

Wrestling with Another Human Being: The Merits of a Messy, Power-laden Pacifism

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Abstract: How might pacifism contribute to our ability to think through and confront the most urgent problems of global politics? First, in an act of ground-clearing, I address the problems commonly associated with pacifism—its assumed passivity, inviting exploitation/aggression; inability to confront injustice and thus inherent conservatism; and abrogation of responsibility to *this* “other” through over-concern for *that* “other”—interrogating the misguided assumptions about violence/nonviolence on which they are based. Second, noting my own framing of previous research projects in terms of nonviolence (a mode of action) rather than pacifism (a philosophical stance), I ask, what do we gain instead by taking an explicitly *pacifist* stance? Exploring recent violent encounters between resurgent white supremacists and Antifa activists in the U.S., as well as insights from “maternal thinking” (Ruddick 1989), I develop three points in response: that taking a clear and principled stance against collective violence 1) has practical utility, including a protective effect in the context of resistance movements, 2) forces us to wrestle with the individual humanity of our adversaries and our inability to ever fully control them, and 3) enables a truly radical politics of inclusion by requiring sustained attention to difference, even as we struggle against injustices existing within this “difference.” The pacifism that emerges is a messy, power-laden one that demands that we continually wrestle—imperfectly, to be sure—not only with one another but with the tensions inherent in human interaction, difference, and conflict.

When I walk through my neighborhood these days, I often pass graffiti messages entreating me to “PUNCH NAZIS!” I live in Portland, Oregon (USA)—a city best known as a haven for progressive politics and creative types, as a place that takes its craft beer and coffee very seriously, and as the home to the largest independent bookstore in the world. Despite its progressive, pluralist sheen, it is also a city with a racist past—and present—where Nazi skinheads killed an Ethiopian immigrant in 1988 and the city’s African-American community has been systematically discriminated against and uprooted several times. In the age of Trump, Portland has become a hotspot for clashes between white supremacist/“free speech” groups and Antifa—anti-fascist activists who, among other forms of anti-fascist organizing, engage in street fights with those on the far right. Although the Women’s Day March (the day after Trump’s inauguration) was an overwhelmingly nonviolent demonstration of resistance to the new administration and its deeply troubling agenda (with marchers numbering about 100,000, nearly 1/6 of the city’s population), subsequent smaller demonstrations have included a sizeable Antifa contingent. It is in this broader polarized political context that a man with inchoate white supremacist sympathies stabbed three men (killing two) on a commuter rail

train in Portland this past May after verbally assaulting two young women with an anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, pro-free speech rant.

This incident has a lot in common with the archetypal case used to challenge pacifism: an encounter with a violent racist person who attacks—and ultimately kills—innocent people. Those using this case to argue against pacifism (as they understand it) would contend that one of those bystanders on the commuter train would have been justified in shooting—perhaps even killing—the perpetrator to prevent him from killing the two men he killed and from injuring the third. They would also likely extend the analogy to situations of collective violence and warfare: if a state (or non-state armed group) engages in an act of aggression against another state or a particular group of people, then the target is justified in using violence in self-defense and/or the international community is justified in using violence to intervene on the target's behalf. Such thinking is seen in international law, in just war theory, and even in the accounts of some poststructuralist IR theorists concerned with difference. As David Campbell argues in reference to opposing those forces that aim to “efface alterity,” “the active affirmation of alterity *must* involve the desire to actively oppose and resist—perhaps, depending on the circumstances, even violently—those forces that efface, erase, or suppress alterity” (2001, 147). Ruling out violence, he seems to suggest, would rule out a mode of action that could potentially be necessary for affirming alterity in particular circumstances—whether in response to a racist individual overtly threatening nearby individuals, a white supremacist group organizing in one's community, or a genocidal government intent on wiping out a particular ethnic/racial/religious group within or beyond the boundaries of its country. Ethical action, in other words, according to his view and others, may sometimes require one to “punch Nazis” or engage in other such forms of violence. This is certainly a dominant perspective that has emerged in recent heated debates among those on the left about the role of Antifa in confronting violent white supremacists recently emboldened by the Trump administration.

How does pacifism help us think through these questions? Not just what is its defense in response to these challenges, but what does it contribute, if anything, to our thinking on acting ethically in the face of violence, aggression, and forces that “efface alterity” (Campbell 2001)? And what do we gain, if anything, by developing and taking an explicitly pacifist stance as opposed to sustaining a commitment to the practice of nonviolent action? These are genuine questions for me, as someone who has focused on nonviolent action, not on pacifism, in my previous work, and I am not quite sure where I will end up. I also approach these questions from my perspective as a fairly new mother—a role that has taught me more about power and conflict, agency and control, difference and relationship, than any text book has, an experience—as others, like Ruddick (1989), Cohn (2013), Sylvester (1992), and Tickner (1992),

have noted—that upends many of our received notions in IR about the nature of autonomy and security and vulnerability.

