



to be crystal clear about their stance.

Also, Graeber's framing is a false choice where condemning violent reactions to police brutality is somehow *excusing* and further, even *inviting* police brutality. One can believe both kinds of violence are wrong, and it is a mighty cynical kind of solidarity that requires those who believe in nonviolence to ignore those who practice violence. Silence equals approval. If you employ a tactic that you know goes against my deeply held beliefs, why is it *my* beliefs which must be suppressed? In that formulation, violence trumps nonviolence, because only the former is granted a full spectrum of expression.

The calls for silence among NVAs have taken a particularly sinister turn recently as VAs have begun to also insist that no [9] (potentially inconvenient) live streaming be done of events, lest they show Black Bloc tactics in action without the aid of a painstaking explanation by an apologist. So Black Bloc now comes full circle to embrace precisely the same mindset of brutality and suppression that they claim to find so objectionable in police. And since Black Bloc is relatively easy [10] to infiltrate during an action, we aren't necessarily just talking [11] about an ideological merger, either.

These tactics are spectacularly wrong-headed; as Charles commented [12]:

[Hedges] would have done better to point to the long history of the police inserting their agents into demonstrations to commit crimes and thereby tar the demonstrators. The logical question then is, "if the police are paying people to smash windows, why are you doing it for free?"

Why indeed? As DCblogger remarks in mail: "No snitching cries are a good indicator of a police informer. Bringing in the police is very dangerous to informers, so they don't want anyone to do that." As for the suppression, I initially considered likening it to the infamous Stop Snitchin' [13] campaign, but refrained because I thought VAs might find the unsavory connection objectionable. Well, turns out they're going there [14] themselves<sup>3</sup>. What's next, omertà [15]?

Perhaps VAs, like Mitt Romney [16], believe some things should only be discussed in quiet rooms. That would be very convenient for VAs, to have gentle talks in dulcet tones out of the spotlight while chaos is stirred up on the streets, and the public views the entire movement through the lens of violent activism.

Those opposed to violent actions (no matter how you define them) do not have that luxury, though. They need to voice their opposition strenuously and publicly, because literally everyone else -- VAs, authorities, and the wider citizenry -- will assume they approve of violent tactics otherwise.

Finally, there's a dynamic that both sides are coming to grips with. Susie Cagle describes [17] it thus:

While previous criticisms came from the right or center of the political spectrum, these perspectives are arising from the left and mainly from journalists who have not been in the field to witness these tactics in action and within context.

And Graeber (again):

I am also writing as someone who was deeply involved in the early stages of planning Occupy in New York. I am also an anarchist who has participated in many Black Blocs.

There are two points being made. First, Cagle is right that those who are actually on the scene are best qualified to report on what is happening. God knows there has been enough shoddy reporting from those who blandly pass along press releases from City Hall or who parachute in for a day or two and presume to write their authoritative accounts. There's no substitute for long term, on-the-ground reporting, and the accounts from those folks should be taken to be the most credible unless they demonstrate otherwise.

But as valuable as that experience is for a reporter, it can be hazardous for an activist: There's a certain "I was there" snobbishness that can creep in. Arguing from authority has been one of the major complaints of those frustrated with insular, self-referential and power privileging reporting from MSM outlets. Seeing it from activists is particularly disturbing, and seeing it from anarchists like Graeber is mind-boggling.

While those on the inside are better positioned to give a front row story, they are also susceptible to the myopic perspective that causes relatively small or inconsequential elements to be wildly distorted. VAs may have an elaborately constructed paradigm to justify their tactics, and may have meticulously selected a regional franchise's windows to break, instead of a "locally owned" coffee shop<sup>4</sup> (curated vandalism, if you will), but guess what? The uninitiated observer will just see destruction<sup>5</sup>.

