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On the Ethics and Utility of Violence

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Abstract

After the property damage at the University of Berkeley by protesters opposed to Milo Yiannopolous speaking there, many within the movement have condemned the violence. They argue that the violence plays into a narrative constructed by white-nationalists, and damages the moral legitimacy of the progressive movement that opposes everything he is calling for. Others, such [...]

Article



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Others, such as Katherine Cross, have strongly argued that violence against fascist movements (“punching Nazis”) and leaders is not only justified but necessary and a moral imperative in order to preserve democracy. She opines that “Nazism is democracy’s anti-matter. There is nothing about the ideology or its practice that is anything but corrosive to democratic institutions. Fascism is a cancer that turns democracy against itself unto death.”

NEW NRA VIDEO FUELS AMERICAN EXTREMISTS, SAYS FORMER CIA ANALYST

BY **GRAHAM LANKTREE** ON 6/30/17 AT 10:12 AM



Figure 1. Prior to Charlottesville via Newsweek: “A new ad put out by America’s biggest gun lobby, the National Rifle Association, has been compared to an extremist recruitment video by terrorism experts.”

This essay does not propose to achieve a definitive answer to how, when, and where violence is justified. It attempts to analyze the effectiveness of violence and the threat thereof as a tool used by factions to influence systemic change. This includes how it can positively and negatively create change, as well as change societal attitudes. While this may seem like a “listicle”, it does tie together by the end.

1. “Punching Nazis” is depicted as virtuous in popular culture, and we accept it

In comics and cinema, gratuitous punching of oppressors by the “good guys” is depicted as right and justified. Indiana Jones, Superman, and Captain America all used violence in the defense of liberty, with the understanding that Nazis were the bad guys. Who didn’t want to cheer when Hermione Granger punched out Draco Malfoy, the vicious spawn of Death Eaters (basically magic Nazis)?



Figure 2. Long-term American pop culture take on violence against Nazis and other genocidal movements.

One could argue that these are all fictional characters. They are, but that is beside the point. These movies are a mirror of our own societal attitudes, beliefs, and values. They reflect what we believe is good, moral, and ethical. We are supposed to empathize, identify with, and agree with the motivations and actions of the protagonists. Hermione Granger is supposed to represent the moral center or conscience of three main protagonists. Were we to find her motivations and actions contrary to our own values, we would not want to cheer her when she punched out Draco Malfoy.

2. Violence in the face of an existential threat is nearly universally seen as justified

Preemptive violence against a clear and present danger, where there is a clear intent of existential harm is generally accepted by our society. Whether it involves Jews participating in insurgency during WWII, or home-defense “castle laws”, or even pre-emptively blowing up the second Death Star, we culturally believe that using violence, at some level, is acceptable to avoid levels of violence and oppression that are far worse.

Milo Yiannopoulos and the ideas he espouses are seen by many within the transgender community as an existential threat. He advocates harassing, bullying, and mistreating transgender people until they self-deport back into the closet, and encourages that they should be forced into the harmful and ineffective practice of reparative therapy. In short, he is advocating a form of crowd-sourced cultural genocide.

Thus, attempts to remove a platform for his advocacy of this can be argued to be a form of collective self-defense.



Figure 3. Actual Nazi complaining that a trans woman tweeted that bashing Nazis is an okay thing for Americans to do.

3. Violence against property has been a successful tactic in movements across US history

Both the American Revolution and the LGBT rights movement started with the willful destruction of property and limited violence against individuals. Whether it was the Boston Tea Party or the Stonewall Inn, tangible resistance and limited destruction of property demonstrated a capacity for resistance that became powerful and enduring symbols. Violence against property emboldens those resisting and creates doubt in the minds of those in a position of authority.

4. Violence has also backfired completely in other movements

The 1963 Church Bombing in Birmingham by Klan members killed four Black girls and swung public opinion firmly behind the Civil Rights movement. It represented a turning point for the movement and contributed to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The church had been used as a gathering point for local civil rights activities. The Klan had hoped to intimidate them. Instead, the escalation of destruction of property to the destruction of innocent life undercut their support and swung undecided white Americans in favor of the Civil Rights Movement.

