

# Pacifism and Revolution

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to subject a series of commonly heard claims about pacifism, violence, and the liberation of oppressed people to a critical analysis in order to assess whether such claims are sufficiently compelling to form the normative and strategic basis for a politics of revolution. Specifically, I examine the related claims that: (1) in a context of overwhelming repressive violence, violent resistance is the only realistic alternative for the defence and the liberation of oppressed people; (2) that in oppressive situations revolutionary violence is not only legitimate, but normative because it empowers the oppressed, reinvigorates their agency and liberates their subjectivity; (3) that pacifism and calls for nonviolence denies the rights of the oppressed to resist oppression and thus functions as part of the apparatus of domination; and consequently (4) that violent resistance is a necessary tool or process for social transformation and revolution. These claims can be found in a variety of forms, including certain sections of the postcolonialism literature, and the anarchism and Marxism-inspired literatures, among others.

The findings of this paper are that each of these claims are deeply problematic on the basis of both political and social theory, as well as empirical research on violence and nonviolence, and that they therefore provide a poor foundation for revolutionary political action. Instead, it is suggested that revolutionising both the means and ends of liberation through the practice of radical nonviolence can greatly help to constitute a new kind of politics which does not simply reproduce forms of dominatory power and its associated direct, structural and cultural violence. In other words, while regime change is certainly possible through violent resistance, genuine revolution towards human emancipation necessitates both nonviolent aims and nonviolent means of transformation.

In the following sections, I subject each of the main claims to critical analysis to see whether it accords with political and social theory and existing empirical research, in part through engagement with Fanon and Gandhi, two of the leading postcolonial theorists concerned with resistance to colonialism, as well as Arendt who wrote in response to Fanon (see O'Halloran 2015; Trivedi 2011; Srivastava 2010). I conclude with a plea for nonviolent revolution and the continuing relevance of pacifism as a radical theory of emancipatory practice which can expand the current limits of political possibility.

It should be noted that I use the terms "pacifism" and "nonviolence" interchangeably to refer to a range of positions relating to the rejection of organised forms of political violence, as well as a number of different types of theories of politics, and practical programmes for political action and social change. Although some scholars make an analytical distinction

between “principled nonviolence” (or pacifism) and “pragmatic nonviolence”, I follow Stellan Vinthagen’s (2015: 61; original emphasis) proposal that nonviolence refers to forms of political action which are simultaneously ‘*without violence* and *against violence*’. This formulation emphasises the underlying normative basis of a variety of forms of political action which, despite a variety of aims and practices, nevertheless reject the use of organised inter-personal physical violence as a strategy or tactic.

### **Violence and Realism**

The first claim I consider is that in a context of overwhelming and totalising repressive violence, such as situations of colonial oppression, military occupation or institutionalised racism, violent resistance is the only *realistic* alternative for the liberation of oppressed people (see Brie 2008). The notion that in some circumstances violence is the only available response, or the only response which has a realistic chance of success, is so widely accepted as to be little more than commonsense. However, such a viewpoint is based on a common misunderstanding of the relationship between violence, power, and coercion, and alternatively, the nature of nonviolent action and what it is capable of in this regard. The implicit assumption here is that in some circumstances, only the use of violence can deter and coerce violent actors and make them halt their violent actions; nothing but violence could make them change their minds or choose another path of action.

A first critical observation to make is that such a viewpoint is overly deterministic and reductionist in relation to human motivations, agency and subjectivity. People, groups and societies act out of a variety of complex motivations within shifting contexts, and they always retain the necessary agency to stop their actions, change course and act differently. Reducing the strategic choice of oppressed people to a simple binary between violent resistance or passive submission is a gross simplification of both the possibilities for action of the oppressed, and the potential for changing the mind of the oppressor. It functions to reduce both actors to moral caricatures locked into a kind of pre-ordained morality play.

As I have discussed elsewhere (see Jackson 2017a), from a theoretical perspective we can argue that the proponents of revolutionary violence (or the proponents of other forms of normatively-oriented violence such as humanitarian intervention or national defence) misunderstand the relationship between violence, force, and power. In particular, they misunderstand the relationship between brute force and coercion (see Holmes 2013: 185; May 2015: 49-52), failing to note how the effectiveness of violence to deter or compel depends entirely on how people respond to the violence, not the violence itself. Theoretically, the capacity to destroy bears no direct relation to the ability to coerce (Wallace 2016). Violent acts or threats can produce submission and deterrence or resistance and retaliation, despair or rage, action or inaction – as the proponents of violent revolution themselves accept when they assume that the oppressed *can* choose to resist the oppressive violence they are facing rather than simply submit to it. The point is that the desired response to violence can never be assured. This explains why advocates of violence so frequently mistake the reliability of violence as a political tool, even when it is employed for a normative good such as liberation from oppression. As Howes (2013: 436) puts it, “Killing people does not have predictable political results because it operates in the ‘somewhat intangible’ “web” of human relations’

which makes it difficult to know what meanings people will assign to it or what actions they will take in response to it.”