Ground-clearing: addressing assumptions about violence and nonviolent action

As with most discussions of a “subjugated knowledge” (Jackson 207) like pacifism, I must start here with some ground-clearing, as it is necessary to cut through the common-sense interpretations that predominate on matters of violence and nonviolence. As I think of it, there are three main kinds of criticisms (or dismissals) of pacifism: First, a pacifist position is assumed to be a position of passivity and therefore invites exploitation and/or aggression. Critics of this sort argue that pacifism would be wonderful if everyone were “on board” or “played by the rules,” but the hard truth is that there are those who are not or do not (whether evil or simply self-serving) and who will simply take advantage of the nonviolent “nice guys” to get the upper hand (invade this territory, gain control of this government, obliterate this targeted community, etc.). The typical “What about the Nazis?” question is a good example, as is the reference to “Munich” (Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler in 1938). A sub-set of this critique is the acknowledgement that nonviolent action might work with democratic or moral adversaries but not with those with no moral qualms (again, the Nazis figure prominently here). Second, more radical critics argue that a pacifist position is inherently conservative because only violence is radical enough to confront certain entrenched and/or extreme forms of oppression/injustice and to bring about the necessary revolution. Frantz Fanon’s (2004 [1961]) anti-colonial arguments for violent resistance and Antifa’s contemporary arguments for “physical confrontation” with fascists would be good examples. Third, pacifists, in their principled opposition to using violence against anyone (either individually or in wartime, depending on the brand of pacifism), even in situations where some people are threatened by violence, risk abrogating their responsibility to *these* “others” through their over-concern for *those* “others.” The primary context where this critique emerges is in debates over humanitarian intervention in cases where a government is terrorizing its own civilians through mass killing and other atrocities—but it also emerges again in arguments that Antifa is necessary to protect unarmed activists from the violent Right.

The first point to note here is that all three major lines of criticism of pacifism depend on uninvestigated assumptions about the utility of violence. The sub-text in these critiques is that violence could do better: it is a reliable tool for effectively deterring or stopping an aggressor, for dismantling unjust power structures, or for protecting targeted populations. It comes across as so reliable because, as Howes puts it, violence “produc[es] some things with utter certainty (e.g., dead bodies, pain, screams)” (2009, 117)—immediate tangible effects that trick us into reading its overall efficacy as immediate, too, and also make us feel like we are *doing*

something. When the stakes are really high—when it *really* matters, and *now*, without time to wait for this nonviolent stuff to work—most of us assume that violence is necessary for defense, justice, or security. But, as I point out elsewhere (Wallace 2017a), echoing others like Arendt (1969), Howes (2009), and Hutchings (2017), we can never be certain about what the outcomes of violence will be; its effects are unpredictable, as are the effects of all political action, and therefore its ability to succeed in defending, resisting, or protecting is no more reliable than other forms of action. The idea that violence is more reliable and more decisive derives from the assumption—stemming from the “domestic analogy”—that military action operates via brute force and thereby somehow *forces* opponents into submission or surrender, leaving them with no further room for deliberation, choice, or alternate courses of action. This domestic analogy is the prism through which we tend to think about war: just as someone attacked by a “thug” in a dark alleyway might use brute force in self-defense to disable or kill that attacker, so too can an army similarly use brute force in self-defense to disable or “kill” an invading army with the same finality and decisiveness with which the “victim” in the alleyway can rid herself of the single attacker. But this is, of course, not what happens, and the analogy—as apt as it seems—is unsound (Wallace 2017a). In the case of intergroup/collective violence, everything hinges on how one’s violence affects those opponents *remaining* after their compatriots have been killed or maimed (Howes 2009).¹ Does it decrease or increase their will to continue fighting? Does it coerce them or energize them? In other words, barring a wholesale obliteration of its entire military capability, the opponent group is not *forced* into a particular course of action (retreat or surrender)—rather, they decide how to proceed based on a mix of pressures and motivations. The results are not automatic; rather, though military action certainly affects an opponent’s military capability, it more crucially influences the *will* of the opponent group—and therefore its effects can be unpredictable, even if there is a clear disparity in military capability between the two sides (Arreguín-Toft 2001; Merom 2003). In fact, one’s use of violence against the opponent can even bring about the opposite result from that intended, emboldening members of the opponent group, reinforcing the psychological and discursive conditions that make their own violence possible, and therefore strengthening their resolve to fight harder and longer (Wallace 2017a). This is the case both with the use of violence from “below” like terrorism (Abrahms 2012) and the use of violence from “above” like counterinsurgency (Barkawi 2004). Furthermore, as Fortna (2009) demonstrates, clear victories in war have been in decline, since World War II for interstate wars and since the end of the Cold War for intrastate wars, suggesting that violence is becoming even less decisive than we suppose it to be in attaining the ends for which it is used. The only thing that is predictable and

¹ As Howes puts it, “If one’s intent is only to kill people then violence can reliably achieve that end, but usually the purposes that guide physical violence depend upon and are transformed by how people react to the production of dead or injured bodies” (2009, 115).

certain about the use of violence is its result in damaged and killed human bodies and the related human loss experienced by loved ones and communities.

These three criticisms of pacifism also rely on uninformed assumptions about the nature of nonviolent action, as noted above: that it is passive and/or ineffective against opponents who are not “nice,” that it maintains the status quo, and that it fails to protect vulnerable “others.” First, nonviolent action is just that: action—and effective action at that. As Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) have famously found, nonviolent resistance is twice as likely as violent resistance to be effective in bringing about “maximalist” goals like regime change, self-determination, or the end of an occupation. Claims, therefore, that a renunciation of violence necessarily equals passivity in the face of aggression or exploitation do not hold water. Furthermore, nonviolent action does not depend for its effectiveness on the goodwill of its adversaries and their ultimate persuasion. Though the persuasion or transformation of the opponent is certainly one of its capacities, nonviolent action also has coercive mechanisms at its disposal, as well; in other words, it can work with unsavory opponents—whether Milosevic or Mubarak—who ultimately lose their ability to hold onto power. Therefore, nonviolent action—and therefore pacifism—does not require everyone to be “on board” or to “play by the rules” to work (Wallace 2017a). Nonviolence can meet violence and still win.

Second, and on a related note, nonviolent action resists various forms of injustice, again vastly more effectively than violent resistance does. Therefore, it is simply inaccurate to equate violence with radical action or resistance and then to peg nonviolent action as complicit with the status quo. Beyond being more effective, nonviolent resistance is more radical insofar as it refuses to use “the master’s tools” to “dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 2007 [1984]), so to speak. It does not simply seize power with the instruments of violence only to re-instate a deeply hierarchical system, flipping those empowered and disempowered but leaving an oppressive structure intact.