5. Violence is scalable

This is something the military is very much aware of. Targeteering is the art and science of selecting a weapon for a mission that is the minimum necessary to ensure success while limiting collateral damage.

Similarly, there is a wide range of options for destructive resistance, from graffiti at the low end up to a fully-fledged insurgency like we saw (and probably created) in Iraq.

6. Violence often has a purpose

Violence is not necessarily random. It can have a very specific purpose towards a strategic aim, particularly when planned. At the high end, the purpose can be kinetic effects (bombs, guns, missiles, etc.) to reduce an adversary's Command and Control infrastructure. In the case of Milo Yiannopolous, destruction of property is likely to reduce the number of university administrators willing to provide him a venue for his advocacy of cultural genocide.

7. Spin and media coverage often determines the actual effect of violence

Right-wing media outlets have leaped upon the destructive actions of some protesters at Berkeley to denounce the progressive movement, and many progressives have been eager to follow suit. However, who remembers the fact that a week earlier, one of Yiannopolous' white-nationalist followers shot an unarmed protester in Seattle? Far fewer, and it illustrates the fact that despite the disproportionate level of violence (property damage vs. lethal force), it was the media that decided which event would have more impact on the discussion.

Another example is the purposeful depiction of the protest signs left at Trump Tower as “trash left behind by protesters” in order to discredit the protest.



8. Playing the victim card doesn't always work

Being the victim of violence and intimidation, and keeping your response measured and non-violent, doesn't always succeed, especially if you don't have a large base of dedicated support and sympathy, to begin with. Consider Gamergate, which Milo Yiannopolous was a driving force behind. Not only did he crowd-source intimidation and death threats to silence female video game programmers, it worked. They were effectively denied a platform to exercise the same free speech rights Yiannopolous seems to hold so dear now, and the public was generally apathetic to the whole thing. In many ways, Gamergate was a dry run for the 2016 election.

Similarly, the cautionary tale of the SS St. Louis and her Jewish passengers demonstrates that if you are part of an unpopular minority, being the victim at the early stages of violence and repression will not necessarily generate enough sympathy for someone to bother trying to save you.

Thus, for the transgender community, adopting a purely defensive posture may not work, particularly given that the opposition is essentially fascist in nature and the percentage of dedicated people supporting the community is relatively small.

9. Violence, or the threat of it, can change behavior

In warfare, changes in tactics or the level of violence changes behaviors of entities. In Iraq, the 2003 insurgent attack on the hotel hosting the UN Assistance Mission killed over 100 people and resulted in the UN pulling out of the country. This significantly damaged efforts to reconstitute the government and provide essential services.

On a lower level, the threat of violence changes behaviors of people on a day to day basis. According to the US Trans Survey in 2015, within the last year, 59 percent of transgender people avoided using bathrooms, and 31 percent avoided eating or drinking in order not to need to use public bathrooms so as to avoid violence. This fear is substantiated: 8% report being harassed or assaulted for using a bathroom.

In short, violence, and the threat of it can be an effective tool for altering behaviors and tactics.

10. There is a hierarchy of acceptable violence

The threat of violence is common and often accepted. In some cases, it is predicated on our own behaviors (e.g. breaking into someone's house in the dead of night is likely to result in violence, and is a predictable result). However, there are varying degrees of tolerance beyond this.

Harassment and threats of violence online are very common and authorities almost never do anything about it. Milo Yiannopolous has argued that if women don't want to be threatened with rape and violence, then they should get off the internet.

People are less tolerant of destruction of property than they are of threats, but this still is accepted to some degree as a legitimate form of resistance. The next step is non-lethal force against authority figures (punching Hitler), and then violence against random people associated with bad movements (beating a German POW in WWII). Finally, use of lethal force is the least tolerated level of violence. Again, the status of the person affects the acceptability of the use of lethal force.

Killing Hitler is ok; shooting a German POW is much less so, and violence against bystanders, children, and unarmed people is the least acceptable form of violence.

However, this is not universal, for the reasons stated in point 7 about spin and media coverage. Right wing media playing off of racism has managed to convince a sizable portion of the population that Black Lives Matter (which opposes violence at its core) is a terrorist organization. They have also enshrined the idea that killing children and innocents (e.g. shooting a sleeping 7-year-old girl to death) is simply the price of maintaining law and order in minority majority areas.

