

Shepard, B. (2006) Review of *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, The Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies*.  
*Left Turn Magazine*.

The years since September 2001 have witnessed a long debate about the philosophical underpinnings of the use of political violence in the US and abroad. While some have suggested that terrorism should not be differentiated with dissent, others argue there is more to this question. For example, Bernard Lewis suggests that the political roots of Al Qaeda's case against US can be located as far back as the thirteenth century in an entirely different way of viewing history. By many accounts, abolitionist crusader John Brown was viewed as a terrorist in his day. There are countless ways to view the use of political violence. August 2001, Bill Ayers published his memoir *Fugitive Days*, a story of his life and activism, including an account a bombing of the US pentagon by the US activist group the Weather Underground (WU). The WU was a splinter group of the Students for Democratic Society which actively chose to engage in armed struggle against the US government during the Viet Nam War years. Ayer's work was followed a veritable literary explosion of writing on the WU's glimpse at the political abyss of the rejection of Ghandi's philosophy of non violent civil disobedience. The central question of this body of work remains: Why and how did young, middle-class radicals in prosperous democratic societies attempt to overthrow their governments by armed force in the 1960s and 1970s?

Of all these works, Jeremy Varon's work, *Bringing the War Home*, offers the most substantial, scholarly interrogation of these questions. Varon, a historian, compares the left-wing violence in the United States and West Germany, contrasting the motivations and ideologies of two distinct groups which rejected pacifism: the US Weather Underground and Germany's Red Army Faction (RAF). While the Weather Underground fought its government's active involvement with the Viet Nam War, the German Red Army Faction viewed Viet Nam as a way to redeem their parent's inaction in the face of the rise of the Third Reich. The RAF struggle was against the ghosts of the past as much as the present anti war effort. The moral question remained the same for both groups: what would you do if you witness what appears to be the rise of Nazi-ism in front of your very eyes. For RAF, armed struggle against forces it viewed as fascist could make up for the absence of armed resistance to the Nazis (those who did, such as The White Rose who distributed anti Nazi flyers, were swiftly executed). Still, the same question vexed the WU. In the midst of the disastrous Days of Rage in 1969, leader Bernardine Dohrn declared, "We are not going to be good Germans in a Fascist State."

What makes Varon's work effective is the way he situates his study of moral actions and political consequences in the sociology, philosophy and history of the day. Members of both the WU and RAF pondered why the US government was free to napalm villages of innocents abroad while suppressing dissent at home. When activists claimed state sponsored violence justified their use of violence, the result was usually long prison sentences. To answer these questions, Varon turns to Max Weber's term for 'monopoly of force' or *Gewaltmonopol*. Weber described the state as, "a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory." An exclusive right to engage in physical force is what makes the state, in essence, a state. For activists to challenge such state power was both audacious and naïve. For Varon, whose work becomes as an extended interrogation of the claim of the right to kill morally, violence is an act of ethical daring – the least of which involves violating a social contract by claiming the right to kill.

Varon's interview highlights Bill Ayers' recollections of being called a 'liberal creep' for confessing his affection for Brecht's, 'For Prosperity,' a poem pleading for future generations to refrain and 'judge not too harshly' the excessive actions of revolutionaries. Not long after his love of poetry is belittled, his faith in the imperative of non-violent waivers. A subtext of the work thus becomes - process counts. For those involved in struggles for human freedom, the way groups work together is as important as the end results. "The goal, free human beings, must already be evident in the means," Varon quotes Herbert Marcuse.

In the end, the lesson of *Bringing the War Home* becomes that to be a committed activist, one does not have to engage in inhumane acts. While the WU save themselves from the moral abyss of random violence, the same cannot be said of the RAF. Their work, including random killings of security guards and the like, begins to blur into a space where violence begets more violence. On the other hand, the Weather Underground renounced violence against human beings after the Town House explosion, yet continued bombings against strategic targets including an office of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in San Francisco in March 1974 in protest against forced sterilization of women on public assistance. Over the years, many in the WU lived on to continue the struggle, while those in the RAF languished in jail.

- Benjamin Shepard