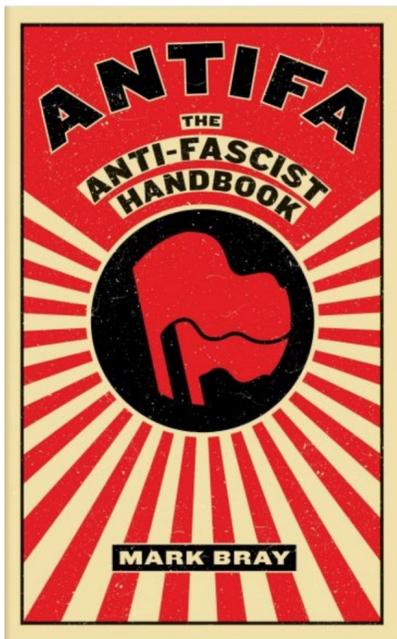


CAN ANTIFA BUILD AN EFFECTIVE BROAD-BASED ANTI-FASCIST MOVEMENT?

Mark Bray's "Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook" is an informed and revealing account of anti-fascist efforts, but its one-dimensional focus on violent tactics underscores the movement's limits.

Sue Curry Jansen and Brian Martin April 25, 2018



In March, Richard Spencer, a prominent white supremacist, cancelled his speaking engagements at U.S. universities, saying he was deterred by “antifa,” a loose international network of radical anti-fascist groups that aims to shut down far-right talks and rallies. For antifa members and supporters, Spencer’s capitulation was both [vindication of their aggressive tactics](#) and a sign of their success in opposing fascism.

These confrontations between far-right activists and antifa groups — on the rise since the election of Donald Trump — are often presented as involving two opposing values: free speech on one side and the danger of allowing fascists to appear in public on the other. What is missing in this framing, however, is an understanding of the dynamics of censorship and of nonviolent action as an alternative.

At the forefront of this clash of values is [Mark Bray’s 2017 book](#) “Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook,” which provides the most comprehensive justification for antifa tactics available. It has sold briskly and received considerable attention among its target audience of antifa activists.

Bray readily acknowledges that “Antifa” was written “on the run” during the early days of the Trump

era to meet the demand for information about newly visible anti-fascist activists. The immediate catalyst was the assault on Spencer by a masked man in 2017, which generated a popular meme and had many news outlets asking the question, “Is it okay to punch a Nazi?”

Responding in the affirmative, antifa activists believe that the ends (“stopping fascism before it becomes unstoppable”) justify the means: violence. The more thoughtful members of antifa add the qualifier “when necessary.” As Murray, one of Bray’s anonymous U.S. informants puts it, “You fight them by writing letters and making phone calls so you don’t have to fight them with fists. You fight them with fists so you don’t have to fight them with knives. You fight them with knives so you don’t have to fight them with guns. You fight them with guns so you don’t have to fight them with tanks.” Beyond punching Nazis, antifa tactics drawing significant media attention include “no platforming” — or blocking or disrupting speeches — and “doxxing,” which consists of publishing private information about a target on social media to encourage harassment.

Despite its genesis as instant history, “Antifa” is a serious book that raises fundamental questions about the viability of liberal tenets of free speech and the role of violence in political protests. Bray, a historian, visiting scholar at Dartmouth College and an Occupy Wall Street organizer, used his radical credentials to gain access to the antifa network, which generally operates in secrecy. He interviewed 61 active or former members of antifa groups from 17 countries. Supportive of the goals of antifa, but open to criticism of the movement, Bray argues that “militant anti-fascism is a reasonable, historically-informed response to the fascist threat that persisted after 1945 and that has become especially menacing in recent years.” The authorial voice he projects is humane and reflective, occasionally punctuated with references to his personal history and activist experiences.

The first two chapters are devoted to the history of fascism and anti-fascism, from the 1899 founding of the anti-Dreyfusard League to the early 2000s when antifa groups began to rethink their strategies in light of the rise of new far-right parties in Europe. While historical contextualizing is essential to understanding antifa’s “never again” rationale for preventative violence, Bray packs too many facts into too little space for readers without a deep background in European history to readily absorb and retain, making these crucial early chapters a hard slog. This is unfortunate because the subsequent chapters are accessible and illuminating. Chapter Three addresses the recent emergence, in response to the refugee crisis in Europe, of “pin-stripe Nazis”: nationalists who cover their underlying fascist tendencies with a veneer of respectability. They claim to be protecting democracy against its enemies while providing a cover for racism, Islamophobia and restoration of patriarchal gender regimes.

