

# Pacifism and the Nonviolent Rebellion

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## DRAFT VERSION

In this paper, I will discuss theories of rebellion and revolution, the majority of which describe these political phenomena as inherently violent. In addition, violence is seen as a distinguishing and defining characteristic of rebellion and revolution. This is the main point that I will be contesting in this talk. I will illustrate this by discussing different definitions of violence and show that the idea of violence as a defining characteristic of rebellion rests on a narrow and limited definition of violence. However, following from Arendt's theories of violence and rebellion I will further argue that even using a narrow definition of violence, the use of violence is not very helpful in distinguishing rebellion from its context, or from other political phenomena.

This leads the talk to a search for other, more useful, characteristics of rebellion. Ultimately, this opens up to the possibility of theorising rebellion as possibly pacifist or nonviolent.

Most of the literature on rebellion and revolution describes violence as an integral, even defining characteristic of these political phenomena. That is, the fact that violence is used is, according to this literature, one of the ways in which an event can be defined as a rebellion or a revolution, as opposed to a different political event. Following on from that, in the literature that discusses the normative aspects of rebelling, the use of violence becomes something that has to be justified before the rebellion or revolution can be a just one.

Both of these claims – the definitional and the normative – are evident in Tony Honore's work, notably his 1988 journal article "The Right to Rebel". Throughout the article, Honore implies that a definition of rebellion includes the use of violence, and writes explicitly that the right to rebel is defined as "*the right of an individual or group to resort to violence, if necessary on a large scale*" (Honore 1988, 36) and writes later that rebellion "covers a wide range of acts of political violence" (ibid. 37).

Although Honore writes of a potential legal right (although of a specific sort, but those nuances are not relevant here) to rebel, not a normative one, he does touch on normative arguments by mentioning for example "the doctrine of abuse of right" (Honore 1988, 37 footnote 9), and talking not only of a right, but also a possible "duty to plant bombs" (ibid. 39). Through this, Honore invokes the idea that a normative discussion of the use of (political) violence – one that is "by some moral theories" already a closed discussion as it is never permitted – is central and a pre-requisite to deciding on a right or duty to rebel (Honore 1988, 39). Finally, the use of Honerich's 1976 work "Three Essays on Political Violence" as relevant to Honore's own argument – despite the fact that Honore himself writes that Honerich does not write about political violence in rebellions (Honore 1988, 40) underlines the centrality of justifying violence in order to justify rebellion in Honore's framework.

Hannah Arendt argues similarly that violence is a defining characteristic, writing that revolutions, along with wars, "are not even conceivable outside the domain of violence", a characteristic which separates them from "all other political phenomena" (Arendt On Revolution, 9). Arendt does not, however, write of the normative importance of justifying

violence in order to justify rebellion. I will return to this later, as it becomes part of my argument, so for now I will leave Arendt as the exception in the literature in this sense.

With all this in mind, there are several examples of the terms ‘rebels’ and ‘rebellion’ being used without violent connotations – this indicates that although the theory specifically defining and discussing rebellion describes violence as a defining characteristic, there is a more general use that does not imply violence as inherent to rebellions.

Examples of this include discussions of the Conservative Party in the UK as full of ‘rebels’ (Cowley and Norton 1999), and historical assessment of the so-called “peasant wars” in 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia, in which ‘rebellions’ are described that both include violent strategies and nonviolent ones (Jenkins 1982).

However, this broader use of the term is not in the mentioned works accompanied by any discussion of how a rebellion is defined, and what separates it from other political phenomena (Jenkins hints at some of these in how he uses ‘uprisings’ and ‘revolutions’ however), meaning that although there clearly is a broader sense of the rebel as not necessarily violent, this does not lead to a serious investigation of how rebels and rebellions are then defined and identified in political theory. This gap between the literature defining rebellion thoroughly, but as inherently violent, and the broader use of rebellion to mean any form of dissent (although often intended with a slightly anarchic connotation) is what I am aiming to start filling with this paper.

