



WEAPONS AND ETHICS

ILL WILL

ADRIAN WOHLLEBEN

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There is no such thing as a peaceful insurrection. This is America; there is no imaginable scenario in which social conflicts will continue and people will not be armed, on all sides. Whether weapons are necessary is an open question, but in any case, they are inevitable. However, as friends noted some time ago, there is an important distinction to be made between “being armed and the use of arms”. If guns are an inevitable feature of any American insurrection, it is a question of doing everything possible to make their use unnecessary.

For participants and observers of this summer’s uprisings, the clashes in Kenosha following Jacob Blake’s shooting have dragged the question of armed violence to the forefront of debates. Does the presence of guns on “our side” offer any sense of relief from danger? Do they make anything possible that isn’t otherwise? Can we imagine them being used in a way that would open the situation up, and make people feel more powerful?

In his “Critique of Violence” (1921), penned in the immediate aftermath of a defeated communist insurrection in Germany, Walter Benjamin attempts to bypass sterile oppositions between violence and “nonviolence”, legitimate and illegitimate force, instead directing our attention to the more decisive difference between modes and manners of violence. By suspending the question of the ‘aims’ or goals of violence—which, on Benjamin’s view, quickly devolves into myth and metaphysics—and instead differentiating between its *means* and *uses*, we shift the problem from an instrumental or technical register to an ethical one. Instead of asking, “for the sake of what end does this act occur?”, we should ask, *What is this act like from the inside? What does it do to us, and those around us? How does it activate, or deactivate, our capacity to fully participate in existence?* In this way, Benjamin is able to reframe the problem of revolutionary violence: its difference from state violence resides not in the “tasks” or agenda it claims to serve, but first and foremost in the relation to the world, to oneself, and to others that it engenders.

The same insight must today be applied to the presence of violence and weapons within rebellious movements. Violence is neither “good” nor “bad”, nor is it helpfully framed in terms of the “ends” or purposes it serves (tradition offers us little in the way of a program, model, or vocation anyway). Better would be to ask about the types of arms, and the mode of their use: *How does our use of weapons work behind our backs to define the meaning and limits of our power? How does this choice affect and configure who feels able to join us, and even what we think of as ‘winning’?* How can we make this choice explicit to ourselves? To be clear, this question cannot be limited to the subject of firearms (my focus here), but embraces the entire domain of tactics—marches, blockades, occupations, rioting, looting, mutual aid, and so on. In the long run, it’s our whole way of looking at things, at the meaning of revolution itself as an immanent and lived process that is at issue here. All methods used by insurgents must be subjected to ethical concerns of this sort. We are in need of an earnest debate around tactics today: *Which practices have succeeded in deepening and widening social ruptures, thereby opening a real possibility for communism? Which end up confining insurgencies within a closed field of specialized problems, the better to govern and manage them?*

There is an ethics wrapped up in the selection of firearms, and the visibility this entails. For instance, when we think about the presence of guns on the side of protestors, we need to distinguish guns openly carried versus those concealed. The leftist militia-style folks open-carrying long rifles often say they are there to “protect” the demonstration or the crowd outside the courthouse. For this reason, we think of them as being formally or ideologically aligned with the protesters, or “on our side.” In reality, however, the crowd in Kenosha was already armed, only with pistols under their belts. Between these two groups, there are qualitative distinctions to be made around the mode and method of arms, and how each brings their bearer to relate to the crowd around them.

Unlike the folks carrying long-rifles and wearing bulletproof-vests, those who had pistols concealed in their belts are able to continue to also engage in more “social” forms of rebellion. By this, I mean those non-specialized forms of action accessible to anyone who simply shows up, such as graffiti, breaking windows on the courthouse, throwing rocks at police, setting dump trucks on fire, rioting and looting, etc. For the most part, while those conceal-carrying in the crowd often make no secret of the fact that they were armed, to the point of openly telling people next to them that they intend to shoot back if the crowd is attacked, they do not make their possession of guns into an exclusive vocation. Having a gun is not treated like an identity or a “social function” that distinguishes them from everyone else. In most cases, those moving alongside them in the crowd would not even see their guns until they were used, for instance to shoot open an ATM, or else when Kyle Rittenhouse opened fire, at which point at least a dozen pistols came out of belt loops that had not been seen before.