Related to this, power theorists know that there is no simple or linear relationship between violence and power. Arendt (1970: 56) for example, argued that “power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent... Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it.” Following Arendt, Vinthagen similarly explains how power and violence are analytically distinct, given that violence is a form of unilateral action, whereas power is by definition relational and operates through the approval of the subordinate. He suggests that as a consequence, ‘the most extreme result of violence – the killing of a human being – is something that ensures that there will never again be subordination within that relationship. Killing results in an absolute absence of power. In fact, violence is a... failure of power’ (2015: 193-194). This suggests that the notion that taking up arms is a means of empowering the oppressed subaltern is theoretically flawed.

In fact, it is clear that there is no *a priori* theoretical reason for thinking that violent actors cannot be deterred or convinced to change their behaviour using other, nonviolent means. It is perfectly possible to resist, exert power against, and coerce other actors without the threat or employment of physical violence. Strikes, boycotts, and other disruptions to economic profitability, to give one example, can sometimes be enough. In other cases, shame, appeals to common values, and reputational damage can exert power to change behaviour, as can the promise of rewards. As Deming (1984: 175-176) explains it, “To resort to power one need not be violent”, and “It should be acknowledged both by those who argue against nonviolence and those who argue for it that we, too, rely on force”. She goes on to suggest that it is possible to use physical force to obstruct and frustrate the will of those who would kill, but in ways that do not violate their persons in fundamental ways (Ibid: 176-177; see also May 2015). In short, there is no theoretical or logical reason to think that violence is necessarily the only resistant response to violence or oppressive situations.

From the perspective of empirical research, the argument that violence represents the only realistic option ignores the wide variety of documented historical experiences where nonviolent actions were able to prevent, deter, or end violence by oppressive actors. At the very least, the burgeoning literature on forms of “everyday resistance” or “hidden resistance” (see for example, Lija et al 2017; Darweish and Sellick 2017; Hahirwa, Orjuela and Vinthagen 2016), as first proposed by James Scott (1987), demonstrates that even in the most violently repressive contexts, humans always retain the possibility of resistance, dignity and agency. As Foucault (1990: 95) famously put it, “where there is power, there is resistance”. The point here is that there is no essential reason why resistant action must be violent; there are infinite possibilities for the expression of resistant agency in any social situation, including violently oppressive ones.

The growing literature on nonwarring communities (see Kaplan 2017; Anderson and Wallace 2013; Kemp and Fry 2003) further illustrates the many creative ways that communities have found to protect themselves from predation and violent oppression in conditions of state terror and civil wars – without the need for organised resistant violence. There is even evidence for successful community-based nonviolent resistance to ISIS in Syria and Iraq (see Stephan 2015). The stories in this literature gesture towards the inherent and wide-ranging

possibilities of nonviolent political action, and the opportunities for agency and resistance which inhere to every social situation, regardless of the degree of oppression or violence.

Moreover, we can add to these observations the growing body of empirical evidence which collectively demonstrates that nonviolent resistance movements are much more successful than violent resistance movements in achieving their aims, including when they face a highly ruthless opponent, and even when their aims include maximalist demands such as regime change or secession (see, among many others, Schock 2013; Celestino and Gleditsch 2013; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). In fact, Howes (2013: 433, 438) argues more broadly that there is “gathering evidence for the ineffectiveness of violence in a variety of empirical literatures”, and he concludes that “[t]he weight of extensive empirical evidence demonstrates that the practitioners of violence are more often the tragic idealists than are pacifists”. In other words, the belief in the efficacy of violence over nonviolence is not supported by the empirical evidence we currently have.

Related to this, there is also evidence that nonviolent movements result in fewer civilian casualties than resistance movements who use violence ostensibly to protect civilians from state violence (see Wallace 2017; see also Deming 1984: 178-180). The empirical evidence that nonviolent strategic action by rebels provides greater civilian protection than violent action by rebels has not been adequately addressed in the leftist and postcolonial literatures on revolution, and consequently raises doubts about its efficacy.