The position of VA that destroying property and physically confronting police is some kind of sublime critique requires an almost complete level of self-absorption. It takes a resolute and willful ignorance to not see how obviously repellent such tactics are to the population at large<sup>6</sup>. VAs might respond by saying they disregard the delicate sensibilities of the bourgeois pigs, which is fine. But those who characterize the populace like that have no place in a movement that strives to represent -- or at least get approving forbearance from -- the bottom 99% of the economic scale.

---

## NOTES

1. VAs are notoriously slippery in their arguments. They insist that they never, ever be criticized over what they call tactical disagreements -- but refuse to make themselves distinct from those who want no part of their tactics. NVAs tried to make that distinction plain from the very beginning [18] in Oakland and violence advocates prevented it. In effect, the groups were associated against one of the groups' will. Yet VAs remain extraordinarily touchy about being criticized. So they force themselves on those who strenuously disagree with their tactics and then act like aggrieved victims if there is any objection. And incidentally, that disagreement is foundational. VAs like to pretend its some sort of minor semantic difference, but in fact it goes to the very heart of what Occupy represents: VAs consider it an insurgency; NVAs a mass movement. Those two are mutually exclusive.

[\(Back\)](#)

2. Any veering off into What Would Gandhi Do is an unhelpful distraction as far as I'm concerned. Occupy is happening right now; we need to focus on what's happening right now and give our arguments for or against it in terms of what's happening right now. Hypotheticals, theoreticals, thought experiments and other flights of fancy are as counterproductive as eliminationist rhetoric.

That said, Graeber misrepresents Gandhi. His [claim](#) <sup>[19]</sup> that Gandhi refused to denounce the murderer by a radical is simply not true. The passage comes [from here](#) <sup>[20]</sup> (via affinis in email), and Gandhi clearly denounces it: "I must say that those who believe and argue that such murders may do good to India are ignorant men indeed. No act of treachery can ever profit a nation. Even should the British leave in consequence of such murderous acts, who will rule in their place? The only answer is: the murderers."

Affinis also [sent along this](#) <sup>[21]</sup>; see particularly the last part: "Do you not tremble to think of freeing India by assassinations?" etc. Perhaps violence advocates require a certain amount of historical revisionism to make their ideology palatable for the masses. I wonder why that would be?

[\(Back\)](#)

3. There's at least an equally long post that can be written about suppression, [bullying](#) <sup>[22]</sup> and [sexism](#) <sup>[23]</sup> by violence advocates. While they bristle at any suggestion they are animated by a hypermasculine mindset, it's pretty clear that women are overwhelmingly (but not unanimously!) turned off by the kind of glorified hooliganism VAs champion. If they don't lose their voices entirely they will only be heard if they manage to become sufficiently appealing to a powerful male.

[\(Back\)](#)

4. The romanticized notion of targeting a national coffee chain over a [locally owned coffee shop](#) <sup>[24]</sup> might be some more historical revisionism. Affinis, via email:

Graeber:

I doubted this when I read it, since most Black Blocs agree on a strict policy of not damaging owner-operated enterprises, and I now find in Susie Cagle's response to your article that, in fact, it was a chain coffee shop, and the property destruction was carried out by someone not in black."

This is a reference to Tully's coffeeshop. I tried digging into this a bit. Individual Tully's coffeeshops explicitly advertise themselves as locally owned and operated. But Tully's is a franchise. Across firms, franchises vary in their level of central control. Apparently with Tully's the individual shops are pretty much independent in operation and style (unlike say a McDonald's franchise), but all sell coffee from the mother firm, etc.

Whether or not the property destruction was carried out by someone in black (and I've not seen any evidence of this outside of Cagle's article, where she was arguing against Hedges) might be a bit besides the point. In the Nov 2 evening events, [in the videos](#)

[25], the people carrying out the trashing seemed to be predominantly be young men wearing bandannas, and it seemed that they clearly knew each other and were acting in a coordinated fashion, but many were not wearing black. Incidentally, in Oakland, both Tully's and that Starbucks that later had its windows smashed had donated food to OO before getting their windows smashed.

As far as BB respecting owner operated businesses - I've seen [26] little evidence of that.

So take the lofty claims with a grain of salt.

