

State of Emergency and Self-Defense

An Imaginary Interview with Günther Anders

Günther Anders

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1. The End of Pacifism

Imaginary Interviewer (Int): We heard a rumor that you object to being called a “pacifist”. I am sure you will understand that we are disturbed and even shocked by this rumor.

Günther Anders (GA): You shouldn’t be. All I wanted to say by rejecting that label was to point out that those who call themselves “pacifists” under present conditions appear to unreflectively take it for granted that the objectives of power politics can also be attained by non-pacifist means. But since that is no longer the case, because under current conditions any war, or at least any war between world powers (although even smaller states have now “come of age into nuclear adulthood”) would automatically, and most likely within a few minutes, result in a total catastrophe: because—as I have been saying for thirty years¹—there are no longer any war goals that would not be negated by the military means employed to achieve them, as even according to the most conservative estimates, the negative impact of such means would be incomparably greater than any conceivable or desirable gains, so there is no other choice but pacifism. The altogether false maxim that says, “the end justifies the means”, must now be replaced by the true notion that “the means destroy the ends”.² And because this is true, there is no alternative besides pacifism. And this is why I am not a pacifist. Where there is no longer any alternative, a special term such as “pacifist” becomes superfluous.

Int: We are most grateful for that clarification. All the more so since the rumor said just the opposite.

GA: What does the rumor say?

Int: That you ... forgive me, but I am not responsible for this rumor ...

GA: What rumor? What does it say?

Int: That you have explicitly declared your opposition to non-violence as an exclusive principle.

GA: But why do you call this a rumor? It is the pure truth!

2. Our Rejection of Non-Violence is the Affirmation of Our Right to Self-Defense under a State of Emergency

Int: The pure truth?

GA: Your surprise at this makes me think that you believe that I ever explicitly advocated the principle of non-violence. Naturally, nothing of the kind is true.

Int: You call this about-face “natural”?

GA: What do you mean, I “call” it that? And what about-face? The right of persons to exercise self-defense when threatened with death, persons who could be struck down at any time, is, naturally, something natural! It is part of natural law.

Int: You call the renunciation of non-violence “the right to self-defense”?

GA: Again you say I “call” it that! It is the right to self-defense! And since the danger is total, and the possible scope of destruction is global, our right to self-defense must be exercised totally and globally. It must become the defensive war of all who live under the shadow of this threat. And I would like to add: of all human beings, in our time and times to come.

¹ Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Vol. I, Munich, 1956, p. 261. (Author’s note.)

² *Ibid.*, p. 251. (Author’s note.)

3. Morality Is above the Law

Int: How and why have you arrived at this ... strange position?

GA: Strange? What would be strange, what would require clarification would be, to the contrary, if I had not arrived at this position.

Int: And you avoid answering all my questions!

GA: Good, good. Someone who has lived, as my generation did, in the era of dictatorships and wars of aggression, someone who has lived with his eyes open throughout this era for more than seventy years...

Int: How many years?

GA: Yes, since August 1914. Whoever has lived with open eyes through this era, and what I mean by that is this: whoever has not, at any moment of his life, looked away, whoever has not been able to tune out the image of the atrocities that took place during his life, regardless of where they took place (because distance does not reduce our obligation); and who even during moments of happiness never averted his gaze, not even during those times referred to above, because in matters relating to the emotions one must always “put your whole heart into it” ...

Int: (His body language indicates utter incomprehension.)

GA: It was not worth much. Not much; it may even have been a liability. In any event, someone who was alive during the battle of Verdun and then Auschwitz and Hiroshima, then Algeria and Vietnam, etc., etc... If you could hear everything that happens all over the world, even though most of us are deaf, then you would have to immediately cover your ears, because the cacophony coming from all sides at once does not cease for even an instant ...

Int: (Covering his ears, frightened.)

GA: Stop doing that! Someone who has been condemned, and is still condemned, to live through this era, to endlessly hear its din and roar, day after day, year after year...

Int: Yes?

GA: And now for the conclusion you did not expect ...

Int: Which is?