Lastly, there is an important argument to be made about strategic action in a situation of extreme asymmetry, such as in a confrontation between the state and a popular resistance movement. In such circumstances, the employment of violence plays into the hands of the actor with the greatest capacity for violence – usually the oppressive state – which explains in part why violent resistance movements often fail, and why they tend to result in greater civilian casualties than nonviolent movements. The use of violence under such conditions also has the potential to backfire in terms of alienating potential allies, harming those already oppressed and confusing political messaging, among others. Apart from this, as Clausewitz and many other war theorists have amply demonstrated, once violent action begins it is much harder to control than nonviolent action (Deming 1984: 169). In short, the current state of research on violent and nonviolent movements suggests that in situations where a resistance movement is facing violent provocation from the authorities, it is strategically important to maintain nonviolent discipline rather than respond with counter-violence.

In sum, the oft-heard argument that the use of violence is sometimes the only realistic option available for the oppressed to defend themselves or win their liberation faces a number of important objections and can be said to be a seriously flawed assumption. It is reductionist and based on a weak theoretical foundation, it largely ignores the empirical record, and it can be dangerously naïve from a strategic perspective.

### **Violence, Agency, Liberation**

The argument for revolutionary violence goes beyond necessity and purported realism in situations of oppression, however. In many Marxist-inspired and postcolonial accounts, violence takes on a normative role: it is the primary means by which the oppressed restore their agency and dignity, and is argued to be “indispensable in the decolonization of the self

from the psychological hegemony of the colonizer” (Srivastava 2010: 304; see also Frazer and Hutchings 2007). It is assumed to be a liberating force, in other words. For example, in its most famous articulation, Fanon (1963: 86, 94) argues that “The colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence”, and “violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect”. Jean Amery, among many others, re-affirms the normative properties of what is labelled “revolutionary violence”, highlighting its re-humanizing force:

Revolutionary violence is the affirmation of the self-realizing human being against the negation, the denial of the human being... Repressive violence blocks the way to the self-realization of the human being; revolutionary violence breaks through that barrier, refers and leads to the more than temporal, the historical humane future. (Amery 2005: 16; cited in Srivastava 2010: 308).

The problem with this normative conception of violence is first and foremost that it is essentially idealistic and rather naïve, primarily because it fails to acknowledge or accommodate the lived nature and effects of violence as an embodied, material experience (see Scarry 1988). At the very least, it ignores the vast accumulation of empirical evidence about the traumatic and dehumanising effects of violence on the individual and societies which experience it. There is, for example, no acknowledgement in this argument that both victims *and* perpetrators of violence frequently experience a range of psychological injuries and disorders as a consequence, including elevated suicide rates, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and what has become known as “moral injury” (see, among many others, MacLeish 2013; Grossman 2009; Maguen et al 2009; Hoge et al 2004; Prigerson, Maciejewski and Rosenheck 2002). Interestingly, in tension with the normative assertions Fanon made regarding the liberating force of violence, the final chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* on “Colonial War and Mental Disorders” (1963: 249-310) vividly captures Fanon’s “recognition of the traumatic and pathologizing effects violence had on Algeria society”, and the fact that “Violence, in the end, and contrary to Sartre, is fundamentally inglorious” (O’Halloran 2015: 369).

Such an observation makes perfect theoretical sense given that physical violence is an embodied, degrading, traumatic, world-shattering practice which is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning in its brute material experience (see Scarry 1985, 1988; Brie 2008; Wallace 2016). Violence typically renders its victims and audiences mute, and it has no inherent meaning in itself beyond horror and physical domination, until it is made socially meaningful by its perpetrators and its audiences. Violence requires narration and discursive reconstruction to legitimise, obscure or aestheticise its sheer brutality and reinscribe it as redemptive, justifiable, legitimate or emancipatory – as “*revolutionary violence*”, for example, as opposed to simply “violence”. As Brie (2008: 252; emphasis added) puts, “counter-force [revolutionary violence] is initially no more than the other side of rule. To this extent, it is not different, it is only against. Often it imitates in the rawest form the means of domination, and sometimes even makes these more brutal.” In addition, as argued above, violence and power are analytically distinct; killing is a failure of power and it results in the absence of power from the relationship. From this perspective, the argument that violence can function as a means of empowerment is somewhat nonsensical.

