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## In Defense of Violence

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### **Abstract**

In this work I attempt to articulate a principle or set of principles that can guide violent revolution, or emancipatory violence, and yet still prevent the end-stage backlash that generally follows; e.g., the Terror's culmination in which the originators are the targets of the Terror.

“If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.”

—The Open Society and Its Enemies, Karl Popper (1945)

“To punish the oppressors of humanity is clemency; to forgive them is cruelty.”

—Principles of Public Morality, Maximilien Robespierre, (1794)

Violence is the sword, which strikes at its bearer. The threat is greatest when it is wielded without principle. Indeed, even when principles have been articulated, history has shown us that the very use of violence may breed more, and it may redound out of all control, to the benefit of tyrants and counterrevolutionaries. Therefore, I will here endeavor to examine the principles under which violence may be employed, and to what ends. For the purposes of this examination, we shall define violence thusly: as the realization of a capacity to harm, particularly living things.<sup>i</sup>

First, we must understand from whence the right to use violence originates. In order to do that, we must examine the origin of rights themselves. Then, we shall examine the potential for violence that is inherent in the State, how it is lodged there by constituent members of that State, and how that violence is transformed by State action.

The existence of the State permits the use of secondary, that is non-violent, power in interpersonal and State-to-person relationships.<sup>ii</sup> This leads to the alienation of the inherent capacity to harm given up by the State's constituent members, concentrating it and separating it from the constituent members of the State, which we must examine. Finally, we will approach the justification for the realization of capacity to harm when turned against the State and, under the new, equitable State, when turned against counter-State actors.

## **I. The Violence of Nature.**

Rights are constructed notions that arise from the interaction of human beings—they are agreed-upon baselines for human interaction and behavior. Nature does not recognize rights. Natural law, as it was conceived of by the great thinkers of the Enlightenment, is nowhere present in nature. Nature itself is a great calamity, a constant collapse.<sup>iii</sup> All systems seek equilibrium at their point of maximum entropy, but that equilibrium is necessarily dead: all difference homogenized, all energy expended. Movement, change, and growth are all forces of violence in nature. Peace and stability are the result of entropic decay and the cessation of struggle.

Mankind is also part of nature. It is only through hubris that we hold ourselves above it; the development of self-awareness is an element in the greater tapestry of

nature. We, too, are part of the cyclical violence that is the constant search for equilibrium. The “rights” of human beings arise not from the natural world *per se*, but rather from the social world (which is itself an outgrowth of the natural order).

Nature does not comprehend rights as we imagine them. This is why I approach violence with a pragmatic lens. In nature, the right to do violence can be understood as a function of any individual’s capacity to realize the potential to harm. That is, the only brake on the upper limit of violence is ability.

Part of that brake arises from the violence others may do in turn, to prevent the violent acts of the actor.<sup>iv</sup> However, absent a social formation, each actor is free to act in such a way as to do the maximal amount of harm that it is actually possible to realize. The upper bounds to one’s potential to do harm are limited only by circumstance.

Of course, this idealized State of Nature has likely never existed; it serves as a Hobbesian thought experiment. When conceiving of it, we must dispose of all social formations, even that of the family. Any social formation will impose a brake of some kind on the capacity to realize harm. Some of these brakes will be firmly founded in organized counter-violence (the main limitation employed by the State), while others will be founded in secondary types of power that arise from social formations and work at one remove from actual violence or the threat of violence. Both of these types will be discussed below; organized counter-violence (State violence) in section II, and secondary power in section III.

The State, we are told, has a natural monopoly on violence. It is that monopoly which makes it the State. Whatever natural inclinations individuals have to do violence to one another, this is subsumed by the power of the State as part of the social contract. In order to live peaceably with others, individuals presumably agree to surrender their “right” to do violence. Here, I do not speak of a right as something derived from natural law, but rather a *natural right*, that is, an *unrealized potential*. That is, every person has the *unrealized potential* to do violence to every other, but that potential is theoretically surrendered in lieu of the socialized violence of the State. Those who attempt to exercise that unrealized potential once they are placed within the social order will find that the order itself (in the form of individuals) punishes them.