GA: Someone who lived through all that with his eyes open cannot, he does not have the right to become an advocate of non-violence at any price, not now and not in the future, because those people who are under attack, the victims of this blackmail—and this is something that is conceded not only by international law but even by ecclesiastical law—are entitled, even obligated, to exercise self-defense against threats of violence, and are even more entitled to do so against acts of violence. Those of us who oppose nuclear power are therefore, as I have already said, waging a defensive struggle against the greatest threat ever faced. We therefore have the right to employ violence against violence, even if it is not backed by any “official” or “legal” power, that is, by any State. But the state of emergency makes self-defense legitimate: morality is above the law. I believe it is unnecessary to justify this rule two hundred years after Kant. The fact that today’s Kantians call us “friends of chaos” does not affect us, although we believe we can detect the odor of the brewery when we hear that sort of talk, because it merely demonstrates the moral illiteracy of anyone who would apply that label to us. Since we know the identity of the ingenious inventor of this term, the same man who called us “rats” and “bums” years ago, we will have to accept this name as well as a badge of honor. At least I have.

4. The Ability to Exercise Violence, Known as “Power”, Is a Legal Monopoly.

GA: They call us “friends of chaos” because we do not recognize the monopoly of their power based on violence, that is, on their ability to threaten and attack us. Since they strive to make power, their power, pass for order, we are eo ipso the disorderly, the friends of chaos, and are even reproached for our hairstyles, for the long hair that for Durer or Schiller was still normal, which is said to be a proof of slovenliness, or maybe of criminality or Bolshevism. As we have seen, anyone with long hair (even though the number of longhairs among the enemies of nuclear power is small enough) does not have the right to defend humanity’s right to survival. As absurd as it may be, the Strausses and the Zimmermanns, in their support for Wackensdorf and other nuclear installations, claim that only filthy longhairs are opposed to the nuclear arms race.³

5. Everything Upside-Down

GA: At the same time that we, the defenders of peace and the enemies of what endangers humanity, are labeled as “violent” when we do not restrict our actions to purely verbal protests, all the really aggressive powers consider themselves to be on the defensive. The source of the chemical contamination of Vietnam or the recent bombing of Tripoli was, obviously, not a “Department of Aggression” but a “Department of Defense”, although obviously neither Vietnam nor the minuscule Libya would, even in their wildest dreams, have been willing or able to attack the United States. When the aggressors call themselves “defenders” (and, corrupted by their own lies, they amazingly not only lay claim to but also wear this false label), then we should not be surprised that, conversely, those of us who are fighting for peace are treated by them as aggressors, and they employ weapons that are clearly weapons of war against us, such as took place, for example, at Wackensdorf. This counterrevolutionary activity of theirs effectively transformed us into revolutionaries and brings about a situation that truly approaches a state of undeclared civil war. And if a citizen comes to any harm, then that proves that he was the aggressor.

6. On Happenings and the Dialectic of Non-Violence

Int: The term “self-defense” that you are using, I am not comfortable with it. Are you not, by using that term, crossing a Rubicon, so to speak?

GA: A Rubicon? The Rubicon!⁴

Int: That is what I meant to say.

³ This appeal to the shorthairs (as well as to cleanliness) in every country is all the more comical when we recall (something that the uncultured philistine gentlemen, of course, do not even suspect) that the short hair style which they praise was introduced by the *sans-culottes* in protest against the aristocracy, whose members always wore wigs. As is so often the case, ignorance is the source of history, not only for those who write it but for those who make it as well. (Author’s note.)

⁴ Caesar violated the Roman law forbidding him from crossing the river Rubicon at the beginning of the civil war against Pompey and, according to tradition, spoke the following words: “The die is cast.” The war resulted in a situation of “no return”.

GA: But I am not the one who crossed it, it was crossed long ago by those who are threatening us now. Or do you think that those who are defending themselves are responsible? Are you saying that we invented this defense?

Int: No, of course not.

GA: Look. From now on there is no need to express ourselves in such a pedantic manner; this is not the place to show off our humanistic education, it would even be a sign of cowardice to do so. The more disturbing the theme, the more soberly we must express ourselves.