The point here is not that Fanon is completely wrong; as embodied, purposeful social action, violence can restore the agency of the oppressed, and it may provide a short-term cathartic

effect in the liberating moment following a violent revolution. Rather, the failure of Fanon is to assume that physical violence is *necessary* for restoring agency and pride, and to dismiss the dehumanising effects of violence on its perpetrators. As I will attempt to demonstrate below, it is also a failure to acknowledge the constitutive nature of violence, and the way in which its use as a political tool re-constitutes oppressive sovereign power as a dominant political mode. The point is that Fanon fails to see that “the re-humanization of the colonized self” (Srivastava 2010: 303) occurs in the moment of disobedience and resistance, not solely or necessarily in the moment of *violent* resistance; it is ‘the courage to act against the colonizer... which ensures a form of re-humanization’ (Ibid: 305), not necessarily the courage to act violently.

Alternatively, we might reconcile Fanon and Gandhi, among others, by arguing that it is the violence of disobedience which restores agency (see O’Halloran 2015; Srivastava 2010; Deming 1984). It is in the act of violating the political-judicial order, of throwing off the regime’s epistemic chains, of overturning the existing modalities of power, and of tearing oneself away from revenge and anger and other socially prescribed affective reactions, that the oppressed subject finds liberation and the opportunity to re-build their shattered subjectivity. It is not the violence of tearing apart and dominating other human bodies which liberates or restores agency; in this respect, violence as agency is actually bondage to the existing violent order.

In the end, as Srivastava (Ibid: 318) puts it, “how to distinguish between ‘purifying’ violence, an end in itself and limited in time and execution, and the perpetuation of colonial violence in its postcolonial reincarnations remains an open and troubling question” (see also Trivedi 2011). I would suggest that such a prior distinction between types of violence – the notion that there is an oppressive kind of violence which produces negative effects on the human, and another, separate kind of normative, revolutionary violence which produces positive effects on the human – is empirically and theoretically untenable. In fact, Srivastava’s question itself represents an idealistic yearning rather than a realistic confrontation with the nature of violence, and its dismissal throws doubt on any theory of revolution which depends on a normative conception of violence.

### **Pacifism as Oppression**

However, advocates of revolutionary violence go further than arguing that violence is necessary and normative in the struggle against oppression; they also argue that pacifism and calls for nonviolence denies the rights of the oppressed to resist oppression and thus functions as part of the apparatus of domination. In part, this criticism grew out of the circumstances of the anti-colonial and civil rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s when it was observed that many privileged liberals appeared to be opposed to revolutionary violence, and seemed to advocate forms of passive resistance that were reformist in nature and would not destabilise the existing social system (see Trivedi 2011; Deming 1984). To the extent that political movements do advocate forms of nonviolent protest and acquiescence to the state’s authority which are not effective in bringing about radical change, and which leave oppressive structures largely in place, it is legitimate to claim that they function as part of the apparatus of oppression – particularly if they suppress and divert other more radical groups and movements from confrontational action (Chabot and Sharifi 2013; see also Deming 1984).

However, most pacifists and nonviolence advocates would not recognise this as their primary orientation, given that pacifism “does not mean meek submission... it means pitting one’s whole soul against the will of the tyrant” (Gandhi cited in Cady 2010: 25). The point is, as Cady (2010: 103; emphasis added) puts it, “pacifists do not claim that it is wrong to resist violence. On the contrary, they claim that *violence should be resisted*. They just believe that there are strong moral grounds for preferring to do so nonviolently.” Dellinger (1970: 371) makes a similar point: “Commitment to nonviolence must not be based on patient acquiescence in intolerable conditions. Rather, it stems from a deeper knowledge of the self-defeating, self-corrupting effect of lapses into violence.” In part, this is a way of saying that “the question of the *expediency* of violence is not at all identical with the question of its *legitimacy*” (Brie 2008: 245; original emphasis).

In other words, pacifists do not deny the right of the oppressed to resist; in fact, they strongly assert the moral reasons to resist tyrants and oppressors and to struggle for social and personal emancipation. Rather, what they contest is the necessity and expediency of employing violence in this struggle – particularly given the nature, effects and failures of violence as described above. Famously, Gandhi argued that courageous violence was preferable over passive submission to tyranny, even though he believed that nonviolence was more ethical and effective and would in the long-run bring about the liberation of society and the self: “If the choice is set between cowardice and violence I would advise violence. I praise and extol the serene courage of dying without killing. Yet I desire that those who have not this courage should rather cultivate the art of killing and being killed than basely to avoid the danger... I would a thousand times prefer violence than the emasculation of a whole race” (Gandhi cited in Srivastava 2010: 317; Chabot and Sharifi 2013: 7; see also Dellinger 1970: 369).

