

“Pacifism, Anarchism and the Critique of State Violence”

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1. Introduction

Pacifism is an ethical and political response to the problem of violence in human relationships, from the inter-personal level to the international or even global level. There are multiple versions of pacifism, depending upon whether the motive or argument for pacifism is religious, ethical or political or some combination of these three, for example. Some versions of pacifism reject violence more generally, while others focus on specific types or categories of violence, such as the taking of human life, or the mass violence and destruction associated with war and armed conflict. This paper does not evaluate the arguments for and against pacifism, but instead discusses the links between the ethical or normative requirements of pacifism at the level of the individual and its implications for forms of social and political organisation.

A particularly important and controversial aspect of pacifism is its rejection of all forms of collective violence, especially the violence of the state as expressed through war, armed conflict and the use of military force. Pacifism is most prominently associated with an unequivocal opposition to war and the use of military force as perhaps the most egregious and destructive forms of collective violence.

Pacifism does not make a distinction between aggressive violence and ostensibly defensive or protective violence because it regards all forms of collective violence as equally harmful to human beings and as part of the same pattern or cycle of destructive behaviour, and because of the difficulties in distinguishing between these two categories of violence. Pacifism involves the rejection of all forms of collective violence, including and especially the violence of the state, whether this violence is described as aggressive or defensive, punitive or restorative, unilateral or multilateral, law-breaking or law-enforcing.

Pacifism has a significant ethical dimension, involving a personal refusal to participate in or support the use of violence, particularly war and armed conflict, but it also has important political implications, involving a rejection of political structures or forms of social organisation that depend upon or utilise violence. Pacifism is not only anti-war, for example, it can also be linked to the anarchist critique of the state, because it argues that the only way to eliminate war, armed conflict and other forms of political violence is to remove the capacity for institutionalised and systematic violence epitomised by the military structures and systems of the state. This paper examines the connection between the ethical and normative implications of pacifism at the level of the individual and its anti-militarist critique of state violence and the social and economic sources of militarism through the pacifism of the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy connected the need for change at the level of individual belief and behaviour (or “resistance through disobedience”) to his critique of the state through challenging “the myth of patriotism” (as a belief or ideology) as the basis of both state power and state violence.

2. Tolstoy's Christian pacifism

Tolstoy has been a hugely influential proponent of pacifism, partly because of his skills as an essayist and polemicist, and partly because of this combination of personal moral exhortation with a broader vision of the requirements of a nonviolent social order. Irving Louis Horowitz, for example, in his book *War and Peace in Contemporary Social and Philosophical Theory*, claims that:

It was through his reinterpretation of Christian ethics that pacifism achieved a status as a significant, if not fully developed social philosophy of contemporary civilization. Tolstoy is largely responsible for making pacifism the theoretical force it is in the western world.

Tolstoy had a huge impact on Gandhi, for example, who translated Tolstoy's ethical commitment to pacifism into practical efforts to achieve Indian independence and social reform through nonviolent methods (1973, 69).

Tolstoy's pacifism is expressed through his interpretation of Christianity, because it was through Christianity that he confronted the deep personal crisis that challenged him in middle age. And yet, Tolstoy's concerns remained profoundly moral and humanistic, focused on human well-being and our responsibilities towards each other in society, expressed through his interpretation of what he took to be the central message of Christianity. According to R. V. Sampson, for Tolstoy: "The basis of man's welfare in this world was the Christian teaching of the law of love and nonviolence, the law of suffering evil, of not returning it" (1973, 171).

For Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, for example, "Tolstoy's understanding of Christianity was deeply rationalistic...and superstitions like the Resurrection were all fantastic stories later

added by elites whose interest was to distort the essential teachings of Christianity” (2008a, 21).

Tolstoy’s primary interest was moral, rather than specifically religious or theological.

“Christianity, for him, was about ethics, not mysticism, liturgy or theology” (2008b, 47).

He is concerned with establishing the conditions for a good life for human beings and the implications this has for individual behaviour.

