such as this article about the Clapton Ultras featured in “Strike!” magazine.

exposes the limits of antifas who are solely focusing on counter protests, rather than utilizing a larger and more transformative strategy that could involve such tactics as counter-recruitment, education, dialogue, and sustained subversion.

The film “Quitting the EDL” is juxtaposed as a liberal peacebuilding vision for confronting the EDL through dialogue. This film shows the founder of the EDL being ultimately able to speak out against neo-nazis in the EDL, and furthermore begin working directly with several British-Muslims. Thus, “Quitting the EDL” highlights the importance of exposure to diversity and tackling these right wing groups head-on by groups mobilizing key figures (like Tommy Robinson) to speak out against the farther right elements within their already far-right organization. Even if this process really failed to do much about the EDL as a phenomenon or at a structural level, and even though Tommy is still kind of a prick, he’s certainly changed a lot.. This film shows the potential value of dialogue in a process of counter-recruitment and subversion of the respectability of far-right groups (although one does wish that Tommy could be counter-recruited farther left into the antifa ranks where his knowledge would prove quite useful). This film also makes visible how purely liberal peacebuilding traditions have done little to actually stop the EDL and as such, continued antifa resistance is essential.

How we Define Violence: Military vs. Diplomatic Solutions

To the extent that military theory has as its basic goal to pound the enemy into submission, and peacebuilding has as its basic goal to prevent unnecessary death, they are quite opposed. However, in practical terms, they depend on each other. No one has an unlimited supply of military equipment or human bodies. At a certain point resources always get exhausted.

Military approaches hope that the enemy gets exhausted first or at least that they can control the bulk of the territories when all parties are finally pushed into negotiations. Further, if there was no war, then the Peacebuilding-Industrial Complex would collapse and become just a corner store market and small consultancy enterprise for primarily neighborhood and domestic disputes. So at baseline, they make and save each other money. When wars end ('even great, noble wars' against nazis and fascists), it is often through diplomatic and peacebuilding concessions coupled with military pressure from all sides. There is no perfect peacebuilding solution nor is there a full military solution that transforms the conditions leading to violence. At some point both positions have to yield authority, however grudgingly, to each other. Anti-fascism cannot shoot fascism out of existence, nor can peacebuilders just magically hand-wave it gone.

Both of these ideologies, anti-fascism and a peacebuilding/conflict transformation **approach**, taken at base, also have failures that the other makes glaringly clear. For instance, peacebuilding looks at the fact that one can bomb and kill a group (to an extent) but never an ideology. There is no such thing as a "military solution". The logical end of this is genocide, which, aside from being one of the most horrendous aspects of humanity, does not ever accomplish its own stated goals of ending some lineage or 'purifying' another. Even in a sort of less severe situation, we see that the more the U.S. military attacks al-Qaeda, the more their ideology strengthens, even if their numbers temporarily dwindle. Suddenly, you have all-important and symbolic martyrs who are morphed into glorious beloved saints in death. Civilians killed in the crossfire and by the horrors of drone warfare begin to feel like only al-Qaeda can protect them. The group just splinters and reforms. ISIS craves greater U.S. boots on the ground because it justifies so much of their mythos. The whole situation is like the many-headed hydra that grows new life in different places each time it is

eral insufficiency of covering everything is just fickle. We need more pedagogy, town halls, neighborhood activism, friendship and community outside the bubble of what movement scholar Kevin van Meter calls the activist mentality. More militancy in unions, more public climate activism, more understanding of poverty and how poor people's movements develop, rather than urban middle class condescension. A lot of us are looking for that one big theme that will save the world but what's needed is smaller things that come together naturally." He here shows how a diverse range of action and tactics beget greater impact and that there are no universal answers, only contextually appropriate experiments towards transformation.

The two case study movies exemplify a lot of these trends in the dynamic relationship between diplomacy and militancy. The film, "Right to Left" was made by a few naive filmmakers who seemed to have believed that they could just casually make their entrance onto a centuries-old battlefield and get everyone to sit down real nice and talk it out. They represent, in this sense, so much of what is wrong with the white-savior, colonizer, and capitalist peacebuilding field. However, they did achieve a part of their goal, which was making visible the point where street protests become sort of pointless spectacle when they are the only tactic emphasized or primarily employed. They showed that the antifa and the EDL come together and clash around for a bit and then go home, basically ready to do the exact same thing again next month or next year. The EDL scream out, "You liberal faggots!" (and then apologizes to the gay EDL organizer next to him and the scornful-looking cop), and then the antifas respond, "You Nazi scum!" Neither party feels duly represented by their opponent's name calling. In this mutual misunderstanding they become only more consoled by only feeling understood by members of their own group. Both parties go home having the same discussions; "How could they not realize how wrong they are and how right we are? What's wrong with them? Although did you see me hit that

tion. This is imperative and largely militarist work, no doubt, however, we must also think about long-term transformative anti-fascist projects if we hope to build towards a positive peace. To be clear, I am not talking about some rubbish liberal vision of fascists and minorities and anarchists living side by side happily. I'm talking about upending and challenging the roots of fascist ideology in our cultures in an attempt to, rather than try to push it back forever, end it completely. I would like fascist ideology and affiliation to be one of those things that even an average Joe and Jane scoff at as being childishly naive and brutally cruel. Building this kind of transformative and long-term strategy requires building relationships across massive political divides and also supporting academic-activists and decolonizing indigenous resistance writers such as Enāemaehkiw Thupaq Kesīqnaeh who stay on the front lines of anti-fascist research while also being embedded in movements.