From another perspective, it must be acknowledged, following Foucault and others like Bloom (2017), that the type of resistance that emerges in a particular context is constituted or produced by the type of power it is resisting. In other words, a violently oppressive power which brutalises individuals and communities, and which trades in the currency of exemplary violence can expect to produce equally violent expressions of resistance. Such an outcome could also be viewed as part of the mimetic nature of violence itself, as described by Clausewitz. In any case, there are plenty of historical examples in which violently ruthless revolutionary organisations emerged to confront violently ruthless oppressors. Nevertheless, while such a response from the oppressed may be justified in legal or ethical terms, and may be expected as a consequence of the situation, this does not necessarily mean that violence is either legitimate or prudent.

In the end, pacifism is neither inherently passive nor does it reject the right of the oppressed to resist. Instead, it simply questions whether violence is the most ethical and effective means by which to resist. As Deming (1984: 168-69) formulates it,

if the individuals who can find the courage to bring about change see no way in which it can be done without employing violence on their part – a very much lesser violence, they feel, than the violence to which they will put an end – I do not feel that I can judge them. The judgements I make are not judgements upon men but upon the means open to us – upon the promise these means of action hold or withhold. The living question is: What are the best means for changing our lives – for really changing them?

In other words, the more important question than whether the oppressed have the right to resist violently is the question of what are the best means for achieving emancipation? Here, following Arendt (1970: 52), pacifists suggest that “violence will be justifiable, but it will never be legitimate”, in large part because, as has been argued, it destroys power, negates politics, reinforces domination as a mode of political action, harms both perpetrators and victims, is strategically ineffective, and so on. Instead, pacifists suggest that nonviolent political action offers a “third way” between conflict avoidance or passivity and violent resistance (Brie 2008: 255).

Moreover, the fact that Gandhi’s nonviolence did what the Marxists in India did not remotely come close to doing (Trivedi 2011: 527), and that dozens of nonviolent movements in the past few decades have overthrown and transformed numerous oppressive systems (see Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Celestino and Gleditsch 2013), demonstrates that pacifism is much more a force for social transformation than it is a part of the apparatus of oppression. In fact, as argued below, given that the use of violence is a form of dominatory social action and that it functions to reify prevailing modalities and structures of (sovereign) power, it can be argued that it is actually the use of violence which ultimately functions to uphold the apparatus of oppression in society.

Nonetheless, as a strategic orientation towards revolutionary change, it must also be acknowledged that nonviolence is still in its infancy; it is still “in the process of invention”, given that compared to the use of violence “we have hardly begun to try it” (Deming 1984: 171-72). This means that when pacifists argue that nonviolence is the most ethical and effective strategy and should be the primary or default strategy in situations of oppression and conflict, then they have a responsibility to offer alternative methods of resistance. They cannot simply condemn the use of resistant violence on moral grounds and then do nothing. As Dellinger expresses it:

Those who are convinced that nonviolence can be used in *all* conflict situations have a responsibility to devise concrete methods by which it can be made effective. For example, can we urge the Negroes of Harlem or the *obreros* and *campesinos* (workers and peasants) of Latin America to refrain from violence if we offer them no positive method of breaking out of the slums, poverty, and cultural privation that blight their lives and condemn their children to a similar fate? It is contrary to the best tradition of nonviolence to do so. (Dellinger 1970: 369; original emphasis)

Importantly, as we have already noted, there are growing literatures today which document numerous strategies and practices of nonviolent resistance, nonviolent defence and nonviolent intervention that have been effectively employed in struggles around the world and throughout history. There are also a great many scholars, research centres and activist groups devoted to nonviolence study and training for this precise purpose.

### **Violence, Pacifism and Revolution**

The final argument to be considered is that violent resistance is a necessary tool or process for social transformation and revolution – that major social and political transformation away from oppression and towards emancipation is impossible without organised violence which needed to dismantle the oppressive order and build a new one (see Frazer and Hutchings



2007). In part, this argument is related to the notion that violence is necessary for the oppressed to free their agency and decolonise their subjectivity – that it is a kind of cleansing force, politically and psychologically. In addition to the evidence about the traumatising effects of violence noted above, pacifist theory would also question this assertion on at least two grounds: first, the inextricable link between the means and ends of social action, and the consequential constitutive nature of political violence; and second, the inherent nature of political violence itself, which is a dominatory kind of social action and thus the antithesis of politics in its ideal form, which is inherently dialogic and cooperative. Together, these factors – the means and ends connection, the constitutive nature of violent action, and the anti-political nature of violence – all make it difficult to see how violence could be considered a force for emancipatory revolutionary transformation.