Tolstoy’s emphasis on his interpretation of Christianity as the source of his pacifism but also as the key to social transformation does seem highly idealistic and perhaps somewhat futile. And yet, as Horowitz points out, the basis of social change for Tolstoy is not a change in material and political conditions, but rather a transformation of human consciousness, “[a] massive change in the collective conscience, in ideas and values” (1973, 73). “The impasse of violence is, for Tolstoy, broken only by the ultimate triumph of conscience” which he translates into “the law of universal love” (75-76) exemplified by Christian ethics.

This change of consciousness, and “not the covenants of international jurisprudence”, is the key to achieving peace between human beings for Tolstoy (Horowitz, 1973, 76). In other words, projects such as Immanuel Kant’s perpetual peace that are based on changes to political and legal structures or institutions will be insufficient to eliminate violence from human interaction, up to and including international relations and war between states, without this more fundamental transformation of human consciousness.

Normative change or a transformation of values and beliefs takes priority over institutional change because the power of governments, including their capacity to employ military force, depends upon patriotism, or loyalty to one’s own nation or state above all else, and patriotism in turn depends upon public opinion. “A public opinion exists that patriotism is a fine moral sentiment, and that it is right and our duty to regard one’s own nation, one’s own state, as the

best in the world....And when such public opinion exists, a strong governmental power is formed” (Tolstoy 1968 [1894], 85).

Tolstoy’s emphasis on the primacy of normative change and public opinion as distinct from structures and institutional change rests at least partly on his analysis of power, as Sampson points out. Power, for Tolstoy, consists primarily “of the obedience of the many to the few” rather than material resources represented by wealth or control of armies or weapons. Such obedience “is secured in part by the intimidation made possible by the control of armed men, but (as this means is never of itself sufficient) even more by beliefs, purposes, justifications designed to persuade people that it is their duty to obey” (Sampson 1973, 180). Patriotism as a norm or value, as the exclusive or at least primary allegiance to one country, helps secure such obedience because it “ensures devotion and submission to the existing government”, and its “sole purpose is to bind together rulers and ruled in a common delusion” (Christoyannopoulos 2008a, 36).

This emphasis upon “doctrine, that is to say, concepts, ideas, argument” (Sampson 1973, 180) helps explain why individual and collective nonviolent action can be effective in resisting war and militarism through expressing or challenging norms, values and beliefs. The public opinion that supports patriotism and the power of governments can change through acknowledging the truth of our common humanity.

If only men were boldly and clearly to express the truth already manifest to them of the brotherhood of all nations, and the crime of exclusive devotion to one’s own people, that defunct, false public opinion would slough off of itself like a dried skin—and upon it depends the power of governments, and all the evil produced by them; and the new public opinion would stand forth...and establish new forms of existence in conformity with the consciousness of mankind. (Tolstoy 1968 [1894], 92)

Tolstoy finds the source of this truth in the central message of Christianity concerning God’s love as a basis for the unity of humankind. This involves an acknowledgement of “the

perception of human equality and respect for human dignity which flow from Christianity” that also excludes patriotism (Tolstoy 1968 [1895a], 132). The sovereign state’s use of “legitimate” violence in pursuit of its own interests under the guise of patriotism is an affront to the universal ideals of Christianity.

Thus, resistance to war and militarism begins at the level of individual consciousness and individual conscience, translated into individual action, rather than at the level of international law or global institutional structures. Change at the level of the individual produces institutional change, rather than the other way around, for Tolstoy. “The alteration of character and life-conception of men inevitably brings with it the alteration of those forms in which men have lived”, whereas a focus on the alteration of such forms or institutions can prevent real change “by directing the attention and activity of men into a false channel” (Tolstoy 1990 [1905], 63).

In order that people who do not want war should not fight, it is not necessary to have either international law, arbitration, international tribunals, or solutions of problems....The way to do away with war is for those who do not want war, who regard participation in it as a sin, to refrain from fighting. (Tolstoy 1968 [1899], 98)

The transformation of consciousness at the level of the individual must be expressed by individual action as the most effective way of eliminating war and militarism, through conscientious objection for example, or “refusing to take part in military service or to pay taxes to a government which uses them for military purposes” (Tolstoy 1968 [1899], 101). Thus, according to Tolstoy, “the easiest and surest way to universal disarmament is by individuals refusing to take part in military service” (1968 [n.d.], 113).