Third and finally, despite the assumption that a renunciation of violence leaves those targeted by other people’s violence vulnerable, there are actually protective mechanisms associated with nonviolent action that are often difficult to see due to our deep-seated associations between weapons and protection. These include the greater difficulty security forces usually have firing on clearly unarmed activists than they do firing on armed rebels, as well as efforts by some nonviolent movements to diminish antagonism and build connections between the security forces and activists (Binnendijk and Marovic 2006; Nepstad 2011; Wallace 2017b). Nonetheless, security forces do sometimes fire on nonviolent activists—indeed, violent repression is often expected by activists in nonviolent resistance movements. But, by and large, civilians are less vulnerable when a resistance movement is nonviolent than when it is violent (and therefore easily used to justify further violent repression). Armed resistance movements

are actually almost three times more likely to be subjected to mass killings than unarmed resistance movements are, with 68% of violent campaigns and 23% of nonviolent campaigns experiencing mass killings from 1955 to 2013 (Chenoweth 2017; Chenoweth and Perkoski 2016). Scholars have established a strong empirical relationship between guerrilla warfare, in particular, and a government's resort to mass killings, as part of its counter-insurgency strategy (Valentino et al. 2004; Carey 2010). This assertion is nonetheless counter-intuitive because, when we see violent repression against unarmed activists, the contrast is so jarring that all we can see is the "defenselessness" and vulnerability of the unarmed side; when we see a war situation where both state military/security forces and rebels are shooting, however, regardless of how many casualties are being taken on the rebel side, we see rebels as "defending" themselves and therefore as less vulnerable. In fact, most of us would maintain these first impressions even if ten unarmed activists were killed in the first scenario and twenty rebels and thirty nearby civilians were killed in the second. By considering only the numbers of casualties, however, we could reasonably argue that the unarmed activists were more effectively defending and protecting themselves without weapons than the armed rebels were *with* them (Wallace 2017b).

Nonviolent action also has more proactively protective capacities when used in the form of either local zones of peace (ZoPs)/resistance movements or international unarmed civilian peacekeeping (UCP) teams. With the former, declarations of impartiality vis-à-vis multiple armed groups, adherence to nonviolent discipline, the use of leverage against armed groups (particularly their concern for their reputation and their reliance on local populations), and often direct negotiation with armed groups to gain "buy-in" are all strategic choices that can be effective in reducing violence and protecting civilians in civil war contexts (Mouly et al. 2016). Participants in ZoPs recognize the premium armed groups place on ensuring that civilian populations not support their adversaries (other armed groups or government troops), so if that imperative can be achieved through a ZoP's declaration of impartiality, armed groups have an incentive to comply; they also lose the justification they may have previously used to violently target civilians—i.e., that they supported the opposing armed group. Furthermore, civilians can leverage their proximity to armed groups to "nudge" these away from the use of violence, often through the use of protest, which can serve to create—or exacerbate—schisms in the armed groups themselves, with "swing" combatants initiating debates within these groups to reconsider their violent practices (Kaplan 2013).

With the latter (UCP teams), there is a recognized protective effect to the presence of unarmed international "bodyguards," used since the 1980s by groups like Peace Brigades International and, later, Nonviolent Peaceforce to accompany civilians threatened by violence (often human rights defenders and journalists, along with other targeted civilian populations). Though this

deterrent effect of UCP is most well known, there are other mechanisms that enable their protective work, namely, their ability—through relationship-building with armed actors—to influence the psychological and discursive conditions that make violence possible by, for instance, drawing out inconsistencies between armed actors’ stated commitments and their practices, pinpointing responsibility for imminent violations, or clarifying the noncombatant status of potential targets (Wallace 2017a). Therefore, although no form of action, violent or nonviolent, guarantees the safety of threatened individuals, nonviolent action does, in fact, have tools at its disposal for protection—unique abilities that violent action does not, rather than simply a diminished toolkit due to the lack of weapons. In other words, the claim that pacifists neglect *this* “other” through their over-concern for *that* “other” depends, first, on an inflated view of the ability of violence to protect the targeted individual/group and, second, on a deflated estimation of the ability of nonviolent action to do so.

Implications of a pacifist stance

With these assumptions and corrections on the table, let me begin my exploration of pacifism with the voice in my head—the one that always comes back when I consider the question of pacifism: my mother’s. Sometime in my teens—somewhere between the first Gulf War and the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—when my pacifist leanings were becoming apparent, she advised me: “I was a pacifist, too—that is, until you two girls were born. Then I realized I would do absolutely anything to keep you safe.” I recall her counsel not just because it keeps me grounded and honest in my deliberations on this question but also because it evokes reflection on the different levels—and brands—of pacifist commitment. What do I mean by pacifism here? My mother’s statement portrays pacifism as ruling out violence not only at the collective level of war but also at the interpersonal level—very close to what Ryan (2013) would call personal pacifism (with the exception that he defines it as “the opposition to all killing” [980], not all violence). For my mother, permitting herself to use violence against someone who might harm my sister or me would contradict a pacifist stance. For others, of course, pacifism entails a rejection of warfare, as opposed to a rejection of all violence—a stance variously called political pacifism (Ryan 2013), ethico-political pacifism (Hutchings 2017), or collectivist pacifism (Cady 2010).

Now that I am a mother, I absolutely understand the imperative in my mother’s voice—the fierce protective impulse—in a way that I certainly did not before. And it seems to me that there are a few ways one could respond to this imperative to protect one’s children in relation to political—not only personal—pacifism. First, if one assumes that there are cases at the interpersonal level where violence might actually be necessary for (and therefore effective at) protecting one’s children from a threat, and that one would claim the right to use such violence

if required to do so, one could extend this willingness to use violence to cases of collective violence where whole communities are being targeted, thereby contradicting an overall commitment to political pacifism.