Int: And how would you put it in plain words?

GA: I have already done so, but I fear you do not want to understand. What I am trying to say is that mere declarations are ineffective and therefore shameful and immoral.

Int: But you cannot ...

GA: You can, or you should have, or you should, you will see and you will yourself admit it immediately when I take you on a trip back in time...

Int: What do you mean by that?

GA: How should Hitler have been fought? Do you think that the few attempts to eliminate him, which unfortunately failed miserably, were immoral? Or would it have been immoral not to touch him (as was effectively the case, with few exceptions) even if you knew that he would not hesitate to sacrifice millions of human beings to his demented goal?

Int: How can you compare today's situation with the era of Hitler?

GA: You are not so mistaken in making such an objection. Because what happened then was, despite sixty million dead, only a practice run for what awaits us, which is incomparable.

Int: Why a practice run?

GA: Because today's Hitlers, by possessing weapons that can no longer even be called "weapons", are incomparably more dangerous than Hitler was. I fear that you only recognize the Hitlers of the past as dangerous, as they were; you prefer not to recognize today's Hitlers.

Int: (Looks thoughtful.)

GA: But let us return to the matter at hand. With only non-violent means (which are probably not means at all as long as they remain non-violent) you cannot fight the Hitlers of the past or those of today. Not only would they have no fear of these means and laugh at them, no, they would not even laugh, because such means would appear too insignificant for laughter. Nor could such non-actions as fasts, for example, be accepted as "methods of struggle", which harmed neither the Hitlers nor the Reagans nor the Strausses, but only harm those who attempt, by means of their own self-denial in the archaic style of religious sacrifices, to subject someone more powerful to blackmail. Asceticism and the pain that one inflicts upon oneself have never succeeded in blackmailing any god or power. The same lack of seriousness is responsible for such sentimental trivialities as, for example, the bestowal of bouquets of flowers upon the police, who, armed to the teeth, are not even physically in any condition to accept them. In brief: happenings are not enough.

Int: (Disturbed.) Happenings! Does it not seem to you that this comparison goes beyond ...

GA: No. It goes beyond nothing. It is not even a comparison. Actions of non-violent resistance are not just similar to happenings: they are in fact happenings.

Int: Why?

GA: Because happenings are playful pseudo-events, they are “as-ifs” which pretend to be more than that, that is, they pretend to be real actions or, at least, bastard offspring of being and appearance, of seriousness and play.⁵

Int: Yes, but ...

GA: There is no “but” about it. Only “and”. And resistance demonstrations have over the last few months taken the form of such “as-ifs” and pseudo-activities that pretend to be actions. (It seems that since then some have felt a twinge of shame for merely having staged a comedy.) I would not, however, venture to suggest, naturally, that there is no difference between the happenings of the sixties and today’s happenings. Neither the actors nor the public, nor the enemy, are the same. Nor is the style and social function of such events the same. The happenings of twenty years ago were carried out by individuals, with pretentious costumes and sometimes surrealistic and ingenious props, with like-minded people who formed an audience, while today’s non-violent acts of resistance are mass actions, whose participants never think of doing anything original or ingenious; they never heard of surrealism, but behave with a petty-bourgeois seriousness, and even with unctuousness and pathos. Not to mention the numerous people who transform their protest demonstrations in the most abject fashion into picnics, with hot dogs and hamburgers: a practice funeral banquet. And with guitars: where these people strum the three chords they know, the rule of vulgarity begins. It is true that the social and stylistic differences between the happenings of the past and today’s happenings are undeniable. Nonetheless, there is the same oscillation between being and appearance, seriousness and play. Do you actually believe that it is a historical coincidence that these two “as-ifs”, these two forms of pseudo-opposition or pseudo-revolution, the happenings of the sixties and today’s non-violent happenings, have emerged in the same quarter-century? Are they not both obviously the temper tantrum thrown by man rendered powerless and therefore obsolete by the superiority of the technological apparatus?

Int: I have never noticed a connection between those two things.

GA: Then now is the time to see it. The two are submissive “as-ifs”, terribly submissive.

