

What is Insurgency?

Institute for the Study of Insurgent Warfare

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THESIS 1: Up until this point critiques of activism have tended to focus on the characteristics of activists that we find reprehensible.

It is easy to despise leftists. The popularity of their positions inclines them toward slow and flabby thoughts, reassured by the supportive murmurings of their fellows and the ease with which they rebuke the equally inept ideas of their traditional opponents on the right. It is simple to look at their love of the democratic form, of representation and protest, and read into the frequency with which self-described activists are also leftists, a conflation of the two. We find these critiques of activism proliferating in the anarchist milieu as of late, revulsion at the cycle of endless meetings, as well as rejection of consensus and the concept of the all-controlling general assembly, the legislative form that permeates this sort of action, gutting the very possibility of volatility. However, as critics we are, as with so much else, inclined to first pluck the low hanging fruit and with activism reach immediately for the theatrical antics of incoherent protesters and the joyful naivety of the charitable who would build a better world one filled belly at a time. It takes little effort to dismiss their politics as nonsense, their motives as exhibitionist, their practices as invasive, or their endeavors as ultimately ineffectual, but the sort of examination which seeks merely to dismiss the activist position fails to grasp its conceptual underpinnings as the font from which these other things spring. It is not as though activists fail because they have long meetings or enjoy screaming at empty buildings; these are merely symptoms of a more general sickness. Rather, the failure of activism appears at the core of the activistic injunction to act in all moments on the discursive terrain of a mythologized “social conversation;” and to declare ourselves victorious so long as “something” happens, that we did “something:”

THESIS 2: Activism constructs a symbolic terrain of engagement in a conceptual space, one defined by a politics of complaint fused with an injunction to act against problems defined in a completely despatialized way.

By activism we do not mean that thing which leftists do. Rather, activism is defined by its enclosure within an absurd Kantian narrative of the so-called democratic space, in which opinion polls substitute for actual fighting, but the critique of activism can just as easily become containable within the limits of our disdain for leftists. We cannot equate the annoyances that are generated by leftists for activism. Rather, activism is an enjoinder to act politically against bad things whether that political act is the representation of discontent through theatrics and complaint, or as divergent from that as the assassination of an appropriately public figure as a sign of seriousness, encompassing activities on the political right as readily as on the left, and direct action as readily as protest. By this we mean that the bomber of an abortion clinic is likely every bit as much an activist as is the campaigner

for women's rights caught in the blast in that they both have constructed completely despatialized symbolic terrains within which to represent their discontent, merely differing as to their preferred symbols and the audience with whom they lodge their respective complaints.

Fundamentally, activism is based in the attempt to influence the symbolic operations of some unitarily defined concept-enemy that exists in an abstract and generalized terrain in which there are no local features, and in which logistical imbalance never occurs. The terrain of engagement becomes removed from the spaces within which actions occur, and the enemy becomes decentered from actual material things.

It is not then a question of activists having a phobia of discussions of material fighting or narratives of effectiveness, discussions of terrain variance and police force movements, but rather it is that within their conceptual plane of engagement none of these things matter. It is not even that activists are unable to discuss these things, it is that within the conceptual limitations of activism they are nonsense.

THESIS 3: It is this formation that has led us to our current impasse, where attempts to transcend activism replicate the same formation but through actions of greater magnitude.

The move beyond activism is not effected by giving up the terms and tropes of the leftists. Activistic histrionics and theatrics find ample room to play amidst burning cars and glass filled streets, reminding us that a message can be wordless and an object can be a symbol too. Reacting to the lived conservatism of the left, by which we mean activists, it can be expected that the thinking will arise that one may transcend activism, by which we mean leftism, through simply going beyond the limits of the sort of actions they would be willing to undertake. Through bigger and more beautifully destructive displays the post-left activist constructs a mishmash collage by which to represent their disaffection. In this way shallow criticism allows activism to don new colors and appear under other banners, its essential strategic principles and tactical formations unchanged. To be avoided is a mythology which pervades militancy in which institutions are treated as bodies through which one may strike blows, where linear escalations of force, more smashy! Bigger bombs!, are interpreted as directly increasing efficacy, as though blowing up the lobby of an IBM office disrupted the functional logistics of apartheid any more than smashing an ATM in the middle of the night disrupts banking.

THESIS 4: To overcome the impasse is not a question of moving past complaint into other forms of symbolic action against despatialized enemies, but of defining the enemy in an immediate and material sense.