Second, one could grant that violence may be necessary for (and therefore effective at) protecting one's children in some cases of interpersonal threat but still argue that this potential effectiveness of violence to protect is more reliably and immediately assured (and the number of those harmed or killed to do this protecting is vastly smaller and better targeted) at the interpersonal level than at the collective level (Arendt 1969; Howes 2009), as suggested above, maintaining a relevant distinction between the use of violence at the two levels. Furthermore, one could agree with those advocating political pacifism that war/collective violence is implicated—in a way interpersonal violence is not—in broader systems of militarization, patriarchy, racism, and so on (Cady 2010; Ryan 2013; Hutchings 2017), and therefore decisions about its use can never just be limited to consideration of its instrumental effects (Hutchings 2017). Therefore, the willingness to resort to violence at the interpersonal level would not necessarily contradict a pacifist stance at the level of armed conflict or war.

Third, one could argue that violence simply is not reliably effective at protecting, either at the interpersonal level or at the collective level, and that an impulse to protect is best served, therefore, by other forms of action on both levels. (For instance, see the case of the school administrator outside Atlanta, Georgia (USA), who talked a potential mass shooter down from a rampage in 2013, in large part by expressly empathizing with him and his hurt [Botelho et al. 2013].) One could also assert that the distinction between interpersonal violence and collective violence is untenable, due to the fact that interpersonal violence cannot exist in isolation from its broader social and political context and may therefore carry with it similar ethico-political shortcomings to those carried by collective violence with regards to both its instrumental effects and the world that is created through its practice (Hutchings 2017; Wallace 2017a). This assertion would bring one to a more expansive pacifist position that includes the rejection of violence at both the interpersonal and collective levels.

At the moment, I find myself somewhere between the second and third responses here. There are relevant distinctions between violence at the interpersonal and collective levels—both in terms of reliability and in terms of the extent of harmful consequences and the contribution to a broader “war system”—and, perhaps due to hubris, I hesitate to rule out any options at the interpersonal level while I remain lucky enough to not yet have been forced to choose among them. Yet, I remain heartily skeptical of the efficacy of violence even at the interpersonal level. In the same way that violence against one's wartime opponent can reinforce and strengthen that opponent's will to continue fighting, so too can the threat or use of violence against an

individual attacker provoke him or make it easier for him to follow through with whatever violent action he had in mind. Surprising or generous action that engages another side of him might have as good or better chances at success than confronting him directly with a weapon or tit-for-tat physical violence. In addition, we cannot escape the way in which actions at this interpersonal level have larger, longer-term consequences for protection. To be prepared to meet an attacker with violence, one might feel compelled to buy a gun, and the statistics are clear that the presence of a firearm in a household makes those in that household more vulnerable to fatal gun violence, not less (Dahlberg et al. 2004). Furthermore, if we think about the broader social structures within which violence can occur, and the mobilization of identity groups within which interpersonal violence becomes intelligible, the use of violence to protect at the interpersonal level can have broader polarizing implications between identity groups, reinforcing victimization narratives on all sides.

Nonetheless, the default pacifist position I will be discussing and referring to here is the rejection of collective violence (including, but not limited to, war²), as opposed to the rejection of all violence; I will, however, maintain a hearty skepticism towards even interpersonal violence in what follows for the reasons outlined above.

Before proceeding, greater clarity is also needed on the question of what constitutes violence in the first place. As I have discussed elsewhere (Wallace 2017a), there is merit to sticking to a limited direct, physical conception of violence, as the more expansively we define it (including, for instance, structural violence), the more room we create for disagreement over what does or does not count as violence. Although there is perhaps no coherent, non-controversial way to define it (and any judgment about what is and what is not violence in a given instance will necessarily depend on the social and political context [Ruddick 1989; Frazer and Hutchings 2013]), violence in the form of bodily harm perpetrated with some level of intent by one person against another is widely agreed to be wrong—*when* it is understood to be devoid of a legitimating purpose (e.g., self-defense, protection, justice, etc.) And since there is always disagreement on the presence of this legitimating purpose, we can treat all such violence as potentially devoid of legitimation from some perspective or another, leaving bare the plain physical horror of violence enacted by one person against another (Wallace 2017a). Note that this definition of violence does not, therefore, include all forms of physical force or non-physical coercion. For instance, I would not count one person's physical restraint or movement of another person violence, even though both entail some measure of force—unless that restraint or movement were to result in physical harm. I would also not include forms of action typical in

² As a side note, there seems to be a bit of a gap in pacifist theorizing between the category of interpersonal violence and the category of war; it seems that opposition to other forms of collective violence (short of war) could be more fruitfully explored.

nonviolent/civil resistance struggles—like boycotts or strikes—that operate via the coercion of the opponent: we will do this thing that hurts you economically until you meet our demands. Why these distinctions? Why is the infliction of physical harm objectionable but not the use of other forms of physical force or non-physical pressure? In the end, as I argue elsewhere (see fuller account in Wallace 2017a), it boils down to the fact that there is simply something about violence—and especially its potential fatality—that makes people respond differently to it than they respond to other forms of influence (whether physical force or non-physical coercion)—whether they are the agents or targets of violence. This difference is what makes violence—its infliction or receipt—call for legitimating content/purpose. The exercise of power and influence, on the other hand, is an inescapable fact of human existence whereby people reckon with other people and the fact of human difference rather than potentially obliterate them and it.³

