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What is Violence?

Transcribed from sub.media film from the series “A is for  
Anarchy”

2019

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*SYNOPSIS: Our societies are heavily dependent on violence to function. While states will attempt to hold a monopoly on violence and constantly find new ways to legitimize their use of force, people struggling against domination can also use violence to confront the hierarchical systems oppressing them. While debates around violence and tactics seem to be revived every time someone decides to fight back, the necessity of physical attacks on power cannot be ignored. So, what is violence exactly, and how does it function in the world?*

It’s often said that anarchists are violent. And there’s plenty of historical and contemporary evidence to back this up. But an inclination towards violence is not the defining characteristic of an anarchist. Just as it does not define what it means to be a liberal, or conservative, or Christian... despite the far higher levels of violence carried out by the members and guiding institutions of those groups.

There’s a reason why anarchists have been portrayed as singularly violent by our enemies for well over a hundred years. Our ideas are threatening to those in power, and so the phrase ‘violent’

is used to discredit us. To paint us, and by extension our actions and beliefs, as unwanted, anti-social, threatening and scary. An aversion to violence is a good thing. We should all strive to minimize violence through the actions that we take... and in fact, that's the driving ethos behind most anarchist practice.

That being said, violence is an intrinsic part of life. It always has been, and it always will be. Human beings' capacity for violence is hardwired into our DNA. It's precisely this capacity, combined with our propensity for complex problem solving and mutual aid, that allowed us to assume the apex position in the animal kingdom and overcome the harsh, incredibly violent conditions of the natural world. And despite all the advances made over thousands of years of human civilization, our societies and complex economic systems are still heavily dependent on the massive and systematic application of violence to function.

Understanding and coming to terms with this reality is the first step in changing it. So... what is violence, anyway? And what's it got to do with anarchy? Because it's both a common and incredibly loaded term, there are many different definitions of violence, depending on who you ask. And it's worth pointing out that what's considered violent to one person might not be experienced that way by another.

That said, violence is generally understood as any action that causes shock or pain to another sentient being. Often it describes a direct act of force to assert agency or control over another person, but it can also be indirect, passed down through hierarchies and encoded into arbitrary sets of rules.

Violence can be physical or it can be psychological... and most often, it's a mixture of the two. When most people hear the word violence, the first thing that often comes to mind is the use or threat of physical force. Whether this takes the form of a punch to the face, a mass shooting, a domestic assault, a death threat, rape, a sensationalist news report about an armed robbery, or a debate over tactics... this is the realm of violence that everyone can relate to, to

some extent. Maybe we've experienced a specific manifestation of it first-hand. Maybe not. Either way, we all know what it's like to feel pain. We can all identify with the sudden shock of unexpected danger.

This mode of violence speaks to, and resonates with our own past experiences of trauma. This baseline empathy is the foundation for how discourses around violence are used to isolate, criminalize, de-humanize and otherwise repress specific individuals, ideas, and entire groups of people. Selective narratives and the use of violent imagery become weaponized to manipulate public opinion, fan divisions and justify all manner of countermeasures in the name of safety and security.

Is it time to classify Antifa as a terror group? Burnie Carrick is a former New York City police commissioner, helped put together an anti-terror task force. Commissioner, how do you label this group? The specter of the terrorist is the most glaring example, but there are many other well-known tropes and stereotypes that shape the way that we understand the world and each another, magnifying threats out of proportion to reality, or manufacturing them where they do not exist. Popular perceptions on violence are shaped by the ruling classes, through their control over mass media and the operation of state education and criminal justice systems.

The specific schematics vary according to local political considerations, demographics and culture... but one constant is the casting of all those who challenge state authority as violent criminals, on one hand, and the glorification of state violence as a necessary counterbalance, on the other. This skewed lens is intended to obscure the fact that states are responsible for the overwhelming majority of violence in the world. In fact, when you peel back all the layers of bureaucracy and self-aggrandizing mythology, that's what states really are: highly-structured systems of organized violence. As the front-line agents of this violence, police, soldiers and paramilitaries carry out atrocities and acts of brutality on a scale that is utterly beyond the scope and capacities of even the most

sadistic individual or ragtag terrorist outfit... let alone the scandalous acts claimed by anarchists.

How can a broken window or a punched Nazi be remotely compared to the carpet bombing of a mid-sized city, or the “enhanced interrogation” of an “enemy combatant”? What is the assassination of a king or a particularly brutal cop when compared to colonial genocide, or the threat of nuclear war? A state’s violence is given direction and legitimacy by its political institutions, whether cloaked in the hallow robe of democracy or the unquestioned authority of dynastic rule. These same institutions uphold the violence of the so-called “free market”, destroying the ecosystems that support life and condemning the great mass of humanity to choose between wage labour, or starvation.

To safeguard the infallible logic of this market, states lock up bodies and regulate flow of human beings across imaginary lines. On the mantle of border security, thousands of desperate people are sacrificed each year to the sun-cracked rocks of the Senora desert and the dark depths of the Mediterranean, while hundreds of thousands of others are forced into the relative safety of squalid detention camps. So what are we to do when faced with this level of violence?

When a person is being savagely attacked, everyone, aside from the most die-hard pacifists generally accepts that it’s morally acceptable for them to use violence in self-defense. Why then, is this same principle not applied to the vastly greater violence of the state? Fostering the legitimacy of defensive violence is a key component of revolutionary strategy. Even when that defensive violence takes the form of attack against the individuals and institutions that subjugate and repress us.

The Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta made it clear where he stood on this question, declaring that “the slave is always in a state of legitimate self-defense and so his violence against the boss, against the oppressor, is always morally justifiable... and should only be adjusted by the criterion of utility and economy of hu-

man effort and human suffering.” Pan-African revolutionary Franz Fanon took it further, observing that the violence waged by colonized peoples against their colonial masters offered up a path towards the realization of their own self worth, and noting that “the very moment when the colonized discover their humanity, they begin to sharpen their weapons to secure its victory.”

This historic truth shines through from the legacies of the armed stand-offs of the Mohawks of Kanesatake, and the Zapatistas in the jungles of Chiapas, struggles that helped Indigenous resistance in the territories ruled by the Canadian and Mexican states. It shines through every time the oppressed and exploited people of this world draw a line in the sand and prepare to defend it by any means necessary. It’s worth repeating that violence has often devastating, real world consequences, and should be avoided and minimized wherever possible.

It is not something to be romanticized, celebrated, or turned into an empty aesthetic, or and end in and of itself. State specialists in counterinsurgency have long recognized that when analyzing the potential of an insurgent movement, factors such as the strength of social relationships, methods of organization and the ability to spread conflict often prove more decisive than the outcome of any particular battle. Building these qualities and characteristics often require little or no recourse to violence whatsoever. But if nothing else, the capacity for violence is an essential component for asserting and defending autonomy. And while meaningful autonomy is not something that so-called ‘progressives’ who fetishize non-violence tactics have any interest in, it forms the basis of anarchism, and every revolutionary project worth its name.