Int: Terribly submissive?

GA: Precisely. Because the authors of the as-ifs go so far as to brag about their as-if, pompously trying to make their ineffectiveness pass for “humanity” or respect or even “the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount”. There is nothing more horrible, certainly, than when submission and the “courage of cowardice” dare to lay claim to Jesus Christ.

Int: The courage of cowardice? Jesus Christ? I don’t know what you are talking about.

GA: I am talking about all these pseudo-activities. In most cases it is a matter of—I say “it is a matter of” because to speak here of agency would be going too far—people who are protesting non-violently because they lack any technological possibility of offering real resistance against the tremendous superiority of machines; these are people who nonetheless only subject themselves to the as-if out of mere necessity rather than as a matter of principle. The third volume of *The Obsolescence of Man* will unfortunately have to contain a chapter on “the obsolescence of revolutions” that has been brought about by the superiority of force in regard to both the tools of war and the people who wield them. But the knowledge of this obsolescence must not prevent reflection concerning the new types of revolution we have to invent or implement. Just because the struggle has become more difficult does not obviate the need to persevere in it.

⁵ *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Vol. II, Munich, 1980, pp. 355 et seq. (Author’s note.)

Int: You have systematically organized your philosophical theories?

GA: Philosophies are not “systematically organized”. What do you mean by that?

Int: I am referring to the theory that you have defended for several decades concerning the superiority obtained over us by the instruments we have ourselves produced; and I am referring to your critique of non-violence and your skepticism regarding revolution.

GA: I repeat: “systematically organized” is an inadequate formulation. It also does me too much honor, because the connection between the elements you mentioned is neither my invention nor is it to my credit to have noticed it. It really exists; you only have to stop and look.

Int: But all of this is not true, your saying that happenings and non-violence are the same thing ... so, maybe all Gandhi’s protests were happenings?

GA: (After a pause for reflection.) From the point of view of world history, I am afraid so. Or do you consider that Gandhi’s protest, the one where he was naked, weaving by hand, an image disseminated by the millions, was anything but an anti-machine happening? He could not stop industrialization or alleviate the misery caused by India’s caste system. Seriously. If Gandhi called for “non-violent” resistance, he did so *faute du mieux*.⁶ He probably did not feel proud but rather ashamed of having to settle for such protests actions. What he was trying to say was: “Maybe we could resist somehow, even if power, and thus the violence needed to act effectively, are not in our grasp.” What was decisive for him—and this is crucial—was not violence as such (as the sole morally lawful method or as a principle or goal) but the very unlikely possibility that resistance might be possible despite a lack of weapons. The main thing was therefore not the affirmation of this “lack” (as in lacking weapons) but rather the “despite” (despite the lack of weapons).

Int: So, to summarize, you are in favor of violence?

GA: I am in favor of violence in self-defense.

Int: And this is final, valid once and for all?

GA: No, of course not! I should hope not. It is only valid as long as self-defense against the state of emergency is necessary. We exercise self-defense for the sole purpose of making the need for it superfluous and making it disappear. A “dialectic of violence”, if you want to call it that.

Int: That is, to employ violence for the purpose of overcoming violence?

GA: Precisely. Since we only recognize one goal, the preservation of peace, we hope that after our victory (if we achieve it, which must permanently remain in doubt) we will no longer have any need for violence. We must only employ violence as a last resort, as counter-violence, as something provisional; because it ultimately is only meant to lead to a state of non-violence. But as long as the powers that be continue to employ violence against us, we who have no power at all and who have been deliberately deprived of all power (and this violence is thus directed against our hoped-for descendants), whether by way of threatening to transform our homes into epidemic-infested ruins, or by way of building allegedly harmless power plants; as long as they continue to attempt to rule over us or subject us to blackmail or humiliate or annihilate us, or even as long as they merely accept the possibility of our destruction (but this “merely” is already enough!), the state of emergency will continue to oblige us—and for this I am sorry—to renounce the renunciation of violence. In other words: we must by no means abuse our love for peace by offering the unscrupulous the chance to annihilate us and our descendants. To look

⁶ “For the lack of anything better.”

this danger straight in the face with equanimity and folding our arms, as ninety-nine percent of our contemporaries do, is not a demonstration of courage, or even of fearlessness, but only of humility (forgive this obscene expression).