The remaining chapters focus on the theory and politics of antifa at more pragmatic levels: lessons to be drawn from history; no platforming and free speech; strategy, including internal criticism within some antifa groups; the dangers of machismo within antifa; fetishization of violence; feminism and antifa; nonviolent antifa tactics; militant anti-fascism and public opinion; antifa groups functioning as reserve police in some Nazi encounters; popular culture’s relation to antifa (via punk, hipster and hooligan subcultures) and much more. There are two appendices: One offers advice to recruits from veteran antifa activists, while the other provides a bibliography on North American and European works on anti-fascism. Unfortunately, the book lacks an index.

The conundrum of no tolerance for intolerance

Bray defends no-platforming, saying one of history's lessons is that "it doesn't take that many fascists to make fascism." Mussolini and Hitler demonstrated that once fascism is legitimized, it can expand rapidly and quickly consolidate its power. Another is that, historically, fascists gained power legally. Therefore, Bray concludes that fascism must be stopped at its source.

He contends that most antifa groups do not reject freedom of speech in principle, but they maintain that the struggle against fascism takes precedence. On this point, he quotes Joe, one of his respondents, who says, "The idea that freedom of speech is the most important thing that we can protect can only be held by someone who thinks that life is analogous to a debate hall." Bray argues that no one actually lives up to the absolutist free speech standard that liberals use to condemn antifa. History, he points out, is full of examples of liberal abridgments of free speech, including some systemic ones, such as wartime press censorship, incitement-to-violence prohibitions, obscenity laws, copyright infringement and incarceration.

Bray argues that the liberal Enlightenment ideal of the best, most rational, argument prevailing in a free and open debate does not take into account the irrational and emotional appeal of fascism. Citing appeasement in the 1930s, Bray contends that liberalism has failed to provide a reliable bulwark against fascism. To be sure, free speech is fragile and liberalism's failures are legion. That is why these positions do require radical interrogation in struggles for social justice. Free expression is, however, a fundamental feature of participatory democracy, whether liberal or socialist.

When Richard Spencer announced on Twitter that he was canceling his "college tour" because antifa had escalated its efforts and — in his view — police were not responding adequately, it seemed like a victory for antifa. If so, it was pyrrhic. Antifa's tactics, which attracted hostile media coverage, did little to advance struggles against racism, patriarchal gender regimes, ableism and the other causes the movement supports. Intentional bureaucratic obstructionism by various university administrators may have done as much to undermine Spencer's tour as antifa. For example, he decided to quit the tour when only 12 people showed up for his appearance at Michigan State University, which scheduled his talk during spring break when most students were away from campus.

Bray faults liberal free speech theory for its failure to live up to an absolutist standard of free speech and for its hypocrisy. Yet, in doing so, he unwittingly encounters the conundrum that has dogged free speech theorists for centuries: what Karl Popper referred to as "the paradox of intolerance" in his 1945 work "The Open Society and Its Enemies." Any system that legally valorizes tolerance, regardless of its ideology, must — by logical extension — resort to intolerance of the intolerant. Like liberalism, antifa and Bray are also caught in this logical trap. As Bray puts it, "An anti-fascist outlook has no tolerance for 'intolerance.'" Yet, antifa is founded upon aggressive intolerance of fascists.

Presumably Bray means no tolerance for racism, misogyny, homo- and transphobia, etc. Intolerance of intolerance is the socio-logic, if not the formal rationale, for the European Union's controversial 2007 measure outlawing Holocaust denial. That precedent also points to the possibility of legalistic tactics

that antifa could use in some national jurisdictions, although it does not have the machismo appeal of violent confrontation.

Democracy has always been aspirational. Free speech is a desired goal, though very unevenly realized in practice. Bray persuasively chronicles some of the many failures of liberal democracy and free speech, and underscores the importance of radical struggles for greater economic and social justice. Antifa's binary framing of choices — speech or violence — does seem to give Bray pause at times, as it should. He contends that the society that anti-authoritarians seek to create would offer more opportunities for free expression than the liberal status quo. For antifa, that is a society inspired by revolutionary socialism; for Bray, preferably one that is anti-authoritarian and non-hierarchical.

Suppression of free speech is a method fascists use to consolidate power and amplify the reach of the irrational emotional appeals of their propaganda. Hitler, for example, quashed opposition, banning trade unions and opposition parties, and established the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, which controlled German media and cultivated anti-Semitism and the Aryan myth, most famously through films like “The Eternal Jew” and “Triumph of the Will.” Antifa, by seeking to suppress the speech of fascists, actually mimics their own techniques rather than providing an alternative.