So, the pacifist stance I am exploring here entails a rejection of violence on the collective level (so, in conflicts between groups, including states) but not a rejection of other forms of pressure or influence that might otherwise be seen as “forceful” or “coercive.” Therefore, there is no contradiction, according to this view, for those adopting a pacifist position to use the various forms of (nonviolent) power at their disposal to struggle for their conceptions of justice, to defend their communities, or to protect targeted individuals/groups. I am less interested here in defending this particular pacifist stance, grounding it in a particular way—a task I leave to others (for instance, Atack 2001, Fiala 2014, Howes 2009, Hutchings 2017, May 2015, and Ryan 2013)—than I am in exploring its effects and implications. Otherwise put, what purpose does a pacifist stance serve? With this particular understanding of pacifism in mind, what do “we” gain—in terms of our response to violence, aggression, and oppression—by taking this pacifist stance and explicitly articulating it, as opposed to simply adopting a more contingent commitment to the practice of nonviolent action and resistance? I imagine this “we” as a collection of citizen-activists organized around a pacifist position of refusing participation in war/collective violence for the purpose of its ultimate abolition but also in the context of other struggles for justice that aim to abolish broader systems of oppression—not simply as individual moral agents isolated from one other who happen to have common pacifist principles (Atack 2001; Hutchings 2017). I see these effects as falling broadly into two categories: the effects that follow from the clarity of a pacifist stance in our communication and interactions with adversaries and the effects that follow from the absolute nature of a pacifist commitment to

³ There is a difficulty here, however, as the distinctive responses that the use of violence elicits follow from the *interpretation* of an act as “violence” by the opposing side, even if it might conform to what I am calling physical force here; once an act is understood under the category of “violence”—even if it is just physical restraint, for instance—then people will respond to it as if it is violence, and it can be expected to justify the types of (violent) responses that the use of violence usually precipitates. This difficulty simply highlights the challenge of nailing down a definition and set interpretation of violence—a necessarily imperfect exercise.

ourselves in our responses to our deepest adversaries and the objectionable political projects they propose.

Protective effects of communicating a clear pacifist stance to adversaries

First, one could argue that a pacifist stance—as opposed to simply a commitment to nonviolence—communicates more clearly and unequivocally to one’s adversaries one’s refusal to use violence, and this clarity can have a protective effect. More mainstream thinkers would likely express confusion in response to this statement. Surely, a clear communication of one’s refusal to use violence in response to an adversary’s violence simply invites aggression, right? This is, of course, the logic behind nuclear deterrence, not to mention the existence of “peacetime” militaries. It is also the logic behind certain mass movements that may strategically adopt nonviolent tactics but vocally retain the right to turn to violence if these do not work—in the hope that the impending threat of violence itself can work to gain the adversary’s compliance before its use is needed. But this logic can easily be turned on its head. If the U.S. were not armed with nuclear weapons and threatening North Korea with them, would North Korea demand its own arsenal? Perhaps more importantly, how would it present its case for nuclear war against the U.S. to its people if the U.S. maintained an overtly pacifist stance?⁴ The threat to use nuclear weapons—or even conventional forces—is only necessitated (if we can use that word) by the existence of these arsenals in the first place, the threat their existence poses to adversaries, and the effect of this threat on the creation of justifications for aggression that gain traction in adversary societies. Likewise, consider recent cases of government violence against civilians, like Syria or Myanmar. In both cases, the government certainly used violence against civilians in the absence of armed resistance but, at the same time, tried its best to suggest that there were violent elements in the resistance movement or community—and also responded with much higher levels of violence once armed resistance did actually emerge (Wallace 2017b; Albert 2017). Had these movements or communities uniformly articulated a clearly pacifist position—along with their demands for justice and rights—their respective governments would have had an even harder time representing their acts of resistance as “terrorism” that requires “self-defense” and motivating their security forces to fall into line. To be clear, this is not about blaming the victims for the horrific violence their governments inflict(ed) upon them; it is simply a statement about what course of action may have better protected them. This insight reinforces the finding that representations and interpretations matter to the effectiveness of nonviolent action—and particularly the dynamic of “backfire” (Martin 2007). Sometimes it is not enough that a movement *is* nonviolent; what matters is that it is explicitly *represented*—as seen by adversaries—as nonviolent, and this task is facilitated by a clear, *principled* commitment to

⁴ See Kristof (2017) for a view of the current anti-U.S. narrative within North Korea.

refusing participation in violence. In other words, such a principled commitment leverages the “otherworldly” associations with pacifism (as, for instance, the territory of the devoutly religious) for protective, practical effect. The empirical research cited above on the protective effect of nonviolent discipline and the vulnerability-inducing effects of armed resistance (Chenoweth 2017; Chenoweth and Perkoski 2016; Valentino et al. 2004; Carey 2010) supports this point; it seems reasonable to assume that moving further in the principled direction would only increase this protective effect of nonviolent discipline. In short, the harder a movement (or country) makes it for the adversary to paint it as violent—or as potentially infiltrated by violent elements—the harder it is for that adversary to mobilize violence against it.

A good example of the reverse dynamic—fuzziness on the question of nonviolence, energizing an adversary’s mobilization of violence—is the current escalatory spiral in the U.S. between Antifa on the left and various white supremacist/“free speech” groups on the right. Antifa’s willingness to engage in “physical confrontation” with protesters on the right has simply reinforced their embattled narratives and has drawn recruits to “free speech” protests who may have otherwise stayed home (Beinart 2017). It has also provided groups on the right with easy justification for their own arming and engagement in violence, such that both sides begin to expect a street battle every time a “free speech” rally is held in Portland. To be sure, white nationalists/supremacists already have an established pedigree of violence in the U.S., from lynchings and bombings to mob violence, and arguably do not need an armed counterpart on the other side to convince them that they need to bring weapons. These hard-core white supremacists/neo-Nazis are few,⁵ however, and what Antifa’s presence does is broaden the appeal of an armed movement on the right, making it appear less fringe-y and more “necessary” to those who sympathize with these views. Furthermore, the besieged mentality emerging from these armed confrontations—almost like the mentality that emerges in the midst of war—provides fertile ground for individual acts of violence like the one that took place on the commuter rail in Portland this past spring. The man who stabbed three people after his racist/anti-immigrant rant targeting two young women on the commuter rail attended a “free speech” rally in Portland in late April after calling on friends “wanting to get Antifa” to join him (Brosseau and Brettman 2017); he was also caught on video the previous day ranting about Antifa (Mesh 2017). So, when fellow passengers stood up to him on the commuter rail (not violently, I should add), he was quick to respond aggressively. The perpetrator’s mental instability notwithstanding, one could argue that there is a relationship, then, between this broader context of violent polarization and this archetypical instance of interpersonal violence. Interpersonal violence never exists in the vacuum suggested by the domestic analogy. The