### ***The Means-Ends Connection and the Constitutive Nature of Violence***

In the first instance, as I (and many others) have argued (see Jackson 2016), it is in reality impossible to separate the means and ends of social action, including violent political action. Moreover, to attempt to do so – to insist that the means by which revolution is achieved is irrelevant to the ends to which revolutionary power is put, for example – is to mistake a necessary heuristic practice with the nature of reality. That is, while we have to separate actions and outcomes in a sequential order bounded by a purported beginning and ending in order to make sense of them, this does not mean that they are ontologically distinct in reality. In human activity, as in nature, events occur in a continuous stream and every end becomes the means or cause for what follows. As Dewey puts it, “nothing happens which is final in the sense that it is not part of any ongoing stream of events”, and therefore, “ends are, in fact, literally endless, forever coming into existence as new activities occasion new consequences” (Dewey 1922: 212; cited in Lindahl 2017).

What this means is that the outcomes of all political actions are already prefigured in, or an extension of, the means employed to achieve them, and “[h]owever hard we try to separate means and ends, the results we achieve are extensions of the policies we live”, and most importantly, ontologically speaking, “Means and ends are aspects of one and the same event” (Cady 2010: 56). Or, as Gandhi famously put it, arguing that the means of revolution can be viewed as separate to the ends of revolution is like saying “that we can get a rose through planting a noxious weed... The means may likened to the seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connexion between the means and the ends as there is between the seed and the tree... we reap exactly what we sow” (Gandhi, cited in Lindahl 2017: 529). Such a teleological perspective on reaping what is sown also confirms Arendt’s observation that “[t]he practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world” (Arendt 1970: 80). From this perspective, it seems implausible that a new, peaceful society can be built by violent revolutionary action, particularly given the traumatising, dominatory nature of violence itself.

In addition to recognising the inextricable link between means and ends, we can examine violence from another perspective as an embodied, repetitive kind of collective social action. In other words, looking at violence through structuration theory or constitutive theory draws our attention to the ways in which violence is *constitutive* of social structures, actors, identities, practices, and society at large. At the simplest level, we can note that organised

violence cannot occur without the prior construction of what some have referred to as a socially and historically embedded “war system” which provides institutional arrangements for the scientific development of weapons and military strategies, a political-economic system for the production and disbursement of weapons and war materials, a logistical system for the training and material support of military personnel, a medical care system for the physical and psychological well-being of the troops, a system of doctrines, laws and norms governing the use of deadly violence, a violence-supporting culture, the memorialisation of the war dead, and accepted public narratives which define identities of friend and enemy, worthy and unworthy victims, threats and dangers, and so on.

The construction of such material systems and social practices with their inherent values, norms and expectations, as well as the repetition of organised violence over time, functions to create war and violence as a sedimented, self-perpetuating social structure. That is, the repetitive practices of political violence reproduce, materialise and reconstruct political violence as a social-material structure; consequently, they help to constitute a society in which violence has become an accepted and normalised mode of practice and way of being. From this perspective, it is once again difficult to see how the material and social practice of revolutionary violence could constitute its opposite – a non-militarised, nonviolent, peaceful revolutionary society.

However, this critical analysis can be extended even further. Bloom (2017: 5-6), for example, makes the important point, following Foucault, that there is a “mutually constituting relationship between power and resistance” in which “power and resistance mutually produce each other and ourselves as social subjects.” Importantly, he suggests that “power is constructed in and from its relationship to the resistance that seeks to transform it.” We might argue, in other words, that violent power produces violent resistance, which in turn (re)produces violent power. Certainly, it is difficult to see how violent resistance could mutually constitute a different kind of (peaceful) power to that which it seeks to resist.

Bloom (Ibid: 8) goes on to argue that “Importantly, discursive hegemony has a strong affective component. A dominant discourse psychologically ‘grips’ subjects according to its constructed desires.” Without being reductive or deterministic, we have to take into account how the hegemonic discourse of power and violent resistance Bloom describes affects the revolutionary subject. It may help to explain how the *desire* for revolutionary counter-violence of the kind advocated by Fanon is *produced* in the oppressed subject and those who desire to assist them, because power produces specific types of resistance and specific types of resistance subjects. The important point here is to recognise that the kind of resistance we undertake is both produced *and* productive and constitutive: violent power most often produces and constitutes violent resistance and violent subjects.