Implicit in the operation of activism is the existence of a shared project to which the activist, their opponents, and various neutral entities are all party. An activist's enemies then are the particular set of abstract bad things they endeavor to set aright and their opponents are fellows who merely happen to be on the wrong side of the issue.

By comparison, an insurgent's enemies are never abstract, but rather discrete entities of flesh, stone, or steel, from bodies to buildings, which at a specific time and place obstruct their interests. These enemies are not party to the insurgent's project and are instead defined by their exteriority to it, making elimination of the opposition the basic mode of conflict. Engagement with this sort of enemy is not defined by the effort toward annihilation in the sense that the enemy must die, or that things must be destroyed, but rather in such a way that they cease to be the enemy. This does not mean that there will be some Habermasian moment in which a sort of communicative commonality will form where everything becomes rational; conflict, action in itself, is arational as a material movement. Rather, this means that engagement with the enemy ends where they become logistically incapable of continuing to obstruct our interests. At the point of total attenuation of their force, conflict evaporates, but this can only be an immediate calculation.

THESIS 5: To define the enemy in an immediate and material sense means moving beyond hatred or rejection into a posture of hostility, or an immediate antagonism, in this case hostility in relation to policing.

In defining the enemy we have to move beyond aligning ourselves against abstractions and into a posture of hostility toward enemies which are immediate and material. The enemy is that which is directly hostile toward one's objectives regardless of simple claims of political affinity.

This means that in defining the enemy we must fundamentally shift our understanding of affinity, away from aligning ourselves along political theory or identity and into a conception which recognizes the potential presence of enemies all around us. This is clear to any of us that have dealt with the drudgery of working with liberals, only to find that they are a more effective force of deceleration than the actual uniformed police. Enemies surround us, but these enemies are not concepts, they are not the mythologized police as they are generally understood, the specter of the wealthy, or something like this. We do not fight ghosts and see no reason to become political exorcists: disembodied things cannot harm us.

Rather “enemy” is only a relevant categorization in relation to a material clash, finding its meaning in the immediacy of conflict itself, on a plane of engagement, in terms of where we fight, and when we fight. It is on this level that the enemy presents a direct threat, here that the enemy may be engaged, and it is only here that actual hostility exists. When we declare friends and enemies we are not merely claiming a structure of affinity, but more specifically we are distinguishing those we consider able to aid in our objectives from those that will impede this line of flight.

Friends need not even be those that we trust, but only those we can either work alongside, or whom we can use.

Class war can be an effective mythology, as Sorel discusses, but only to the degree that it generates conflict. In our case this conflict is not with the police as an abstract unity, but policing as an operation, as an actual logistics of force that functions in space and at a time. And for us this is a boon as to destroy the logistics of policing need not even require destroying police, necessarily, but only the disruption of their ability to manifest, to function in the streets. At the point that we understand the material operation of the police as it actually confronts us in our homes and on our streets to be the enemy then our engagement becomes immediate and material, arraying us against the effort to define our existences through force. At the point of immediacy everything breaks down to strategy and tactics, and on this level direct clash is not a fight we will, or can win, at least for now. But hostilities need not require direct frontal clash as an enemy, even a single body, is always also a logistical operation the disruption of which can be accomplished through smart subversion and intelligence as well as through direct fighting.

THESIS 6: This move into hostility requires a reattachment of action to the space and time of the act, the immediate and material tactical terrain formed by conflict

In reattaching the question of action to the actual dynamics of action we move back into the material, away from the symbolic, and have to completely realign our understandings of where we are fighting. In activism the terrain of conflict is formed around conceptual relationships; chasing the connections between some specific corporation and global finance, demonstrating on Saturdays in an empty downtown where a bunch of liberals yell slogans at empty federal buildings, engaging in the game of attempting to “change consciousness” by openly debating some hopeless fascist conservative. All of these forms of action are founded on the myth of a symbolic enemy that we may fight on some general discursive terrain. What becomes lost is any actual engagement, which vanishes along with an understanding of where the enemy actually functions, how they function, and what the features of that terrain of functionality actually are.