By contrast—and this is the sense in which the choice of a tool like the long rifle becomes ethical and not simply technical—the use of arms by Black or Black-adjacent militia folks tended to specialize itself, resulting in a form of social closure. With certain rare exceptions—as during the standoff with a Bearcat that drove up on the crowd outside the Kenosha courthouse on the first night—the open-carry Leftist militia folks keep to the edge of the demonstration, and generally refuse to participate in any other way. On the one hand, one could of course read this decision as performing an equally “social” function, at least if you believe that the crowd

needed “protecting” or guarding. Yet this feels like a misconception, since the protest was already armed, and did not hesitate to draw when fired upon. In the meantime, however, those conceal-carrying pistols continue to combine and move together with other roles, practices, and forms of participation. They can engage in the same gestures of attack, defense, and care as everyone else, smashing up concrete benches and pulling up bricks, lasering police, throwing paint bombs at Bearcat windows to immobilize them, escorting protesters wounded or blinded by police to safety, throwing fireworks, and so on.

The choice of weapons is not merely technical, but at the same time ethical. Given the climate of mounting social hostility, the need for collective self-defense is an undeniable fact of current social ruptures. How we try to solve this problem will impact the possibilities of social composition on the ground. The more that armed violence detaches itself from other forms of struggle, the more it becomes something we treat as a specialized technical problem requiring esoteric knowledge, the more it will tend to become divorced from the intelligence and confidence of the crowd. This ultimately will result in a deescalation, since it will ensure that people unversed in its methods continue to feel unwelcome or unprepared to engage.

By contrast, while I might be aware that there are pistols in the belt of the person throwing rocks next to me, this fact need not cancel other forms of engagement, participation, and collaboration. It is decisive that we maintain a common *plane of consistency* of practices that cut across armed and non-armed people. By contrast, the militia-style practice of open-carrying long-arms risks producing a kind of tactical solipsism. The more people believe their only function in the demo is to be a “living gun”, the less inclined they will be to participate in the collective intelligence of the crowd, which is often able to find other solutions than gunfire to problems that confront it. This accounts for the strange feeling one has marching alongside such folks, or engaging in battles with the police in their presence: rather than remaining in fluid contact with the crowd, or feeling like they are a part of what’s going on, their disconnection gives the impression of them being a third or even a fourth type of force on the ground. They appear, in addition to police, protestors, and Right-wing militias, like one more problem to deal with, one more unpredictable ele-

ment with its own internal logic, inaccessible to those around it.

Do the guns on “our side” offer us any sense of relief from danger? Do they make anything possible that wasn’t otherwise?

Any sense of “relief” we might feel at the presence of either the pistols or the long rifles pertains solely to a scenario that is itself already basically terrifying—either police or right-wing forces opening fire on us—and which in any case would result in a chaotic mess that would be destructive of the collective power of the crowd. To what extent does the knowledge that our side is armed help us relate to this possibility? In such a scenario, it *might* be good that the fascists not be the only force shooting—provided that return-fire doesn’t result in further casualties on our side. To be honest, the intensity of such situations so thoroughly exceeds what most of us are accustomed to that the kinds of gestures and tactics we know and understand cannot easily find their bearings in it. As a result, it makes little sense to associate them with anything positive, or to say that the presence of guns generated a kind of opening within the situation outside of this eventuality.

In the final analysis, the only thing that the guns on our side contribute is the possibility of *slowing down a massacre*, since they introduce the potential for return-fire. However, bloodshed is just bloodshed, and there’s nothing to celebrate in it ethically, or socially, on its own terms.

The ethical question is not about weapons,
but about which ones.