Now, this emphasis on the role of violence as a defining characteristic of rebellions that I have described, is important for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it almost automatically excludes the idea of rebellion (with everything that this term encapsulates) from any talk of nonviolent social change. This, as I am hoping to show, takes a significant idea of how to think about social change out of a vocabulary where it could potentially add a great deal in terms of available strategies and understandings.

Secondly, in normative discussions of ‘just’ rebellions, it leads to a sense that the use of violence must be justified – either absolutely or in the specific situation – before the rebellion can be. This leads to many writings and discussions getting sort of stuck at this point of the debate, leaving the discussion of other important issues unresolved or less thoroughly dealt with.

Thirdly, this framing highlights certain kinds of violence, from certain perpetrators, while masking and disregarding other forms of violence from different perpetrators. Through leaving the reader with an impression – whether explicitly stated or not – of the rebels as the instigators of violence, as bringing violence into a previously not violent situation. Or, at the very least, an impression of this pre-rebellion violence as not relevant when distinguishing and discussion rebellions.

This third argument is based on a certain definition of violence, one that I describe here as a narrow definition on a spectrum of possible definitions. This idea of a spectrum of definitions of violence, ranging from narrow to wider conceptions does not fully capture the range of discussions and definitions of the concept that exist. But it does start to illustrate the point that violence is not a simple concept, where the substance of the word and the definitional boundaries around it – for example the line between violence and nonviolence – are easily established and agreed upon. These different definitions have wide-ranging consequences for how we conceptualise and understand other concepts – such as rebellion. I will try to demonstrate one example of the importance of the nuanced and complex concept of violence by illustrating how broader definitions of violence – and, as we’ll see a more thorough narrow

definition – can lead to a questioning of the integral role of violence to the concept of rebellion. Both these conceptualisations will, in different ways, lead to a move away from exceptionalising the role of violence in rebellions.

The definitions of violence that I discuss today, then, can be mapped out as lying on a spectrum, ranging from the narrow view of violence as direct, physical harm, to much broader conceptions of structural violence, the violence of threats, and the violence of oppression.

One end of the spectrum is what is named the "narrow" definition of violence. Using Johan Galting (1969, 168), this can be defined as "*somatic* incapacitation, or deprivation of health ... at the hands of an *actor* who *intends* this to be the consequence". In Honore's article on rebellion, violence is not explicitly defined, although the examples mentioned of possible violent tactics, such as "shooting people or planting bombs" (Honore 1988, 36) are within a narrow definition. His discussion of violent versus nonviolent methods further support the assumption that he is implying a narrow definition of rebellion.

With this conception of violence, rebel violence is made more visible than certain forms of state violence. Other forms of state violence, such as in cases of totalitarian regimes who respond to rebellions, or any form of protest, with obvious, direct physical violence, are recognised. What this creates still, however, is a sort of equalising scenario of "violence on both sides", which, as I argue, overly exceptionalises the role of violence in rebellions. And even then, other forms of violence against the population, or part of it, are not made visible within this framework. Neither are broader forms of violence that may be used by dissenters or protesters to affect social change.

At the other end of this outlined spectrum of violence definitions, we find theorists such as Johan Galtung. He, amongst others, widens the scope to talk of structural and cultural violence, using the basic provision that "if people are starving when this is objectively unavoidable, then violence is committed" (Galtung 1969, 171). This would obviously drastically change an assessment of who is deemed "violent" in situations of rebellion or potential rebellion. In line with this, Freire (1970, 37) for example states that the oppressed are never initiators of violence, as they are the result of violence. I would argue that this broader conception of violence also brings the scope of state violence beyond what we immediately see as "violent" states, that is the scenario of totalitarian states mentioned before.

Hannah Arendt has, as with all of her work, spent considerable time on exploring very thoroughly the central concepts that she uses, including that of "violence".