⁵ Current/recent estimates of nationwide (U.S.) membership in the most extreme groups include the following: Ku Klux Klan: 5,000-8,000 (SPLC N.d.); National Alliance and National Socialist Movement (both neo-Nazi groups) as of 2011-2012: 2,500 and 400 (BBC 2017).

perpetrator situates his actions within a particular narrative, he has had certain experiences, he brings a range of grievances—however unsubstantiated or suspect—to the interaction. Therefore, Antifa’s choice to use violence—like all such choices to use violence—however laudable its anti-fascist goals, can never limit itself or its effects to an immediate exchange (Hutchings 2017; Wallace 2017a); there are always broader repercussions, including the creation of a context where embattled/victimization narratives and polarized identities take root, enabling further violence and therefore vulnerability.

But, one might argue, mentally unstable individuals like this man—or leaders of some countries—need no provocation to inflict violence on others. And don’t we therefore need potential recourse to violence to subdue a volatile individual in order to protect his likely victims? While I maintain a distinction between these two levels—one where an individual acts alone and could himself be stopped through an act of violence and one where an individual mobilizes a large group of people to attack another large group of people whose return violence does not operate in a similar, straightforward fashion—I would also argue that violence in response to either threat risks escalation as much as it promises protection. The point, again, is that neither form of action—on either level—comes with guaranteed results; neither is fully reliable. As Cohn helps us see, with reference to Ruddick’s conception of vulnerability in *Maternal Thinking*, there is an obsession with creating perfect security in mainstream national security discourse/practice when perfect security is not in fact possible, and this Quixotic mission itself brings with it vulnerability-making practices. In a devastating statement of this understanding that emerges from maternal thinking, Ruddick declares, “To give birth is to create a life that cannot be kept safe, whose unfolding cannot be controlled and whose eventual death is certain” (1989, 72). In response, Cohn asks: “what kind of national security policy would be recognized as rational if we acknowledged that *vulnerability is inevitable*, that control has limits, and that ultimately decline is unavoidable?” (2013, 55, emphasis in original). Cohn argues that national security thinking would benefit from the “metaphysical humility” that attends mothers’ attempts to make their children safe—as well as from their realization that attempts to completely control a child or make her absolutely safe may result in harm to both the child and others (2013). In other words, the incessant—and ultimately futile—quest for perfect security and control—often in the form of ever-greater militarization and violence—brings with it additional forms of insecurity for oneself and others. In fact, one could argue that it is only under the guise of the possibility of perfect security that pacifism is made to seem an untenable stance. A more realistic assessment reveals pacifism as a position and approach that tempers the desire to protect (which, as I have noted above, it is quite capable of doing) with “metaphysical humility” and an awareness of the harms that can come with over-“protection.” It is not passive in the face of violence—and may actually provide

a better chance of protection in many instances—but in its efforts to limit and confront violence it is also aware that vulnerability is just something with which we have to live.

Effects of making a pacifist commitment to oneself: wrestling with the adversary's humanity

Second, beyond the potential protective effect of communicating a pacifist stance to one's adversaries, there is something about the commitment one makes to oneself to refuse participation in violence that requires a deeper engagement with—and recognition of—the humanity of our adversaries, even those whom we might be tempted to call “evil.” If we tell ourselves we can simply kill those with whom we disagree—or even those who threaten our existence—we are not forced to engage with their humanity; in fact, there is a real incentive (from a psychological perspective) to eclipse this humanity as much as possible, to tell ourselves that we are dealing with monsters or animals here, not human beings (Bandura et al. 1996). Once we make a commitment to ourselves, however, not to participate in any collective activity that could harm or kill another human being, we must figure out another way forward. We must contend with the “face” of our adversary (to use Levinas' term [Fagan 2013]), and we must become creative in our experimentation with multiple forms of power in our interactions with them—as the refusal to use violence does not of course mean a refusal to respond vigorously to their objectionable political projects.

Here again the insights from maternal thinking and practice are instructive. Ruddick (1989) notes that maternal thinking does not necessarily lead mothers to pacifism, as mothers' special concern for their own children can translate into parochial justifications of war against “outsiders”; at the same time, she notes that maternal thinking can create greater empathy for other mothers and their children. In my experience, motherhood can heighten one's sensitivity to both sides of this tension at the heart of pacifism: concern for this other (one's child) but also for all the other others. When I became a mother, I became excruciatingly aware of the contingency, beauty, and fragility of human life through the particular spiritedness of this little being now completely dependent on me—in part because of all the accidents/miracles of biology that made her existence possible. But I soon realized that my keen awareness of these was not only in relation to her; I noticed a heightened visceral response in myself to any representations of violence against anyone, as if, through my awareness of her lively vulnerability and belovedness, I was suddenly more aware of everyone's and also more apt to see every victim—but also perpetrator—of violence as someone's child. There are profound implications to seeing even perpetrators in this light. First, they are understood in relation to others—not as isolated, evil criminals but as flawed sons or daughters and therefore as multidimensional beings with desires, fears, beliefs, relationships, and so on. Second, because they already have grown and changed so much from infancy, they are understood to be more

generally capable of change—not stuck in a condition of perpetration. The existence of military desertion and defection from even the most vile armed organizations (the Nazis, the Bosnian Serb army, ISIS, to name a few [Wallace 2017c]) demonstrates this fact that perpetrators are indeed capable of reflection and transformation and therefore cannot simply be reduced to their most despicable acts.