[\(Back\)](#)

5. One of the few resonant points VAs make is that those who go into the legal system face a very hard time. America's onerous and punitive criminal justice policies not only warehouse people for excessively long periods, but brands them for life after release. But that is just one part of the issue. DCblogger in an email: "[P]utting someone into the criminal justice system is a very serious matter. it is life altering. But then, so is smashing the window. The bank can replace the window. Or they can shut down the branch. Washington DC's riot corridor was a ghost town for 30 years. The damage of a riot lives a long time after the riot. I hate to think what business insurance is in Oakland right now."

[\(Back\)](#)

6. In a way, getting bogged down in VA arguments is counterproductive because it distracts us from looking at what kind of actions are inclusive and inviting. This is an extension of the "insurgency vs. mass movement" dichotomy in footnote 1. Via email, activist Joseph Anderson:

Occupy Oakland, and the Occupy movement, cannot both have a diversity of people and a "diversity of tactics" at this time -- and the movement can't shortcut the process of attaining, and retaining, the first by jumping to the second.

Via email, Lambert:

The object IMNSHO should be to get as many people as possible supporting Occupations with their physical presence. This is what the Egyptians did. "All walks of life" must participate. One can also think of this as "safety in numbers." Only NV can do that.

As a corollary, transparency and accountability are key, because if the GA decides that an event will be NV, and a bunch of parents bring their kids in strollers, and a lot of old people come with their walkers, and then a black blocker heaves a bottle at the police and the police charge the crowd, then (a) you've put innocents at risk, (b) you've lost a ton of people, who not only feel fearful but betrayed, and rightly so, and (c) you make it harder for part of the country that are not yet Occupy-friendly to become so.

And as a corollary to that, Occupy is pre-figuring what a transparent and accountable public process looks like. Where else have you seen one of those lately? But if, in the

name of autonomy, you've got black blockers doing violence, then nothing is transparent and accountable at all (unless you want to make the assumption that random violence is always possible). So the pre-figuration gets destroyed as well.

[snip]

And I don't think that the idea is that the state will respond with illegal violence. A child of six knows that. The lesson is in the prefiguration. The libraries, the kitchens. Doing something.

And finally [this from](#) <sup>[27]</sup> activist Soul:

We are being killed economically especially small businesses and all resources for our children. We have schools closing down, we have murders daily. That needs to be addressed, but we're trying to teach our children not to use violent measures, to use restorative justice and things. And then we have this violence and madness. Whether the police do it to them or they do it - both sides need to stop, I feel. The police and them, and let us get busy to try and build and create in a positive manner.

So that is why I'm standing; I'm not with the Chamber of Commerce. I'm representing West Oakland community - the children that are voiceless, the poor, the disabled - that will not have a voice with that group...I think [black bloc] has been infiltrated by police infiltrators, by provocateurs and stuff, and they're falling for it.

Because see there's this game in Occupy. As soon as any violence or any type of aggression happens it's the anarchists. And then when they do their call out, that's who they're calling to go front lines, and then they deny it...I think a lot of them, especially those that are always in the camera - you can see the one over there - are protest prostitute media whores. They look for the camera, they look for the sensation, rather than be busy daily in the community like many of us are. Daily. They're going to tear down our infrastructure. Well it's not going to be allowed...I want them to go home, they've overstayed their welcome. Many of them aren't even from this city, and I can start pointing at who don't live here. But I don't want to do that. I send them much respect and love, but enough's enough. You know, enough is enough.

There's no direction, no demand. They talk about foreclosures. Why the hell aren't they standing in front of a bank all day every day, jamming the engines? No no, we're gonna tear up city hall, we're gonna tear up whatever.

Preventing Wells Fargo from foreclosing on a house may not provide the adrenaline rush that smashing shit up provides, but it is actually far more provocative and subversive. To the extent that VAs prevent that kind of more productive activity it is deeply damaging to Occupy.