Thus, the formation of the State, or any social body, can be thought of as a number of individuals pooling their own capacity to exercise the unrealized potential to do harm and transferring it into an organizational structure. This leads us from the Hobbesian “state of nature” to life under the social contract. For example, the structure of the State precludes, with very limited exceptions,<sup>v</sup> the legitimate use of violence by any of its constituent members. The State itself possesses a monopoly on the legitimate realization of the capacity to harm. Of course, this must be made manifest in some individual, but the individuals who carry out State-organized violence do so not as constituent members, but rather in their capacity as agents of the organization.

Entry into the social compact thus requires the surrender of the individual’s unrealized capacity to do harm. We agree, in essence, to live without intentionally harming others. When we do intentionally harm another, the violence of the State takes action.

## **II. The Violence of the State.**

The socialized violence of the State springs from the surrendered potential of its constituent members. That is, the State wields constituent members and co-opts their potential to do violence, by means of organizational roles. The roles which are empowered to carry out this socialized violence have been called by some the “guardian class,” and include police, the military, and the judiciary. Though the State acts through this guardian class, the constituent members act not as individuals (and therefore in a willful or unprincipled manner) but rather as their *roles* in society.

In this way, society serves as the Lacanian Big Other for the guardian class,<sup>vi</sup> while the individual actors serve as the hands, arms, and eyes of the State made manifest. The State cannot see, except through its members. To hold a sword, the State must employ individuals. To swing the sword, the State must have executioners. It is, itself, a non-existent thing, which resides primarily in the minds of those it governs.

As the State relies on the individual to effectuate its will,<sup>vii</sup> it follows that in order to continue to exist, individual constituent members must surrender their unrealized capacity to harm to the State continuously. If one person, or a certain minority of people, reject this necessity and cease to give the State their obedience in the form of the

unrealized capacity to do harm, they will be acted upon by the organs of the State—that is, either violence will be done to them, they will be threatened with the unrealized potential for violence, or some form of secondary power will be exerted.<sup>viii</sup>

However, there is a threshold of minimum reliance, unique to each State and highly dependent on the manner in which the State is structured, beyond which the State must cease to exist.<sup>ix</sup> Essentially, we have reached, by means of logical deduction, the old maxim of Classical Liberalism. The State can only govern with the consent of the governed. However, the manufacture of such consent takes many multifarious forms.

Once the State has control of the mechanisms of unrealized violence, it may threaten the realization of that violence in order to generate consent. This is a sort of second-order attenuated violence, or what we will call coercive force. This coercive force can be used on the State's constituent members, to convince them of the power of the State (and thus to cause them to accept, passively, the continued existence of the State which leeches their individual capacity to realize harm), or even to coerce other States.

This coercive force acts as a stabilizer and countermeasure to centrifugal forces tending to drag States toward disintegration. For example: a democratic-leaning State, which has promised the real accessibility and penetration of its populace in the political process, begins to decay and shift toward a lock-out oligarchy. The existence of a police force serves as a coercive power; it raises the minimum amount of effort required to rebel and alter the now-broken system. In so doing, the State preserves itself.<sup>x</sup>

When the State exercises violence through its agents, the process of this exercise inherently changes the natural violence. It is transformed by the organization through which it is forced to flow. Organizational violence is properly contrasted not to the individual exercise of the capacity to harm, but rather to mob violence. The violence used by the mob is undirected and chaotic due to a lack of central agency to control it. It tends to spill over and run out of all control, doing collateral damage and harming those other than at whom the violence was originally aimed.<sup>xi</sup> There are examples of non-violent mob mobilization, of course.<sup>xii</sup>

State violence, however, is organized and focused. It does precisely what it is meant to do. In some sense, it is purer. The State focuses its violence on individuals and acts with deliberate determination. The State does not execute a block for the crimes of an individual person; it executes that individual and no-one else.<sup>xiii</sup> When the State acts, it must act through a series of organizational chokepoints. Many individuals are tapped to carry out State action. This process of organizing and planning violence abstracts it from its original context. There is a difference in kind between a riot and Birkenau.<sup>xiv</sup>

This alienation of the capacity to use violence takes us into our next section.