Critically, in a second step, the kind of resistance we undertake “sets the scope and limits of its politics and possibilities” (Ibid: 11). In this case, one of the key limits constructed by the use of revolutionary counter-violence is the “primary association of power with notions of sovereignty” and the “unquestioned assumption of power as primarily sovereign power – as the ability to dominate society and people ideologically and institutionally” (Ibid: 23). The consequence of this is the reproduction and reconstitution of a violent, dominatory order. In short, it can be argued that violent revolutionary resistance “delimits the scope of social possibility to one of continued sovereignty, an eternal exchanging of rulers and ideologies”

(ibid: 25) without genuine revolutionary transformation of the underlying political ontology. This likely explains why so many violent revolutions throughout history have resulted in violently oppressive post-revolutionary regimes: the ends of the revolution have been overtaken by the means of the revolution; violent resistance has reached its limits of social possibility and (re)constituted violent power as the dominant political mode.

From this perspective, the argument that violence is necessary for revolution is part of a long historical discursive hegemony (see Bloom 2017) that functions to sustain existing structures and modalities of power. It ensures that even if violent resistance to an existing power structure such as an oppressive state is successful, its replacement will not exceed the limits of the existing (violent) order. The new post-revolutionary state will wield dominatory sovereign power through the same techniques of coercion and consent as the power it opposed, and with its military structures (war system) intact, take its expected place in the existing world order.

In other words, it is the commitment to the use of revolutionary violence which is a force for the conservation and reification of violently oppressive power in the world today. In part, this explains why pacifists such as Gandhi and Tolstoy were deeply suspicious of the crude instrumentalism of Marxism which assumed that the state could be captured and then used simply as a tool for revolutionary transformation. Instead, they understood that the state's very mode of sovereign power, as elucidated by Benjamin and Agamben (see Srivastava 2010: 309, 313), was violent and could therefore not be anything but constitutive of a violent, oppressive order. They argued for the dissolution of the state and its replacement with self-organising communities committed to radically nonviolent politics (see Chabot and Sharifi 2013: 7-11; Bloom 2017: 110).

### ***Violence as the Anti-thesis of Politics***

A second important reason to question whether violence is a necessary part of revolutionary transformation is that, following one strand of political theory, it can be argued that violence is the opposite of politics; it is "politics' constitutive outside. It sets the limits of politics..." (Frazer and Hutchings 2008: 92; see also Arendt 1970). To put it another way, as I have argued elsewhere (Jackson 2017b), the essential characteristics of violence are the opposite, or the negation of, the essential characteristics of politics. That is: violence treats people as a means to an end, while politics treats people as ends in themselves; violence is dominatory and unilateral, while politics is cooperative and consensual; violence is certain, final, and irreversible, while politics is open-ended, experimental, and provides for reconsideration and reversibility; violence is antagonistic, while politics is agonistic; violence destroys the public sphere and democratic space, while politics empowers the public sphere and democratic debate; and so on.

From this perspective, it can be argued that "regardless of whether violence may have its uses and justifications in relation to politics, the crucial point is that it should never be conflated with politics itself. Politics is conceptually and theoretically distinct from violence" (Frazer and Hutchings 2008: 102). Or, simply put, at the very least "violence is counterproductive to politics" (Howes 2013: 428). The key point is that the inherent nature of violence makes it difficult to argue that the employment of violence as a form of political contestation or

resistance could ever function to constitute a new kind of politics based on genuine peace, justice, liberation, non-domination, equality, dignity – what can be called emancipation. A normative, dialogic, emancipatory form of politics would seem to require the use of means compatible with the same ends, and a form of resistance that was capable of constituting a peaceful form of politics free from oppressive power.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have subjected some frequently heard arguments about the necessity of violence in liberating oppressed people to critical examination. The result has been to raise serious doubts about the potential for violent resistance as a mode of political action to provide the normative and strategic basis for revolutionary transformation towards emancipation. As a consequence, and following Bloom (2017: 9-10), I suggest that rather than the tired and somewhat pessimistic call for violent revolution to overthrow the capitalist/colonial/oppressive/neoliberal state, “what is urgently needed in the present are fresh and more effective forms of expanding social possibilities past prevailing power regimes and norms”. That is, we need “to foster multiplicity and new ways of pushing beyond existing limits of what is currently socially possible” (Ibid: 13).