Take for instance Deep Green Resistance, where the terrain of action is reduced to inert points on a map, “infrastructure”, that is thought of as an immobile terrain, a mentality that functions along the lines of strategic bombing, the reduction of targets to immobile

points in space observed from 30,000 feet. Even within this metaphor they fail to grasp the functionality of strategic bombing in the age of the guided bomb which, understood through Parallel Strike doctrine, is an attempt to disrupt enemy command and control in order to set the stage for a material clash in a dynamic terrain, rather than as an end in itself. What is lost in this discussion of inert space, terrain reduced to maps, is that the enemy adapts, the enemy moves, the enemy rebuilds. Attack begets counterattack, and this continues until the enemy is unable to function, to move, to maintain a logistical ontology. To begin to make this move beyond inert conceptual enemies not only requires an understanding of the enemy in an immediate and material way, but also requires a recognition that all strategy becomes obsolete at the moment of clash; as Moltke said, “no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force:’

During hostilities the terrain becomes reconfigured by the very actions that are taken and adjustments must be made. On this level it is not only important to grasp the physical terrain, the features of terrain and their variance, but it is also important to understand the dynamics in that terrain, the things that occur, the other forces present, whether they are antagonistic or not. We will never fully grasp this terrain, as single actors or collections thereof. At most we can, through intense intelligence gathering, come to understand some of the dynamics in a terrain, and develop a more or less effective way of making sense of things. In this we must never allow our abstractions to unmoor themselves from the material and, so liberated, wander away from us. And, if they do, by no means should we let ourselves be dragged off with them.

THESIS 7: The reattachment of action to the immediate and material separates the question of strategy/fighting from the question of why we fight, from the terrain understood conceptually

In the move away from symbolic terrains of engagement into a material understanding of action and conflict grounded in the immediacy of fighting, another fundamental shift must occur in which the meta-conceptual question of why we fight is separated from the question of what fighting is. Activists complete their absurd move into the symbolic with a simple assertion that we become our enemy if we are willing to employ the same means. Underlying this assertion is an odd sort of technological essentialism, one that mirrors the positions of futurists and primitivists, which would have us imagine a world where technologies have an essential content independent of their deployment.

What is missed here is the use of means on the level of their positioning within a wider technics, one which must take into account the method and purpose of deployment, and the actual existence of a technology, or technique, as it developed in some particular historical moment in response to the dynamics of that history. We have to abandon the Ghandian reduction that underlies this assumption of some necessary connection between means

and goals, and come to understand something simple about conflict: the means of conflict take on meaning only within their deployment.

To be honest with ourselves, the ways that we make sense of the world are always interpretive, arbitrary, limited, and dynamic, in light of which the idea that we can understand the present, let alone some postrevolutionary future, is an absurdity. And this absurdity carries a danger along with it that far surpasses the limitation of weapons or means by ideological concerns. In the effort to speak the totality of the present or to plan some future that is supposed to occur after a series of events so catastrophic that the categories we use to make sense of life now are no longer relevant, whether revolution or collapse, we lose sight of some actual present, an immediate terrain of engagement of which we can at least attempt to make sense.

There is no ultimate tactic to be developed, no possibility that the past will recreate itself in the present or the future, no understanding what we have to do to cause shit to go down, there is no eternal moment and featureless terrain in which something like this could even be grounded or to which it could actually respond. There are only present capacities, present dynamics and some objective that we conceive as being important. Given that we cannot actually understand the totality of the world, or even of a single moment, "putting our ideals into action" is impossible; both due to the impossibility of this sort of unity or consensus in an actualized form, but also due to our inability to ever inscribe some necessary meaning into our actions; things occur, for innumerable reasons, and we are left the task of making sense of them in vain, from across the infinite distance that divides the concept from the moment.

We each have our reasons for engaging in the ways that we do, and it is not as though we can opt out. We cannot opt out of history, everything we do sets the conditions for future moments. We cannot opt out of the social war; the state is a logistics of force that operates to the degree that this deployment of force is total. Warfare has become generalized in a shifting dynamics of innumerable immediate contingencies; it is on this level of immediate contingencies that engagement occurs; it is on this level that the decision must be made as to how we engage with total war. What side we each choose, whether we side with the state or with the insurgency, is one that we have to answer for ourselves, for our own arbitrary, provisional, conceptual reasons. The question of what this implies, as an immediate form of the decision, can only be answered in the moment of strategy, necessarily embedded as it is within the dynamics of this clash. We have to decouple action from passion and come to terms with the stakes and risks of fighting. Insurgency is neither romantic nor passionate, it is material, strategic, and often tragic. The ultimate tragedy is that we have been put in a position where this decision must be made at all, but once a decision is made, the conceptual question becomes secondary, trumped by the question of survival, and strategic movement.