Tolstoy emphasised “resistance through disobedience”, beginning at the level of the individual, as the key to challenging the systematic violence of the state, an idea with antecedents in Thoreau’s essay “Civil Disobedience” (1966 [1849]) and a direct influence upon

Gandhi's theory and practice of *satyagraha*, or nonviolent civil disobedience as a method for achieving peaceful social and political change (See Stephens 1990, 17-18). "For Tolstoy, the State could only survive with the consent of the governed; a revolution to overthrow it had to take a personal rather than a political form" (Stephens 1990, 18).

3. Tolstoy's critique of the state

Tolstoy linked his pacifist opposition to war and all forms of military force to a critique of the state as such, and not merely of particular types of government or specific government policies. According to W. B. Gallie, for Tolstoy "war is an evil necessity of *all* governments, constitutional as well as arbitrary" (1978, 123), precisely because of the "myth of patriotism" connected to the supposed primacy of each state's own national interests, including the defence of individual state sovereignty. Every government's insistence on its own right to engage in the use of military force, and the implications of this for investing in and developing the military capacity of states, was a primary cause of war for Tolstoy. Thus, Christoyannopoulos argues that Tolstoy's critique of the state, or his "Christian anarchism", is "inseparable from his Christian pacifism" (2008b, 48).

Sampson concurs that the concept of sovereignty, or supreme coercive power, as applied to the sovereign state is linked inextricably to a capacity for military force.

All States are coercive by nature, otherwise they would not be sovereign...Consequently, all States, including the most 'democratic' are based ultimately on force ...and they maintain their separate political existence only in so far as they are backed by the appropriate military force. (1973, 182)

This capacity for military force, and a willingness to use it, is the ultimate guarantee of a state's control over its territory and governance of its citizens, without which it would not be sovereign.

Tolstoy challenged the state because it embodied the mostly highly organised, systematic and destructive use of violence. It was not essential to achieving security by preserving social order through enforcing the rule of law or by defending individuals and communities against threats and aggression, as Western political theorists have argued. Instead, it was an instrument for defending the welfare of economic and political elites at the expense of the vast majority of the population who suffered the consequences of war and armed conflict.

The people of every nation are being deluded by their rulers, who say to them, 'You, who are governed by us, are all in danger of being conquered by other nations; we are watching over your welfare and safety, and consequently we demand of you annually some millions of rubles—the fruit of your labor—to be used by us in the acquisition of arms, cannon, powder, and ships for your defence; we also demand that you yourselves shall enter institutions, organized by us, where you will become senseless particles of a huge machine—the army—which will be under our absolute control. On entering this army you will cease to be men with wills of your own; you will simply do what we require of you. But what we wish, above all else, is to exercise dominion; the means by which we dominate is killing, therefore we will instruct you to kill. (Tolstoy 1968 [1898], 19)

The obedience of the many provides the financial, material and human resources—in the form of taxes, weapons and soldiers—necessary to sustain and maintain the military infrastructure of the state, even though it is inimical to their interests. The state is inextricably an instrument of collective violence because of its essential role in defending elite interests.

The armed forces of the state have two main purposes, domestically to oppress the people to preserve the privileges of the rulers and externally to engage in aggression and foreign conquest (See Horowitz 1973, 73-74). Even the use of military force ostensibly for national defence is linked inextricably to elite interests. As Sampson points out, for Tolstoy:

in every State the people who ruled and organized the defence of their power against their external rivals beyond the frontiers were invariably the richest group in their community and also organized the defence of their riches against any threat to property within the State. Morally speaking, the entire structure with its attendant culture rested on an allegedly universal right to self-defence. (1973, 169)

In other words, the defence of the state that is justified and supported by patriotism is aimed at protecting the wealth and property of the ruling classes from either external or internal threats.