### **III. Alienation and Calcification.**

The State's co-opting of individual capacity to harm causes it to be abstracted from its original context. In day-to-day life, it is easy to forget that the power of the State to do harm derives exclusively from the power of its people to do harm. That is, when any individual is walking down the street, it becomes second-nature to think of the power of the State as an external force that exists *ex nihilo* with its own origin and justifications that have nothing to do with that individual.

Particularly when the State must use its coercive power to maintain order, it becomes more and more difficult to imagine that the capacity for violence utilized by the State derives not from some esoteric source, but from the coerced themselves.

This structure is most readily apparent when, for example, an army unit mutinies. It is a general military maxim for commanders not to give orders they know will not be obeyed.<sup>xv</sup> When such an order is issued, the illusion of central control immediately breaks down. It takes, paradoxically, very little and very much to teach a military unit that it no longer has to follow orders. Very little: it must merely be subject to an order it will not obey; very much: to reach the point where the unit will no longer obey orders, they must be so catastrophic, disastrous, or immoral as to destroy the conditioning that the unit has undergone.<sup>xvi</sup>

The alienation of the people from their capacity for harm takes the form of structures of power and power-relationships. In the example above, the power-relationships that tend to alienate individual constituent soldiers from access to their

capacity to harm are hierarchal military command. These structures exert a form of secondary power. Above, the secondary power would include the idea of comradeship or brotherhood as well as encompassing the very conditioning soldiers receive in military training.

Secondary power structures in civilian society include class relationships,<sup>xvii</sup> the existence of police,<sup>xviii</sup> “soft” cultural power,<sup>xix</sup> and even the democratic ideal.<sup>xx</sup> These secondary structures sit at a level of remove from the underlying violence. When government changes, for example, it may do so without recourse to realizing capacity for harm. In a democratic society, government is changed solely by the use of secondary power. It is this resort to secondary power which helps disguise the underlying and inherent violence required *simply to maintain the State*.

Due to the capacity to manipulate the State using secondary power, it is possible to channel and further alienate individual members from their capacity to do harm. That is, structures of secondary power can be built up to make massive scaffolds which support certain unequal power relationships. In any capitalist society, initial unequal distribution tends to be magnified by chance. Perhaps self-evidently, one of the main forms of secondary power in a capitalist society is *capital*. The vicissitudes of chance result in some members of these societies in having more soft power than others; once they have acquired this soft power (in the form of capital), it can be spent to accrue other tertiary and quaternary forms of power, to help in the acquisition of even more capital.<sup>xxi</sup>

In this way, it is possible individuals in an insufficiently regulated State to construct edifices with expenditure of soft power to ensure that they continue to accrue that power, cutting off other constituent members’ access to power. This is an extreme alienation of the constituent member from their own capacity to harm.<sup>xxii</sup>

It is rare that a single person manages to gain extreme heights of secondary power in a State while all others languish. Much more likely is the formation of interest groups. By wielding their own secondary power as a bloc, they may make inroads against disunified and scattered opponents. Many of their foes may not even realize they share a common interest until it’s too late.<sup>xxiii</sup> Influence-peddlers thus tend to form ever more stratified and more impermeable networks of power within the State; entire

populations may be congenitally disenfranchised and reduced to a de facto lower class, even in societies that claim to be “classless.” In fact, in those societies that deny the reality of class, the danger is all the greater. By denying the language of class as an operative mode of thought, they can prevent the opposition to interest-groups from ever forming.

