

THE FUTURE OF ANTIFA

Anti-fascism originated in response to early European fascism, and when Mussolini's Blackshirts and Hitler's Brownshirts were ascendant in Europe, various socialist, communist, and anarchist parties and groups emerged to confront them. When I talk about anti-fascism in the book **[Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook]** and when we talk about it today, it's really a matter of tracing the sort of historical lineage of revolutionary anti-fascist movements that came from below, from the people, and not from the state.

The sort of militant anti-fascism that antifa represents reemerged in postwar Europe in Britain, where fascists had broad rights to organize and demonstrate. These groups in the '80s adopted the name antifa, and it eventually spread to the United States in the late '80s and into the '90s. Originally, it was known as the Anti-Racist Action Network. That kind faded in the mid-2000s; the recent wave we're seeing in the US developed out of it, but has taken on more of the name and the kind of aesthetics of the European movement.

The basic principle of antifa is "no platform for fascism." If you ask them, they'll tell you that they believe you have to deny any and all platforms to fascism, no matter how big or small the threat. The original fascist groups that later seized power in Europe started out very small. You cannot, they argue, treat these groups lightly. You need to take them with the utmost seriousness, and the way to prevent them from growing is to prevent them from having even the first step toward becoming normalized in society.

"Much of what they do does not involve physical confrontation. They also focus on using public opinion to expose white supremacists and raise the social and professional costs of their participation in these groups. They want to see these people fired from their jobs, denounced by their families, marginalized by their communities.

Part of what they do is physical confrontation. They view self-defense as necessary in terms of defending communities against white supremacists. They also see this as a preventative action. They look at the history of fascism in Europe and say, "*we have to eradicate this problem before it gets any bigger, before it's too late.*" Sometimes that involves physical confrontation or blocking their marches or whatever the case may be. It's also important to remember that these are self-described revolutionaries. They're anarchists and communists who are way outside the traditional conservative-liberal spectrum. They're not interested in and don't feel constrained by conventional norms.

I don't know of any empirical examples of anti-fascists successfully stopping a neo-Nazi group and then moving on to other groups that are not racist but merely to the right. What tends to happen is they disband once they've successfully marginalized or eliminated the local right-wing extremist threat, and then return to what they normally do — organizing unions, doing environmental activism, etc.

'Norway is an interesting example. In the '90s, they had a pretty violent neo-Nazi skinhead movement, and the street-level anti-fascist groups there seemed to play a significant role in marginalizing the threat. By the end of '90s it was pretty much defunct, and subsequently there hasn't been a serious fascist [movement] in Norway.

Another example you can look at is popular responses to the National Front [a far-right political party formed in Britain in 1967] in the late '70s in Britain. The National Front was pretty huge, and the Anti-Nazi League, through both a combination of militant anti-fascist tactics and also some more popular organizing and electoral strategies, managed to successfully deflate the National Front momentum.

But look, anti-fascists will concede that most of the time nonviolence is certainly the way to go. Most antifa members believe it's far easier to use nonviolent methods than it is to show up and use direct action methods. But they argue that history shows that it's dangerous to take violence and self-defense off the table. They're not interested in and don't feel constrained by conventional norms. The general defense is that the rationale for shutting down someone like Milo Yanopoulos has to do with the fact that his kind of commentary emboldens actual fascists. The Berkeley administrators issued a statement in advance that they feared he was going to out undocumented students on campus, and previously he had targeted a transgender student at the University of Milwaukee Wisconsin. Antifa regards this as an instigation to violence, and so they feel justified in shutting it down.

Again, though, this is much easier to understand when you remember that antifa isn't concerned with free speech or other liberal democratic values. "These are self-described revolutionaries. They're anarchists and communists who are way outside the traditional conservative-liberal spectrum."

These are pan-leftist groups composed of leftists of different stripes. They all seem to have different views of what they think the ideal social order looks like. Some of them are Marxists, some are Leninists, some are social democrats or



anarchists. But they cohere around a response to what they perceive as a common threat.

anti-fascists don't have any allegiance to liberalism, so that's not the question that they are focused on. The question is also how much of a threat do we think white supremacists or neo-Nazis pose, both in a literal or immediate sense but also in terms of their ability to influence broader discourses or even the Trump administration.

I believe that for people who are feeling the worst repercussions of this, they are already experiencing a kind of illiberalism in terms of their lack of access to the kinds of freedoms that liberalism promotes and tries to aspire to; and so for me, that's more of a focus, in terms of trying to mitigate those kinds of problems, than the fears of people who, prior to Trump, thought that everything was fine in the US.

I think that antifa can influence where leftist politics in America is going. They are aggressive, loud, and fiercely committed. They're having a wider influence on the radical left in this country, particularly on campuses and with other groups like Black Lives Matter. Being part of one of these groups is a huge time commitment, and the vetting process that these groups have for bringing in new people is very strenuous. You have to really commit — it's basically like a second job. This limits the number of people that are going to be willing to put their time into it. I don't think the antifa movement is going to explode as much as some do.

Mark Bray courtesy of **Sean Illing**
Vox.com

On Punching Nazis:

Most of us want to punch Nazis in the face. Americans are a bit like Indiana Jones in this regard. That's why it's so tempting to treat hate-spewing white supremacists like Richard Spencer as movie villains, to just dispatch them with heroic fisticuffs.

Resist. We should never permit ourselves or anyone we love to go all Captain America on such smug supposedly Aryan poison. Of course, there are obvious reasons for restraint. They range from a moral opposition to violence, to thwarting these loathsome creeps' strategy of inciting violence so that they can appear to be the aggrieved party. But the best reason not to go start a fistfight with the nearest alt right thug?

Simple. It is violence's fundamental corrosive effect on all it touches, and especially on civil society.

In his book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker uses historical evidence to argue that our modern society, news broadcasts notwithstanding, is the least violent time in human history (based on the chance that the average individual will perish due to an act of violence). I would argue that the force behind this decline is the fundamental bargain of modern civilization: Granting the government a monopoly on 'legitimate' violence, in exchange for protection



and the fair administration of justice.

Imagine if our disputes, rather than being resolved by the courts, were still settled by exchanges of gunfire. Actually, we don't have to do too much imagining; this is why life as a criminal is so dangerous. Rather than going to the police to resolve their inter-gang disputes, rival gangs murder each other (and innocents suffer in the process).

This is why it is so dangerous to advocate violence as a solution to political problems. While it may feel good to talk tough (just ask President Trump), legitimizing violence attacks the fundamental underpinnings of civil society.

Confronting evil is important, but we don't live in a Hollywood movie. And we don't live in a pat, formulaic drama, where violence solves problems and always leads to happy endings.

As the late, great Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote, "The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind." Meeting white supremacists' violence with violence will exacerbate the conflict.

And if you are willing to follow the advocacy of violence to its ultimate conclusion of killing all those who hold a particular belief, at least be willing to admit your purpose so that others can see you for who you really are.

If you believe in the value of peaceful civilization, don't argue for actions that attack its fundamental principles. Really. Please don't.

Some of the thoughts of **Chris Yeh.**
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