In "On Violence" she writes of the "general reluctance to deal with violence as a phenomenon in its own right" (Arendt 1969, 35), and her work is an interesting contrast to much of the other theory dedicated to defining and describing violence. As a highly generalised statement, there seems to be a trend that the work that spends time on violence as a concept tends to be working on broadening the scope of what violence means from the traditional idea of direct, physical harm. Arendt, in contrast, spends time and analysis on elaborately and thoroughly drawing definitional boundaries around a rather narrow conception of violence, and distinguishing the phenomenon from concepts such as power, force, and authority (Arendt 1969, 44-45).

Importantly, she distinguishes power from violence, writing that while the "extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All. And this latter is never possible without instruments" (Arendt 1969, 42). In many ways, Arendt seems to

present power and violence as contrasting phenomena, with power being held by collectives, while violence and strength is individual. An important point to make about violence is precisely the instrumentality inherent to the concept, since "the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength" (Arendt 1969, 46). This, then, underlines the idea of violence as physical, as somatic incapacitation, whereas many of the broader forms of violence are arguably, to Arendt, more a matter of misuse of power. It also raises the possibility of popular rebellions against, say, a tyrannical state or leader, being about both power and violence, rather than just violence.

Arendt herself suggests as much when in "On Revolution", Arendt also describes violence as that which silences speech, which in turn is the foundation for the "political" as Arendt conceives of it.

Therefore, for Arendt, "violence is only marginal in the political realm" (Arendt On Revolution, 9), which allows for revolutions to be defined by her as political, as she concludes that these are not "completely determined by violence" (Arendt On Revolution, 9).

What I argue is then that with both narrow and broad definitions of violence, there are strong indications that violence may not, in fact, be such a fundamentally distinguishing characteristic of rebellion. With the narrow definition, in Arendt's analysis at least, it seems that the important questions about why people rebel, what the aims and consequences are etc. are often about other, although related phenomena, such as power, force and authority, rather than about violence. Or at the very least, that the importance of violence is not as being part of the revolution, but perhaps as being what the revolution rose up against. And with a broader definition it becomes evident that violence was not initially brought into the situation by the rebels, and that the description of rebels as "violent" seems to do very little to distinguish them from other actors in society.

This argument rests not so much on an idea of rebellions taking place entirely without the use of force or violence (although I don't want to rule that option out either). Rather, I argue, that it is not something which sets rebellion apart from other political phenomena and events as clearly as we might immediately think; other political events and systems have violence as an integral part of them too - for example tyranny, or dictatorship, which are often the contexts within which rebellions and revolutions start. If we stretch the definition of violence further, it could be argued that what we call democracies are upheld by violence, with the violence of border control to keep the voting population relatively stable, the violent defence against foreign, totalitarian invaders as during the wars in the 20th century, or in our 'justice systems' with police force and prisons.

Another question to pose is whether rebel violence can, in certain situations, be described as a form of (possibly collective) self-defence. The question of the right to self-defence is a central one to discussions of pacifism, meaning that if this is the case, then rather than being outside the scope of any pacifist stance or theory, rebellion might be at the centre of one of pacifism's core conundrums. As self-defence is such a contested issue, though - especially when we talk of political rather than personal violence - it is in my opinion not the most useful place to start conceptualising a pacifist theory of rebellion, which is why I examine other avenues.

All of this is not to argue that there is no need to think through the use of violence at all in rebellions, or to suggest that any pre-existence of violence removes completely the need to justify rebel violence, if we are talking normatively about rebellion. But, as mentioned

before, it does mean that potential rebels might not be the only ones in need of justifying their violence, and it means that they do not have to justify introducing violence in a previously not violent situation. It also means that the role of violence is perhaps not as exceptional to rebellion as what seems to be the assumption. This opens up the possibility of looking at rebellions within a pacifist or nonviolent political framework.

I would suggest two parts to this pacifist theory of rebellion. The first suggests, with Hannah Arendt, that violence as such can never be justified in a rebellion. The argument becomes one aligned with Realist theory's refusal to recognise a moral justification for violence, even while still looking at violent phenomena and events in politics. Looking closely at where and when violence takes place is not irrelevant or contrary to a pacifist theory. Rather, I would argue that the first step to arguing against the use of violence is to attempt to identify all instances of violence in a situation, and not accept to simply point to the perhaps most visible forms of violence and discuss these. What you get then is an outlook that will most often benefit powerful actors and institutions, who have access to a wide range of forms of violence, while disproportionately policing the actions of already oppressed or less powerful groups. The second part begins to bring out other, more useful, defining characteristics than the use of violence.