The structural and cultural violence understandings and practices are pivotal in that any antifa strategy that is not also rooted in undermining authoritarian dominance (both externally and internally to a group or person), opposing neoliberalism, and seeking to build alternatives, is ultimately a failed and hypocritical endeavor. Fighting fascism without fighting the deeper issues of injustice, coercion, and exploitation is performative spectacle at best and solidifying of structural violence at worst. We see it at its worst in the example of pro-zionist antifa groups in Germany that recognize the legitimate problem of left anti-semitism but fail to call out zionist imperialism. Many people drawn to the far-right are pulled due to their own economic hardship: to not have an economic critique in antifa work, we risk alienating the working class and leaving them to the right, as the U.S. left has often done despite the radical history of poor whites in the U.S. for example, Reid Ross suggested that, "Of course antifa participants are almost always red, black, and green, but to detract from that work for its gen-

attacked anywhere other than the most integral points. However, without military pressure, no armed fascist group would be willing to negotiate.

The Ripeness theory of conflict resolution basically states that groups will never negotiate until they are sufficiently exhausted and stalemated. For example, Assad will never have to attend peace talks until his soldiers are getting bombed to the same extent that his Regime, Russia and Hezbollah bomb the opposition. Why would he? He lives in relative peace and safety and sees the opposition (and apparently all civilians in opposition-held areas) as "terrorists". No military leader wants to acknowledge any scrap of legitimacy on behalf of the enemy. Furthermore, military repression of fascist ideologies and authoritarian groups often disrupts their mythos of invincibility, further disrupting their utopian or merely protective claims. It's only once all parties are sufficiently 'ripe' that a fascist or authoritarian group would consider the mythos blow of negotiation. An aspect of antifa praxis is that we try to repress fascist movements as early and effectively as possible so as to avoid the point where we have to battle with them on the field or ultimately make concessions with them in negotiations. But if we're looking at antifas in history fighting against fascists and nazis on the battlefield there are abundant examples such as Tito's Yugoslav Partisans or even the anarcho-syndicalist Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) in revolutionary Spain in which ripeness theory and negotiation play more important roles.

In terms of diplomatic and peacebuilding approaches in general though, I cannot understate the importance of dialogue in saving lives in an active conflict zone. This truth has micro-examples in the antifa context in smaller-scale battle situations including street confrontations, gang wars, turf wars, etc. in which dialogue can lead to truces or temporary ceasefires. A recent example was Bloods and Crips coming together to protest police violence. In full-blown war, a half-hour cease-fire can

mean the difference between an entire village starving or dying of dehydration or preventable disease, as aid caravans are able to enter and leave safely. Yet even this is complex, as armed groups often seize control of aid caravans or authoritarians exploit distribution to serve their aims. However, the pride or relative safety of armed leaders is often seen as one of the biggest causes in ongoing wartime deaths when the situation is already ripe for dialogue and such leaders refuse to meaningfully participate. However, Syrians for example are heavily divided on the question of whether you can or should have dialogues with Assad present and participating. I asked around 30 Syrian activists this question and found wildly varying answers ranging from, “You can’t negotiate with the devil (referring to the massacres committed by the regime such as chemical weapons in Ghouta and civilian targeted barrel bombs)” to, “Negotiating with Assad is our only chance of ending the war and stopping the killing. He is a party in the war so he has to be present.”

So in terms of antifascist work, to the extent that we can repress and keep the numbers of nazis and their ilk contained, we needn’t break with some idealized deontological ethic, but the moment they have an active body of support, we need to begin to weigh the pros and cons of a wide-range of subversive or transformative methods before they begin to exponentially grow. My time with Syrians supports that this transformation can happen rapidly and almost without notice. Most Syrians I spoke with did not expect a revolution to happen in Syria. The onset of warfare was so rapid that it shocked them especially due to tight controls on media by the regime. It should not be seen as a blow to ethics to have non-traitorous communication and dialogue across enemy lines. Just because we dialogue with a fascist doesn’t mean that we have to snitch or be converted. If our ideologies are so fragile that we can’t maintain them in the face of fascist rhetoric, than we need to update them anyways. Further, dialogue does not have to prevent us from showing up on the streets and doing the active work of repression of

nazism and fascism, but it does open key strategic angles at intervention points along the way. An internet friend, Bobby Wakesleep, described her insights in fighting the alt-right and white nationalism by saying, “If you can, do the difficult work of engaging with people who seem like they have some hope. Meme hard and well. Learn to leverage edginess against fascism. And then when they organize publicly, kick them in the teeth”. This is so important in the ways that it adapts to the discourse and attack surfaces of modern fascist recruitment pools.

An important and relevant peacebuilding concept here is that of positive and negative peace created by Johan Galtung, the father of modern peacebuilding. A negative peace is where there is an absence of direct violence, such as killing, but all the deeper levels of cultural and structural violence maintain in place (see Galtung’s brilliant theory of violence here). Negative peace can be seen in incidences such as temporary ceasefires in Israel/Palestine where, despite the *relative* absence of direct violence, the Israeli state continues its apartheid and colonization of Palestine. A negative peace is considered highly volatile and at constant risk for relapse into directly violent warfare. Seeing how, statistically speaking, a nation that has had active war in recent years is dramatically more likely to lapse back into it (known as the Conflict Trap), negative peace poses a very serious risk. However, it is often the case that a ceasefire and the accompanying negative peace is a necessary first step in beginning to transform the deeper structures at play beneath the visible event horizon of any conflict. Alternatively, positive peace is a situation in which not only has direct violence ceased, but also cultural and structural violences have been transformed such that there is an active celebration of difference and coexistence, in which persons can engage creatively with proactive peacebuilding and development.

The immediate goals of antifa work are most generally of the kind leading to a negative peace in trying to stop fascist groups from harming minorities or feeding a culture of marginaliza-