Int: What are you trying to say?

GA: That in confronting those who have no scruples there is nothing more undignified than humility.

Int: I see that you really are in favor of violence!

GA: I repeat: in favor of that counter-violence whose name is self-defense.

Int: This shifting from violence to non-violence, this assertion of yours that “violence is not violence”, all of this hardly sounds convincing ... it is almost as ambiguous as the words of the cabinet minister, Zimmermann.

GA: The comparison is at least original.

Int: Just like you, he erased the distinction between violence and non-violence. According to the newspaper *Die Welt*, he said: “Non-violent resistance is also violence, because it is resistance.” A pretty equation.

GA: To summarize: resistance as such is violence.

Int: Yes.

GA: And what similarity do you find between my statement and that equation, that dictum that sums up the principles of all dictatorships? It is totally the opposite of what I said! Because, what I said—much to my regret, as you know—is not that non-violence is violence, but quite the contrary, that the employment of the wrathful violence that is forced upon us is legitimate only because its goal is a state of non-violence, that is, to secure the peace that is under threat (and not by us). It is an “if and only if”. And do you seriously believe that my maxim is just as morally ambiguous as Zimmermann’s equation that condemns all freedom, all free expression, and all dissent?

Int: (Remains silent.)

GA: My maxim does of course, in a certain sense, convey a negative message: that by using only beautiful words, with (as they so repulsively express it) “caress units”, or with rational arguments, we will not be able to convince those who support nuclear missiles and power plants.

Int: How is it possible that a rationalist, an enlightened professional, can speak in such a way against reason and argument!

GA: Precisely for that reason! Only the intoxicated overestimate the power of reason. The first task of rationalism consists in not having illusions about the power of reason and its power to convince. And this repeatedly leads me back to the same conclusion: against violence, non-violence does not work. Those who are preparing or at least accepting the prospect of the annihilation of millions of human beings, present and future, our definitive annihilation, must disappear; they do not have the right to continue to exist.

Int: Which means ...

GA: Do you want me to repeat it one more time?

Int: Yes, please.

GA: It has not penetrated your skull?

Int: No.

GA: Me either. But they won’t do it themselves.

Int: And this means, then, that they must be destroyed?

GA: You don't have to play the fool with me. Living in this world is no picnic. And whoever does not have the courage to take responsibility incurs guilt, is still a child and ...

Int: And?

GA: ... is immoral.

Int: (Shaking his head in passionate disbelief.)

GA: Please be reasonable! What do you think should have been done with Hitler, Himmler and company once there was no longer any room for doubt—and this was true even before the Wannsee Conference⁷—that these ... men ... would have no compunctions at all about using millions of their contemporaries for firewood (it is unendurable that this expression is still heard from inoffensive mouths)? What do you think? Should the people have limited their opposition to them to the form of peaceful and educational demonstrations? But you already know the answer: the people would not even dare to attend a peaceful demonstration. Far from it ...

Int: I know that. Because even that was impossible.

GA: Exactly: *because resistance was considered eo ipso violent*, as with Zimmermann.

Int: So they were absolved of responsibility?

GA: Absolutely not. It was even worse.

Int: Why?

GA: Because they were not even indignant, no: they probably were not even aware of the fact that they could not protest, that they were not allowed to protest or ...

Int: Or what?

GA: Or that they no longer wanted to protest. To the contrary: they celebrated their condition with jubilation. They celebrated with drums and cymbals, with applause and torches; they celebrated the man who would not allow them to protest. They enjoyed themselves with the one who forbade them to protest, they enjoyed their complete servitude as a kind of collective sense of belonging, something totally negative as something totally positive. It is not your fault: it is the fault of your fathers.

Int: That is not very consoling either.

GA: I'm sorry. But should they not have liquidated the liquidators?

Int: Probably. So you compare the dangers of that time with those of today?