At the same time, the experience of motherhood is nothing if not the experience of uncontrollable difference. Here is this little soul with her own desires and ideas and proclivities and oscillating emotions—someone I can never fully control. And, as any parent/mother knows, intense anger and frustration can come with the realization that one has lost—or never had—control (Ruddick 1989). The combination of this intense anger with profound love—anger at the person I love more than anyone in the world—is among the most emotionally demanding and exhausting experiences I have had. Using violence against my daughter is simply not an option—furthermore, it is not clear what, if anything, it would accomplish (but this question is beside the point when it is not even an action I would submit to cost/benefit calculation in the first place). Somehow, even when she is at her most defiant, I need to find a way to meet my needs (to get to work on time, to get her dressed, etc.) without being able to *force* her to do anything—except in the rare cases where the thing I need her to do is move her from one place to another or—on a few occasions—wrestle her, kicking and screaming, into her car seat.⁶ Beyond those situations where physical force (not violence) is an option, everything else is some form of negotiation, with both of us using the forms of power and persuasion at our disposal. Yes, I can say things firmly, I can (and do) even make threats and thereby try to coerce her (“If you do not come here to pick up your toys by the time I count to five, we will not be able to watch a movie tonight!”), but there is no guarantee of her obedience. The fact of her natality—both literally and figuratively, in the sense Arendt (1958) intended—means that she has agency and that she can and does act in completely unpredictable ways; despite being *of* me, she is wholly new and brings something entirely novel into the world; and she is capable of resistance.

I am not making a direct comparison here between my relationship with my daughter and one’s relationship with fundamental adversaries; there are too many obvious differences between these relationships to make this a not-very-useful comparison. What I am suggesting, following Ruddick (1989), and Cohn (2013) after her, is that “maternal thinking”—the modes of thinking that follow from the demands of maternal practice—is an intellectually valuable resource in our

⁶ Readers will note echoes of Sharp’s (1973) finding here about the very limited number of things an authoritarian leader can actually *make* his citizens do, beyond physically moving them somewhere. I suppose that makes me the authoritarian leader in this analogy and my daughter the citizen with nonviolent resistance at her disposal!

attempts to figure out power relations and conflict in the broader world—especially when violence against the opponent is not considered an option.

These insights from maternal thinking help us see more clearly, as noted above, that complete control of others is impossible (Ruddick 1989; Cohn 2013)—that our interactions with others, despite a strong desire on our part at times for these to exhibit the sort of instrumental control that Arendt (1958) sees in the human activity of “work” or “fabrication,” instead, of course, bear the hallmarks of human “action”: novelty and unpredictability. The fact that Arendt positions violence in some ambiguous no-man’s land between “work” and “action” is worth noting here. On the one hand, she considers violence to be subject to the same sort of means/end reasoning to which “work” is subject: just as a carpenter employs particular techniques and tools on wood to build a chair, so too might we imagine a general ordering a battle that ends up killing soldiers on both sides to liberate a town. On the other hand, she discusses violence as a form of *action* whose eventual consequences are therefore unpredictable. With the ends always just out of reach, what matters more are the means; as she famously notes, “The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world” (Arendt 1969, 80). This ambiguity may simply boil down to this: We *want* violence to be purely instrumental—for it to be able to control outcomes with the same reliability with which a carpenter can use certain tools and techniques to build a chair—but it cannot be; its political effects are always unpredictable and not limited to those intended (Howes 2009; Hutchings 2017; Wallace 2017a).

Effects of making a pacifist commitment to oneself: enabling a radical politics of inclusion in the midst of resistance

Once we begin to recognize this illusion of control through violence for what it is, we are launched into a new set of relations with our adversaries and are obliged not only to engage with their humanity but also to contend with the radical difference of their political projects—an attention to difference that their continued presence requires. In the abstract, this sounds attractive, beautiful even. We recall Gandhi’s experiments with truth through *satyagraha*—a practice demanded by the acknowledgement of his own fallibility: one of the most profound capacities of nonviolence is that it allows us to remain open to revision, however strongly we may struggle for our particular conceptions of justice (Bondurant 1965; Howes 2009; Wallace 2017a). But what does this really mean in the face of truly horrible political projects (a conviction I hold—and many of us share—despite the fact of human fallibility): fascism, white supremacy, religious extremism, all of which justify violence against those who do not fall within a narrowly defined conception of the community considered worthy of respect? Surely, when we talk about difference or inclusion in lofty terms, we do not mean *this*. Returning to

Campbell (2001), we draw lines between forms of difference that allow for the proliferation of difference and forms of difference that aim to eradicate it—but when we do so in an effort to define those against whom we can use violence, we risk reinstating the same eradication we oppose (Wallace 2017a). If we decide that Nazis are an evil that must be eliminated, with whom we cannot share the Earth, in order to enable the persistence of difference in our communities, we are unwittingly employing the same logic they employ(ed) in their attempt to annihilate the Jewish people. The refusal to use violence, however, allows us to approach this matter differently. Those who adopt a pacifist position are still, of course, free to draw a line between the political projects we endorse and those we struggle against—but, because this line does not also represent the line between those we could justly kill and those we could not justly kill, *we can also afford to be wrong* (Wallace 2017a). We can even draw this line more boldly precisely because we can always erase it and redraw it when and if its exclusions border on oppression. In other words, pacifism does not require us to be “soft” on fascism, white supremacy, or religious extremism, but it does require us to contend with the reality of their attraction to particular individuals—and then to listen to the needs (for security, belonging, agency, and so on) that these political projects aim to fulfill.