The ruling strata thereby seizes access to the capacity to do harm, far outstripping the capacity of any individual in the fictitious state of nature.<sup>xxiv</sup> This is an inequality which our principle of violence should seek to overturn; however, it is easy to take this to an ultimate extreme which would result in a self-defeating non-State.

That is, if we were to assume this trends us to a utopian society without the State, we would be falling into the same trap that the regulation-less society of pure capitalism does; there must, therefore, be a State to regulate interpersonal relationships and ensure that arbitrary acts of the world do not result in exaggerated structures of power. This leads us into our justifying principle.

#### **IV. Justification and Emancipation**

What is the solution to our problem? Is there a principle, in other words, that allows us to act without falling prey to the great bugbear of Classical Liberalism? Yes. The solution is this one: to oppose the calcification of inequality within the State, to minimize the inherent violence in society, and to seek the balance of regulation which preserves this status quo as best it can without being overwhelmed by the corruption of secondary or even primary (violent) power.

That is, we may turn our own capacity for violence on any State which has been coopted by gangs of the powerful—the interest-groups of the ruling class. It is not logically impossible for these interest-groups to be confronted and reformed within the strictures of the State, no matter what other theorists may say.<sup>xxv</sup> However, the pragmatic feasibility of this kind of reform must dwindle as the stranglehold on power grows tighter and tighter. The realization of capacity for harm must be weighed in balance—the likelihood of successful reforms must be compared realistically to the damage done by realizing that harm.



We cannot go into a revolution blindly. Grasping the hilt of power without fully comprehending the steps that will follow is a nightmare of uncontrolled Terror. Once the revolution has begun, the justifying principle must be adhered to with strict and Spartan discipline. No violence should be done which does not reduce the initial violence of the State; no violence should be done which is not done with the aim of mitigating the imbalance of power. The one-party State is an abomination, for it abandons the principles for which the revolution is fought. All parties that seek to better the position of all constituent members of the State should be welcomed into a revolutionary coalition.

Why must we welcome others and build broad coalitions? Because our theory of justification requires it. Recall: We are justified in doing violence when the exercise of that violence serves to reduce the violence of the State and reduce the imbalance established by social structures. In the absence of justification, we must not do violence. Thus, we may do violence to those elements that forestall our progress by actively opposing us, but those who seek conciliation and coalition must be brought into the fold, unless and until their ideology is so opposed to a minimum program as to be irreconcilable.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Indeed, coalition is not just desirable, it is necessary. Failure to stand as a united left front, regardless of our idealized end goal, saps the movement of its strength. It is through blocs of power and concerted action that the ruling class obtain their monopolies or near-monopolies on power. It is only through coalitional strength, by acting as a bloc regardless of ideological niceties, that the left can achieve a similar effect and remain true to the proposed governing principle of violence.

Intellectuals do not begin revolutions. Writing does not cause them. Revolutions represent the seizure of a moment of imbalance and unease. Revolutions begin with popular unrest and dissent; they culminate in the fusion of a prepared and latent intelligentsia with the popular mindset. They must be nurtured from above and below, and are a product of opportunism. Thus, it does not behoove the theorist to do violence until the moment is right. The theorist cannot begin a revolution, only the people can do this. What the theorist can do is prepare, agitate, raise consciousness, and seize the opportunities that present themselves. We must always remember that the true power,

the capacity to do harm, does not reside in the relatively small strata of theorists, but in the vast, underground, and subterranean might of the people.

To do violence to fascists, to bigots, to those who oppose equality and freedom, then, is permissible. These are people who stand in direct opposition to our justifying principles.

## **V. The New State.**

To create a new State, a revolutionary break with the past is required. There must be a suspension of the normal rules and orders. It is impossible to wipe out a government without recourse to emancipation from that government, even when the philosophy of its founders enshrines revolutionary violence.<sup>xxvii</sup> In order to establish a new State, the old must be swept clean away, while all the institutions that can be preserved without betraying the nascent government must be.