THESIS 8: This realignment is the move from activism to insurgency

At its core the current and seemingly perpetual impasse, summarized in the the question of what is to be done, replicates the core of activism on a series of levels. The question itself, when spoken, implies an “us” that will answer this question, and a body of discursive engagement that exists on some consistent plane, replicating the mythology of consensus. More importantly the idea that there is even an answer to this question, one that can take hold on a wide scale, assumes a consistent terrain of engagement across time and space. It is here that all symbolic engagements are fundamentally structured, on the level of thinking that we are fighting a common struggle together, assuming that we are fighting this in the same way, or that there is an essential commonality to the dynamics in which we fight.

To move beyond this series of assumptions, which cause us to replicate the failures of activism, means to re-conceive the fundamentals not only of what one does, but also the context in which one does them.

This is not a question of whether we should engage with activism in some general sense, whether the “movement” is something we should take part in, or a question of the foci or the underground. These discussions all, still, assume a generalized symbolic terrain of engagement in which it is tacitly understood that theoretical efficacy may be equated with material effectiveness. But there is no right tactic, nor universal form of engagement, and certainly no answer to the question of “what is to be done:’ We must abandon the entire symbolic terrain of action itself, but this does not mean that we must abandon engaging with activism.

Activism can be an effective tactic in escalation, as Maraghella discusses, but it does mean that we have to abandon activism as an assumed mode of engagement, and begin to ground ourselves in actual dynamics and in a hostility toward the immediate enemy. This means embracing insurgency, an immediate material engagement on an immediate and material terrain, one focused on strategy rather than abstract political theory; a reorientation of the question of action and waiting around engaging when and how engagement is strategic, and only to generate the maximum effect.

We should not fool ourselves, we are facing nothing less than a war; one without defined battlefields, without limit and without end. A war so all pervasive that it conditions our possibilities for existence, that it has become the standard for normalcy. This is a war that structures our terrain, inspires our cities, and organizes our lines of movement through space. It is a war, and nothing less, and it is on that plane that we must conceive our engagement. Pithy attempts to engage with passion are often poorly thought out, and just as often contact no strategic points of intervention. We see this often with the glorified lone wolf or the urban guerrilla, with their symbolic strikes against a symbolic enemy whatever their very material consequences. This engagement with the dynamics of history, in all their immediacy, in all of their materiality, is the shift from activism to insurgency.

THESIS 9: Insurgency is not something that can be defined in itself, except as an immediate and material engagement of hostility toward the immediate enemy within a context of warfare

To be an insurgent means re-evaluating our relationship to so-called social movements, and also our role outside of them. For example, liberals are not allies; even though there is often confusion on this question.

Fundamentally, their goals always involve some paternalistic attempt to define everyday life, and to use the state to do so; it should then be no surprise that they often work with the police. This does not mean that they cannot be used, or that engagement with social movements may not be effective, but to be able to re-evaluate the relationship that any of us may have to social movements we have to re-conceive of what the so-called social movements are, and this requires a move away from understanding them as a necessity toward the conception of them as a tactic, a form of engagement that has dramatic limitations, but that may not be all together useless given the right conditions. But, to move to this point means moving beyond defining what we are doing as a thing that exists in some consistent way across time and space.

We have already discussed the need to move beyond the question of what is to be done, to recognize the particularity of the means and dynamics of engagement to specific terrains with which they evolve in parallel; the need to move beyond activism and into insurgency, an immediate engagement with the enemy in a context of warfare. But, as we make this move we have to be careful not to fall into the trap of defining insurgency as a thing, as some abstract object, as a series of tactics, as necessarily one thing or another outside of the immediacy of engagement. Insurgency is neither violent nor not, neither symmetrical nor not, neither armed nor unarmed. Insurgency is not a thing to be thought, but a form of engagement which plays out in a hostility toward the enemy, and reveals itself in a posture toward the war that finds us, wherever we are, in our everyday lives.

When we speak about the necessity of moving from activism to insurgency we are not speaking of an increased militancy; militancy can be just as dangerous as pacifism and is a form of activism in its own right. Rather we are speaking of the need to avoid the tragedy of the Red Army Faction just as much as the tragedy of Occupy, the need to abandon symbolic terrains of engagement, in which we struggle against unspecific enemies on abstract political terrain through the elaboration of our passions. We are speaking of the necessity of grounding our understanding of what we are doing, separate from that of why we are doing it, in the space in which things actually occur, in the here and now, and to make the effort to base this engagement on concerns of strategy, of hostility toward the enemy in some specific sense, rather than some effort to make a point, "speak truth to power" or whatever might pass for action otherwise. We are speaking of a posture toward the enemy in which we strike when we have the advantage, wait when we do not, and use the means that will accomplish our objectives, rather than those which will leave us unburdened by conscience.

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