Justifying violence on moral, not strategic, grounds

Bray's history of fascism and anti-fascism gives the most attention to violence on both sides. Fascists in inter-war Italy and Germany used violence and so did their opponents. Bray recounts clash after clash. From the 1940s to the present, he portrays anti-fascism as a continuing attempt to prevent fascists and neo-Nazis from being able to organize in public, with anti-fascists assaulting right-wing protesters and speakers. In some cases, this goes further, with anti-fascists assaulting anyone just wearing fascist garb, or bombing the offices and homes of prominent right-wingers. Bray recounts these events, presenting no reservations about any tactics used.

Bray argues that fascists need to be cowed into submission before they gain any sort of profile, arguing that the failure of the left in the 1920s and 1930s was letting fascism grow without sufficient resistance, though his claim is [questionable](#). Most of Bray's arguments concerning violence are about justifying it. The limitation of this approach is that even if one believes a violent action might be justified, morally or politically, it still may not be the most effective approach.

Bray presents violence as the alternative to liberal approaches, which rely on rational discourse and policing. Certainly, liberalism has often failed to deal with right-wing threats. However, there is another alternative: nonviolent action, the strategic use of petitions, rallies, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins and a host of other methods. This alternative has a rich history — including, for example, [countering fascists](#) using clowning. Bray can hardly avoid discussing nonviolent action because it is now used widely in contemporary social movements.

To his credit, Bray addresses nonviolent action. He spends much of his treatment countering the

arguments about fascism presented by Erica Chenoweth, a leading nonviolence scholar and co-author with Maria Stephan of the acclaimed study “Why Civil Resistance Works.” Bray cites particular cases in his attempt to counter the findings of Chenoweth and Stephan. This is strange because Chenoweth and Stephan do not claim violence is never effective, but rather that a statistical analysis of violent and nonviolent anti-regime campaigns shows that nonviolent movements are more likely to be successful and to lead to freer societies years later.

More seriously, Bray does not come to grips with the assumptions underlying nonviolent action. As Chenoweth and Stephan show, and many others have argued, a key reason why nonviolent action is effective is because it enables participation by most sectors of the population, including women, children, elderly and people with disabilities. Anyone can participate in a boycott.

A second key reason for the effectiveness of nonviolent action is precisely its avoidance of violence. Many people see violent attacks on peaceful, non-resisting protesters as unfair, even inhumane. As a result, such attacks can recoil against the attackers, generating greater support for the protesters. This effect, called political jiu-jitsu, is reduced or nullified when protesters are themselves violent.

Bray is quite right to point out that many campaigns, categorized as primarily nonviolent, used some violence. But this does not mean the violence helped the campaigns. By the logic of political jiu-jitsu, it may have weakened them.

Throughout “Antifa,” Bray actually gives examples of when fascist violence was counterproductive for the fascists and examples of when anti-fascist violence was counterproductive for the anti-fascists. For example, in Sweden in the 1990s, “neo-Nazi violence provoked a harsh societal backlash.” Then, in 2000, a Swedish neo-Nazi, Daniel Wretström, “allegedly was killed in a fight with immigrant youth,” and was seen as a martyr for his cause. The neo-Nazis subsequently held an annual march in his memory. However, Bray does not dwell on cases in which violence is counterproductive and does not link them to a backfire process.

In terms of nonviolence theory, one of the shortcomings of much anti-fascist campaigning is that the use of violence limits participation. Bray notes the challenges that antifa groups have with excess machismo and the rise of feminist antifa (fantifa) groups in response. He gives no information about the demographics of antifa groups, in particular their age and ability profiles. It is reasonable to assume that most antifa activists involved in physical confrontations are young fit men, the same profile as most military forces and combatants in any armed struggle.

“Antifa” succeeds in its primary mission: providing English-language readers with an overview of the antifa network, its purpose, diverse international groupings, ideology and tactics. The book is an informed and revealing, yet one-sided, account of efforts against fascism. What it omits is a sustained discussion of strategy to counter fascism by any means except using force to deter or fight the presence of the far right in public spaces. This one-dimensional approach limits the potential for participation of many sympathetic people. Furthermore, it can even alienate potential supporters who might be won over and involved using less confrontational tactics.

Using violence sends a message that the way to oppose those with whom you disagree is to silence their speech. This can legitimate use of the same methods by opponents. Ultimately, suppressing free speech and using violence are not good ways to build the sort of free society Bray desires, because they fail to foster the attitudes and skills necessary for such a society to develop and flourish.

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