Tolstoy directly challenged the idea that self-defence, or the defence of one's country, justified the use of military force. Tolstoy refuted putative defensive justifications for the use of military force on the basis of his critique of the state. The primary function of the state, according to Tolstoy, is the defence of elite interests through collective violence. According to Gallie, Tolstoy claimed that: "The myth of patriotism—of the unique value and innocence and peculiar vulnerability of one's own country in the face of evil forces—has been invented to sustain and increase the power of governments and of the classes which execute governmental orders in return for social and economic privileges" (1978, 122-123). The vast majority of the population who suffer the negative consequences of war, even for supposedly defensive purposes, would never tolerate it without this myth of the peculiar and special value and vulnerability of their own country.

Peace cannot be achieved through international conferences or treaties in a state-based international system, because such treaties are based in or are expressions of international law as agreed between or by states, and states are ultimately or always sources of systematic collective violence.

Since for Tolstoy, the cause of state violence lies in the very existence of the state, war, for instance, cannot be eradicated by peace conferences and alliances—for the scourge of war to disappear, the state itself must disappear...Peace treaties are based on cooperation between existing states, but according to Tolstoy, it is the very existence of these states that causes wars in the first place. (Christoyannopoulos 2008a, 32)

Compliance with a peace treaty as a form of international law, even one involving the reciprocal renunciation of the unilateral use of military force, would ultimately require enforcement using state violence, and the consequences of this would be no different from war or any other form of politically-motivated violence for those at the receiving end of such violence.

Tolstoy concedes that the state may have had some utility in the past in limiting, reducing or constraining violence. “There may have been a time when, in consequence of the low level of morality and the universal tendency of men towards mutual violence, the existence of an authority restraining this violence was beneficial—that is to say, that the violence of the State was less than the violence of individuals toward one another.” Nonetheless, “this advantage in favour of the existence of the State” has passed because the capacity for systematic violence on a large-scale through the centralised mechanisms of the state and the industrialised technology of warfare has increased. Although the violence between individuals the state is intended to suppress declines, the violence of the state continues to grow so that it “soon becomes worse than the evil it is supposed to annihilate” (Tolstoy 1990 [1893], 100-101).

The irony or self-contradiction of state violence in the form of military force is that it revives and escalates the threats to individual survival against which it was supposed to provide protection. Furthermore, the magnitude of such threats is increased to another level, so that not only are individuals at risk of destruction, but so are the communities ostensibly represented and protected by the state.

Governments were expected to deliver men from the cruelty of individual discord and give them the guarantee of the inviolable regularity of State life. Instead of which they subject men to the necessity of the same strife, only transferring it from personal strife to warfare with the inhabitants of other lands, and there remains the same danger of destruction both to State and individual. (Tolstoy 1990 [1893], 104)

The state's capacity for systematic violence, supposedly developed to protect individuals from the violence of the state of nature, instead exposes entire populations to the risk of annihilation through war and armed conflict.

4. Conclusion

Tolstoy's Christian pacifism emphasises the ethical importance of individual refusal to participate in war or preparations for war as part of the transformation of human consciousness that provides the basis for a world without war. Tolstoy also provides an anti-militarist critique of the state and its institutionalised and systematic capacity for engaging in large-scale violence such as war and armed conflict.

Tolstoy connects his opposition to the state and his emphasis on the ethical transformation of individual consciousness through his critique of "the myth of patriotism" as a basis of both state power and state violence. Tolstoy's analysis of the "myth of patriotism" shows that patriotism is inseparable from state violence and the power of the state because public opinion and the peculiar attachment we are each supposed to feel as citizens towards our own country provides the justification for the state's use of military force as well as an essential support for state sovereignty and the state's capacity to govern. In other words, normative and ideological change through rejecting the "myth of patriotism" and engaging in individual "resistance through disobedience" provides the basis for the political transformation required to bring an end to war and other forms of collective violence.

This discussion of Tolstoy's pacifism helps us identify two interconnected features of pacifism as an anti-war position and as a critical if controversial response to the apparent intractability of war, armed conflict and collective violence more generally. These two distinctive features of pacifism involve its combination of normative and ethical change at the level of individual consciousness and action, and its structural critique of the systematic violence of the state as a form of political organisation.

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