The first part of a possible pacifist theory of rebellion is then not so much perhaps refusing to talk about violence as being ever used in rebellions, but by refusing to morally justify the use of violence, while also refusing to condemn one form of violence (rebel violence) while ignoring another form (state violence).

Arendt writes in "On Revolution" that "a theory of revolution, therefore, can only deal with the justification of violence because this justification constitutes its political limitation; if, instead, it arrives at a glorification or justification of violence as such, it is no longer political, but anti political" (On Revolution, 10). In this quote, a space opens for a nonviolent line of argument - Arendt is not claiming that a revolution must be nonviolent to be political. She is, however, claiming that a "justification of violence as such" (On Revolution, 10) is antipolitical, implying that even if violence plays a role in revolution, a truly political revolution cannot argue that violence can be justified.

This point relates back to realist views of violence, in which the occurrence of violence is seen as a reality in politics, but not as ever being morally justifiable as would be seen in Just War theory and its contemporary manifestations such as ideas of "humanitarian intervention". That is, justice or ethics are taken out of the equation when making decisions about the use of violence in a revolution, echoing a pacifist stance of denying any moral reason or justification for violence.

The other part of this potential pacifist theory of rebellion is to define what rebellion then means, what distinguishes it, if not violence.

Despite a heavy focus on violence in rebellion, other parts of Honore's conception of rebellion are still applicable to an idea of a nonviolent rebellion, or to making sense of rebellion if it is not defined primarily by the use of violence. For example, he bases the right to rebel in "peremptory notions of human dignity, autonomy and co-operative morality" (Honore 1988, 37). This echoes Arendt's claim that it is crucial "to any understanding of revolutions in the modern era" to have present "the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning" (On Revolution, 21-22).

A possible defining feature of rebellion, which does not necessarily centre on the idea of violence, is the idea of rebellion being defined by the point at which a group seeking to make changes no longer treat every member of the society in question as 'on the same side', or as belonging to the previously mentioned community of joint enterprise. That is, that rebellion starts when the society enters into an internal conflict in which the other side is viewed as 'the enemy'. Honore writes: "So in the end we cannot escape the intractable issue, inherent in the etymological root of rebellion (*bellum*) of the right to make war on one's society. It is one thing to concede that, despite our *prima facie* duty to obey the law, there are conditions in which we can properly refuse to cooperate and resort to passive resistance or civil disobedience. It is quite another to justify treating members of our society as enemies" (Honore 1988, 53).

This could potentially also be described as parallel to what Whelan (2016, 11-12) conceptualises as a spectrum of political violence, ranging from "the communication-focused protest, and the militarised insurgency". That is, it could be suggested that the difference between a nonviolent protest and a nonviolent rebellion would be one of increasing capabilities (again echoing Whelan's spectrum) and wider aims. All of these different ways of characterising social movements and struggle for social change seem to me to be useful to have in a theoretical vocabulary, which is why I argue that looking at rebellion and revolution without the heavy focus on violence is a useful exercise.

In conclusion, while violence is, on the surface, an integral and defining part of theories of rebellion and revolution, this strong link is as I've argued questionable. This is in part because theories who describe this definitional link are based on an assumption of violence being limited to direct, physical harm, ignoring a multitude of other possible forms of violence that are often present before the outbreak of a rebellion and that are not performed by rebels, but often for example states and powerful institutions.

This means that it is possible to start thinking of definitions and conceptualisation of violence without necessarily including violence, at least as a defining characteristic - and this opens a door to start theorising nonviolent rebellions and revolutions. Much of this can be drawn out from existing literature on rebellion and revolution which, although it exceptionalises the role of violence, still presents several other possible parameters for mapping out these political phenomena.