However, there will eventually be a cessation to this liminal period. The work of the revolution complete, the organization of the new State safe from counterrevolution, external threat, and internal collapse, there must rapidly follow the establishment of a new, independent, neutral, judiciary to pass judgment. The judiciary will act as a conscience for the new State, determining with finality whether or not certain people have acted against the minimum program, have committed treason, have attempted to undermine the existence of the new State. It is not for a revolutionary coalition to pass judgments once the initial goals have been accomplished.

Suspension of the judiciary's power must be difficult; for example, if the State is apparently safe from immediate counterrevolution, a new government has been established, and a new judiciary created, and yet it becomes immediately apparent that there are counterrevolutionary armies at work within the new State or on its borderlands, the judiciary cannot simply be dissolved or suspended to allow coalition leaders to capture, torture, execute who they will; the function of the new State's capacity for harm must be enslaved to the judiciary except, in international relations, where war is declared.<sup>xxviii</sup>

In the creation of this new State, we must follow the dictates laid down by our principles; that is, we must accept into the government any and all who seek to restore

the balance of power and who subscribe to our minimum program—not to Marx’s minimum programme, but to a new, coalition program that is founded at the time of the initial insurrection or shortly thereafter.

But let us make no mistake: the new State is necessary in order to regulate society. I do not here advocate for the total destruction of the State, the absence of the State; in the State’s absence, surely other forms of secondary power would accrue, as it does in States with unregulated markets. Rather, the new State must take a form that adheres continuously to the same justification that guided the revolutionary and emancipatory violence that established it. Else, it, too, will become an instrument of oppression and terror—not, as Classical Liberalism would have it, the same as any other oppressive regime, but rather as Nietzsche warned: “He who fights monsters must see to it that he himself does not become a monster.”<sup>xxix</sup>

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Here, I mean realization as its Aristotelian definition: that is, the instantiation of a potentiality. Violence is not violence, insofar as this paper is concerned, until the latent capacity to do harm is “activated” and the harm is actually done.

<sup>ii</sup> It is an underlying contention of this paper that all relationships depend on networks of power. See, e.g., Foucault, M. (1977) “Truth and Power”, *Microfiseca del Poetere*. Most relationships are not strictly reciprocal, but rather exist within a semantic web of power-relations.

<sup>iii</sup> Nature reels from crisis to crisis, arbitrarily and seemingly at random. The “natural” (i.e. living) world adjusts for these crises, not because of the presence of some mystical harmony, but out of necessity.

<sup>iv</sup> Of course, it is possible, in various cases (such as where death or punishment have no value to the actor) that this social brake will cease to function. Essentially, an actor with nothing to lose from acting violently will not be deterred by the social function of violence. This is related to Žižek’s contentions that the mismatch between social expectation and individual capacity produces violent outbursts. See Žižek, S. (2011) “Shoplifters of the World Unite”, *London Review of Books*. Available at:

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite> (“What is the point of our celebrated freedom of choice when the only choice is between playing by the rules and (self-)destructive violence?”).

<sup>v</sup> Justified self-defense, for example.

<sup>vi</sup> Allowing individuals to act, as it were, and to cover their actions with the excuse that they had to do so because the State required it of them.

<sup>vii</sup> Insofar as an illusive collective can be said to have a will, or to have agency of any kind. Here, if we are attempting to place the State in the real world instead of the imaginary one of philosophers, it would be useful to conceive of this will as instead emanating from the control-structure of the State. Of course, this complicates matters, as will be seen below, because the controlling State organs often make use of a combination of threats of violence (second-order violence) and secondary non-violent powers.

<sup>viii</sup> Again, for secondary powers under the State, Section III of this essay.