GA: Precisely. But I also compare today's non-resisters with those of that time. Today's task is no less important than yesterday's. Than it should have been. And today's task may be even more serious and more urgent than yesterday's, because even more is at stake.

Int: I know.

GA: I doubt it. And, to return once again to Zimmermann's infamous words, to that iniquitous, contemptuous, antidemocratic and anti-Christian pronouncement that "non-violent resistance is violence because it is resistance": this "because" is truly the most infamous "because" I have ever heard. With these words Zimmermann not only provides testimony of his dictatorial mentality; he actually flaunts it. These words could have been shouted from the mouth of Hitler. It is an echo from fifty years ago.

Int: You think we have reached that point?

GA: It is not a question of what I think. Whoever proclaims, like Zimmermann, that non-violent resistance is violence because it is resistance, denies any right of dissent and thus trans-

⁷ The meeting of the Nazi elite held on January 20, 1942, where the "final solution", the industrial extermination of the Jews, was decided upon.

forms all free expression of opinions, all criticism of the measures enacted by the dominant power, into a punishable usurpation. Thus, for example, any warning issued against nuclear missiles, however, amiably expressed, runs the risk of being suspected of being a violent act camouflaged as “Christian” or “non-violent” and directed against the so-called “values of the free world”. It cannot be denied, of course, that there are occasional cases when kind-hearted people who openly defend things that are not officially authorized or even that are officially prohibited achieve a certain transitory impact. But in Zimmermann’s eyes, impact is something that is basically a privilege of those who hold power. And, basically (although he obviously does not say this) these impacts must be achieved exclusively through the threat of violence (as a proof of power and therefore of legitimacy). What the establishment’s clenched fist is capable of (and therefore allegedly has the right and the duty to exercise) cannot be permitted to the hand that caresses. In Zimmermann’s eyes, the kindness that tries to intervene (and which sometimes even succeeds in doing so) is nothing but a trick; sweetness is nothing but camouflaged violence. For them, every sheep is a wolf in sheep’s clothing; authentic sheep do not exist from the point of view of the powerful, and this also obviously means that, in the eyes of those who only recognize violence and violence based on power as legitimate, real Christians are *eo ipso* hypocrites. And that Zimmermann and his kind will never admit that this constitutes part of their nature. And that the wolves in sheep’s clothing, camouflaged as “non-violent”, cannot be tolerated by the genuine wolves (who by virtue of their ownership of power also possess the monopoly of legitimate violence) is self-evident.

Int: Might there not perhaps be a grain of truth in this mistrust of non-violence? Could it be that the powerful, and also the powerful churches that also profess the religion of love, were often satisfied with non-violence only because, if they could not impose their objectives “by fair means” they could resort to violence at any time? And because they knew that the powerless were aware of this?

GA: That is true. You are speaking of the non-violence that the powerful can afford to use as a means of pressure thanks to their power, sometimes over an extensive period of time. But that is not our topic. Because we have been speaking of those who do not have power and find themselves living under the state of emergency; people who are incapable of allowing themselves to renounce violence if they want to survive, those who are therefore compelled to exercise the right of self-defense or, at least, to attempt to save humanity with violent actions.

Int: So we can no longer count you among the pacifists.

GA: Sure you can. But for me peace is not a means, but an end; and it is not a means because peace is the end. I cannot stand to sit here and watch as we, who are threatened with death by the violent, we and our descendants, fold our arms and not dare to use violence against the violence with which we are threatened. Since Hölderlin’s words, which the Sunday preachers are so fond of quoting,⁸ to the effect that where danger looms salvation cannot be far away⁹ are simply false (since everyone knows that at Auschwitz and Hiroshima nothing came to save them), our task is to intervene for salvation: to annihilate the danger by putting the annihilators in danger.

Int: Are you finished?

⁸ He is referring to Heidegger and his epigones.

⁹ Hölderlin: “Where there is danger, there grows/also that which saves” (*Wo aber Gefahr ist, Wächst/ das Rettende auch*).

GA: No. One last word, so that you will have a memento of our interview: in the cemeteries where we shall lie no one will weep for us; because the dead cannot weep for the dead.

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