Also, the "There's no direction, no demand" critique has traction that initial "why don't they have demands?" cries against OWS didn't have. Occupy has begun to formulate demands via direct actions like Occupy Our Homes and supporting local strikes. The first charges were specious

because they were leveled against a mass movement just beginning to articulate its beliefs. In the early days, what Charles Pierce called <sup>[28]</sup> shouting at the right buildings was enough. Once activism started it became more reasonable to expect protesters to have some kind of message. So "no direction, no demand" is a fair charge to level against VAs.

[\(Back\)](#)



No votes yet

---

**Source URL (modified on 02/14/2012 - 11:02pm):**

[http://www.correntewire.com/concerning\\_violence\\_advocates\\_and\\_the\\_black\\_bloc\\_in\\_occupy?page=0](http://www.correntewire.com/concerning_violence_advocates_and_the_black_bloc_in_occupy?page=0)

**Links**

- [1] <http://www.correntewire.com/user/dcblogger>
- [2] <http://www.correntewire.com/users/affinis>
- [3] <http://www.correntewire.com/users/lambert>
- [4] <http://www.correntewire.com/users/okanogen>
- [5] <http://www.truth-out.org/black-bloc-cancer-occupy/1328541484>
- [6] <http://www.truth-out.org/print/12365>
- [7] [http://www.correntewire.com/crowd\\_sourcing\\_questions\\_for\\_chenoweth](http://www.correntewire.com/crowd_sourcing_questions_for_chenoweth)
- [8] <http://nplusonemag.com/concerning-the-violent-peace-police>
- [9] [http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2012/01/occupy\\_wall\\_str\\_44.php](http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2012/01/occupy_wall_str_44.php)
- [10] <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2007/08/23/police-montebello.html>
- [11] [http://www.correntewire.com/how\\_to\\_recognize\\_a\\_police\\_informer](http://www.correntewire.com/how_to_recognize_a_police_informer)
- [12] <http://pruningshears.squarespace.com/pruning-shears/2012/2/9/diversity-of-tactics-and-uniformity-of-outcomes.html#comment16834375>
- [13] <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/04/19/60minutes/main2704565.shtml>
- [14] <http://twitter.com/davidgraeber/status/168149874364268544>
- [15] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omert%C3%A0>
- [16] [http://blogs.chicagotribune.com/news\\_columnists\\_ezorn/2012/01/shhhh-romney-wants-economy-talk-in-quiet-rooms.html](http://blogs.chicagotribune.com/news_columnists_ezorn/2012/01/shhhh-romney-wants-economy-talk-in-quiet-rooms.html)
- [17] <http://www.truth-out.org/occupy-oakland/1328726021>
- [18] <http://occupyoakland.org/2012/02/did-dot-pass-ga/#comment-3695>
- [19] <http://pages.citebite.com/c1s4v8r2n1hqi>
- [20] [http://ltrc.iiit.ac.in/gwiki/index.php/Collected\\_Works/Volume\\_9/London\\_%2814th\\_August\\_1909%29](http://ltrc.iiit.ac.in/gwiki/index.php/Collected_Works/Volume_9/London_%2814th_August_1909%29)
- [21] [http://www.friendsoftibet.org/main/hind\\_swaraj\\_15.html](http://www.friendsoftibet.org/main/hind_swaraj_15.html)
- [22] <http://storify.com/jaspergregory/snitch-at-occupy-oakland>
- [23] [http://www.correntewire.com/thinking\\_about\\_oakland#comment-205630](http://www.correntewire.com/thinking_about_oakland#comment-205630)
- [24] <http://pages.citebite.com/c1p4x8r2w4ufr>
- [25] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pW8Qeprahcs>
- [26] <http://blogtown.portlandmercury.com/BlogtownPDX/archives/2012/02/06/black-bloc-trashes-belmont-cops-make-arrests>
- [27] <http://susie-c.tumblr.com/post/17291087477/why-the-hell-arent-they-standing-in-front-of-a>
- [28] <http://www.esquire.com/blogs/politics/state-of-the-union-class-6645356>