Circling back to our engagement with the multidimensional humanity of our adversaries, we must be willing to see the human hurt that calls out for adherence to such exclusionary ideological projects while remaining steadfast in our opposition to the harm these individuals inflict on other human beings. A pacifist commitment reminds us of these “two hands” of nonviolence—as Deming (2005 [1968]) notes, one hand reaching out to the humanity of the opponent, while the other resists his unjust actions—*especially* when acting this way is most difficult, when our opponents are those we are most inclined to see as the embodiment of evil.

And responding to this reminder has positive practical implications again, too, opening up new points of engagement and influence: the sort of radical inclusion outlined here, enabled by pacifism, works against the sort of isolation and estrangement that can characterize participation in violence on the part of individuals swept up by extremist ideologies. Whether it is a young man whose family immigrated to Europe but who is made to feel like he does not quite belong in his new home country and therefore turns to extremist religious communities that call on him to use violence or a young man in the U.S. whose social isolation and alienation generate a sense of grievance that leads him to fantasize about and ultimately enact a killing spree that will finally lead to vindication and notoriety, exclusion can be a primary factor in the turn to violence (Hayes 2017). The willingness to proactively engage with these individuals—indeed, mostly young men—as human beings and to treat them as full members of society and one’s community can be a powerful force for guarding them against the attraction of extremist ideologies (Hayes 2017). Doing so is far from easy, however—interacting with a member of a

white supremacist organization is not most people's idea of fun—and striking the balance between human engagement with the person and resistance to his political/ideological project is far from straightforward. But this is what pacifism requires of us—and holds us to—particularly when doing so is not easy, and that is its value, as succumbing to the easier reaction of violence gets us nowhere fast.

Concluding thoughts

So, as I have outlined here, taking an explicitly pacifist stance can have some promising implications, both with regards to the protective effect that can result from its clear articulation to one's adversaries and with regards to the way in which the commitment one makes to oneself to refuse participation in violence obliges one to wrestle with the humanity of one's adversaries and the allure of the extremist ideologies/projects they may espouse, especially when doing so is most difficult. The foil implicit in this exploration has been a slightly more contingent commitment to practicing nonviolent action or resistance rather than an explicitly pacifist stance—and though such a commitment comes with similar implications, the absolute nature of a pacifist stance seems to have its own distinct effects insofar as it carries “otherworldly” connotations (and uses these to its advantage as relates to protective effects) and can hold one to nonviolence even in those rare cases where a nonviolent activist might otherwise feel pushed towards violent reaction.

But what are the possible negative implications of a pacifist stance, as opposed to a “mere” commitment to the practice of nonviolent action or resistance? The answer to this question could of course be a paper in its own right. But, briefly, I will outline a few here. First, in academic and policy-making contexts, due to the marginalized position of pacifism within the more mainstream fields of international relations and foreign policy (Jackson 2017), adopting a pacifist position risks devaluing one's research or policy recommendations. It still occupies a feminized—and thus devalued—position in these discourses (Cohn 1993), so its explicit espousal by an academic or policy-maker means that others will be less likely to take her or his ideas seriously. Aware of this reality, even many scholars of nonviolent action/civil resistance, in an effort to convince others to take such forms of action more seriously, make a concerted effort to distance their research on nonviolent action/civil resistance from any pacifist position. Second, for reasons outlined above, activists who take a pacifist stance are likely to be derided by other activists who affirm more traditional understandings of violence/nonviolence and who therefore see a complete refusal to engage in violent confrontations as a sign of weakness or cooptation. Furthermore, one could see the adoption of a pacifist stance by movement leadership as a limitation to the attraction of diverse participants to a movement, given the widespread assumptions about violence/nonviolence and the presumed passivity/utopianism

of pacifism. In other words, adopting nonviolence for strategic reasons makes more sense to more people than adopting it absolutely for principled reasons and therefore could lead to greater movement participation.⁷ In short, these are the implications that follow from adopting a position that is currently devalued in the broader social/political context, so if we are to reap the promising implications of pacifism outlined above we must at the same time work to shift the meanings and connotations associated with it, and with violence and nonviolence more broadly. Doing so entails steady attention to publicizing the practical effectiveness of nonviolent action and the many practical failings of violence, redistributing the burden of proof of these two ultimately unpredictable forms of action from one to the other. In particular, we must highlight the heady idealism of theories/ideologies of violence, war, and militarism—and the counterproductive effects of the policies they entail.

Indeed, too often, pacifism is charged with being idealistic and utopian (Hutchings 2017; Ryan 2013)—too facile in its clean resolution of what are messy contradictions of political life (Deming 2005 [1968]); but, in fact, violence promises much more than it can ever deliver. “PUNCH NAZIS!”—okay, but what is punching a Nazi actually going to *do*? Beyond this practical question of effectiveness, violence lets us get off the hook too easily—its use means we do not have to reckon with the other’s face, as uncomfortable as that might be, or with the discomfort that we were somehow unable to reach this person or that country or group such that they felt compelled to turn to fascism or genocide or terrorism. Pacifism demands that we continually wrestle—imperfectly, to be sure—not only with one another but with the tensions inherent in human interaction, difference, and conflict: between concern for oneself and one’s loved ones and concern for infinite others, between conviction and fallibility, between the human being and his/her unthinkable acts, between anger and love. Pacifism also embodies an awareness of the dangers of trying to control too much to the point that our own actions create new forms of insecurity and oppression—when perfect control and/or security are in fact impossible. The best we can do is struggle against the world’s wrongs as we see them—using the various forms of nonviolent power at our disposal—while holding out another hand to the human beings on the other side of the line.

⁷ Even if the actual use of violence—if ultimately deemed “necessary”—might end up diminishing mass participation (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

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