I am arguing here that getting beyond social limits is not possible using the same old practices of domination and control inherent to the use of violent resistance. Instead, it requires a new kind of revolutionary politics and a new kind of revolutionary subjectivity, one that revolutionises both the means and the ends of politics in order “to escape the stagnant fate of permanent revolution” and “revolutionize revolution” itself (Bloom 2017: 193, 167). More specifically, this requires accepting that the notion that revolution is needed to capture power in order to abolish power has failed, and what is required instead is to re-imagine revolution as the dissolution of current forms and practices of power (Holloway 2002, cited in Bloom 2017: 156).

Importantly, this standpoint also implies that some forms of pragmatic or instrumentalist nonviolence, as seen in various cases during the Arab Spring, also provide an insufficient basis for revolutionary transformation (Chabot and Sharifi 2013), given that they retain the potential for violent resistance if nonviolence fails, and they are committed to retaining the (violent) state order after the revolution. As O’Halloran (2015: 378; emphasis added) argues, “Revolutionary action... is that which inaugurates *new* concepts of political action and of the human”. From this perspective, violence cannot be genuinely revolutionary because it reifies the existing violent political order and its modalities of sovereign power, and re-inscribes violence onto its human agents. Only radical forms of nonviolence such as pacifism or Gandhianism provide such revolutionary potential .

Fortunately, as I have alluded to, history and the current international scene provides numerous examples of large-scale and small-scale social movements who are practising a new kind of nonviolent emancipatory politics in their vision to build a more peaceful and just world (see among many others, Kemp and Fry 2003; Schock 2005; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Nepstad 2011; Bartkowski 2013; Anderson and Wallace 2013; O’Halloran 2015; Kaplan 2017). Crucially, as Bloom (2017: 4; emphasis added) once again notes, “These contemporary [nonviolent] movements point the way towards a new politics that *does not just*

*resist the existing social order but reinvents it.* It is the possibility, for instance, of ...the evolution of protests against police abuse into a deeper imagining of how to construct a society that does not need to be policed”. Such movements are frequently based on a nonviolent or pacifist political project rooted in human dignity and equality, the recognition of the Other, the acceptance of difference and radical human interdependence, and the impossibility of certainty or absolute truth (see May 2015) – all of which are also the commonly articulated aims of liberation and revolutionary movements. The key difference is that nonviolent movements have the potential to transcend the existing social limits of revolutionary politics which rely on the necessity of domination and violence as the primary mode of resisting power.

At the same time, we must also acknowledge the current limits of nonviolent or pacifist politics and recognise that it is still in the process of invention. That is, while “The potential uses of nonviolent power are tremendous and as yet virtually unrealized” (Dellinger 1970: 374) at the present historical juncture, it is also the case that

The theory and practice of active nonviolence are roughly at the stage of development today as those of electricity in the early days of Marconi and Edison. A new source of power has been discovered and crudely utilized in certain specialized situations, but our experience is so limited and our knowledge so primitive that there is legitimate dispute about its applicability to a wide range of complicated and critical tasks. (Dellinger 1970: 368)

In other words, there is still a long way to go to realise the effective force and transformative power of pacifism and nonviolence. In part, this is because we have yet to invest the intellectual and material resources comparable to those invested in violence in the study and practice of nonviolence. As Holmes (2013: 167; original emphasis) puts it,

we simply do not *know* whether there is a viable practical alternative to violence, and will not and cannot know unless we are willing to make an effort, comparable to the multibillion-dollar-a-year effort currently made to produce means of destruction and train young people in their use, to explore the potential of nonviolent action.

Holmes goes on to make the point even more starkly: “No one can foresee what the results might be if a country like the United States were to spend \$300 billion a year in research on techniques of nonviolent resistance and on educating and training people in their use” (Ibid: 197).

Nevertheless, on the basis of the theory and evidence we do have, we can be quite sure that only a resistance and a politics based on nonviolence can be genuinely revolutionary. As Chabot and Sharifi (2013: 23) state at the end of their study of the Arab Spring: “We conclude that revolutionaries who recognise the pervasive dangers of imperialism and tentacles of violence are more likely to make other worlds possible by experimenting with Gandhian self-rule, truth-seeking, and nonviolence in their everyday lives and local communities.” The recovery of a kind of “Gandhian realism” (Mantena 2012; Godrej 2006) as the basis for politics and resistance today, together with *satyagraha* and a new “constructive programme” (Chabot and Sharifi 2013: 9), is therefore a moral and strategic imperative.

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