<sup>ix</sup> Authoritarian States, contrary to the intuition, tend to have relatively low thresholds of rebellion. States with democratic penetration tend to have very high thresholds. This is because the appearance of legitimacy is legitimacy, and it is far easier for the legitimacy of an authoritarian regime, which is after all

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concerned with portraying itself as the sole arbiter of justice and power, to be shaken when something goes wrong.

<sup>x</sup> This coercive force is being exercised all the time in the modern State. The mere existence of a standing police force and standing army is a coercive power that tends to limit the expression of centrifugal anti-State elements. A minimum coercive force is always necessary, otherwise the State cannot rightly be said to exist; if there was no barrier between existence and dissolution, the State would always trend toward dissolution, as the natural laws of entropy would suggest.

<sup>xi</sup> This directionless violence can be seen in almost every case where a mob or large group of loosely organized people exercise their capacity for harm. This holds true from the foulest cases of lynching to the most righteous and justified cases of riot against oppressive powers.

<sup>xii</sup> The “March on Washington” being one.

<sup>xiii</sup> Yes, obviously, the State could conceivably kill mass numbers in response to the crimes of an individual, but if it did it wouldn’t be because the violence had somehow gotten out of control. A State that went that far would go that far purposefully.

<sup>xiv</sup> When the State utilizes violence against another State, however, these mechanisms of focusing and “purification,” while still functioning in some way to abstract the capacity to do harm from the individual constituent member, lose their power to be precise; that is, essentially, the State’s desire for precision is overridden by the aims and goals of war. See generally von Clausewitz, K. (1873) *On War*.

<sup>xv</sup> This maxim may originate with MacArthur, but the attribution is hazy.

<sup>xvi</sup> Modern military conditioning is a form of very potent secondary power. The entire goal of training men and women to fight is to obliterate their personhood and turn them into semi-autonomous organs of war who will seek to follow their orders without question.

<sup>xvii</sup> See, e.g., Marx, K. (1867) *Das Kapital*.

<sup>xviii</sup> See, e.g., Foucault, M. (1975) *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>xix</sup> The news, cultural indoctrination, etc.

<sup>xx</sup> Access to the corridors of power and the ability to change the government generally tends to mollify or ameliorate otherwise discontent individuals. If one feels as though one can have an effect on politics, it is less likely that one will exercise one’s capacity for harm.

<sup>xxi</sup> The trend of this vicious cycle is more clearly explored and supported in Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty 2015).

<sup>xxii</sup> The most extreme would obviously be something akin to abject slavery, usually justified by the dominant ideology proclaiming them not citizens at all.

<sup>xxiii</sup> The archetypical example for this (at least that I can imagine) is the defeat of classical paganism by Christianity. Christians, with their single unified agenda, easily made great leaps against the pagans, who never saw themselves as a “class” at all. This lack of vision, and its inherent inability to recognize the face of a common enemy, is disastrous.

<sup>xxiv</sup> In some sense, the construction of weapons is also a seizure of power, but one that is semi-permanent; crystallized labor is turned into capacity for harm and then physically translated to the hands of others. In fact, this present specialized issues that the scope of this article cannot hope to address.

<sup>xxv</sup> I have yet to see anyone make an argument based on logical necessity. Certainly, I will admit that it is *unlikely*, but it is not impossible.

<sup>xxvi</sup> And note here that I do not speak of the minimum programme as understood by Marx in 1880, but rather a new minimum program of defensible liberties which can be agreed to by a socialist coalition; the minimum program must realize the correction of inherent imbalance in the State by the *minimum agreeable means* amongst the revolutionaries.

<sup>xxvii</sup> “The tree of liberty must be refreshed, from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” Jefferson, T. (1787) Letter to William Stephens Smith.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Here, the creation of laws that proscribe undermining the minimum program, etc., will serve as justifications for each extension of State violence to any individual.

<sup>xxix</sup> Nietzsche, F. (1886) *Beyond Good and Evil*.