11. Violence can be an asymmetric strategy

To the great detriment of almost everyone, the progressive movement discovered too late that being horrible is a viable tactic. Appealing to the worst instincts of humanity -jingoism, nationalism, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and transphobia- are all tactics of the conservative movement that elected Trump and rallied behind alt-right (white nationalist) leaders like Richard Spencer and Yiannopolous. There was an implicit endorsement of violence behind all of them, along with a drastic widening of the Overton Window (the range of topics society is willing to accept).

It is only asymmetric, though, if there is a significant difference between how accepting of violence each side is. Currently, one side accepts threats of lethal force, rape, and actual use of lethal force as acceptable, while the other philosophically abjures it entirely.

Breaking rules of behavior, including violence, can be an asymmetric cost-imposing advantage. For example, Trump's lies came faster than the media could rebut them. By the time they rebutted one, he was two or three more down the road. Similarly, Yiannopolous has violated all the normal rules of mainstream politics by painting transgender people as sub-human and socializing the concept of their cultural genocide. This is so far outside the playbook for the mainstream Democrats and progressives that they simply have no idea what the correct response is since they have never seen this as a viable tactic before.

(Hint: It is. They used it, they won. Bigly. All three federal branches and 2/3rds of the states are controlled by Republicans, who have fallen in line behind Trump and his movement, which includes Spencer and Yiannopolous.)

The threat of violence, particularly credible ones based on history, alters behavior, imposes a cost, and is potentially asymmetric. For example, if the mere threat of violence at every Yiannopolous campus visit costs the university a cool half million dollars for additional security, and Milo is spending more on bodyguards than a Colombian drug lord, this is the definition of an asymmetric, cost-imposing strategy. If universities start demanding that Republican clubs pony up the money for security themselves, or demanding Milo pay for all the security, it becomes a "no" without actually saying "no."

12. Destroying a perception of invulnerability is a valid tactical and strategic goal

When the US launched the Doolittle Raid from the USS Hornet in 1942, the goal was not to do significant damage to Japan. It was to damage the perception of Japan as an unstoppable foe. Similarly, the Japanese were rattled by the raid because they had heretofore seen the home islands as impervious

to attack. This raid fundamentally altered their risk-reward calculations and caused them to divert scarce resources toward defending their islands. It also prompted the disastrous attack on Midway.

Similarly, the asymmetric dynamic between alt-right figures and those opposing them gave people like Yiannopolous and Spencer an internal sense of invulnerability, which leads them to espouse even more outrageous and dangerous ideas. It is simultaneously demoralizing to the people targeted by such figures that they hold great power (particularly Yiannopolous, who has attended Whitehouse press briefings and is treated as a mainstream figure by college Republicans), and as such seem untouchable.

Thus, when Richard Spencer was punched and it was caught on camera, to some people it gave a sense of hope that someone was willing to tangibly resist the neo-fascist movement in the US.

Resistance is not futile.

Conclusions

Violence is a political tool. It carries a high risk of backfiring and causing those who use it to lose public support for their cause. It introduces chaos into a system because it breaks the rules and causes them to be re-written as a result. The results are usually judged harshly by history, but at the time it is happening the dominant media determines how violence is perceived internally.

Currently, we are in an asymmetric state. Yiannopolous and his followers have used violence and threats as a tactic, attacked academic freedom with it (while claiming it for themselves), normalized ideas that were unthinkable just a few years ago (cultural genocide), subverted media into ignoring the nature of his movement, and negatively amplifying the backlash to his movement. The fact that college Republican groups and universities are hosting these events by Yiannopolous lends an air of normalcy, credibility, and respectability to the ideas and acceptance of violence embodied by him.

The current progressive response is to continue to engage as they have done in the past, with the assumption that at some point normalcy will reassert itself and the Overton window will narrow on its own as people become less accepting of his ideas. This discounts the possibility that his ideas and tactics are in fact the new normal (aided by mainstream Republicans and University administrators), and there will be no return to the old normal. Due to selective coverage, the alt-right generally determines what violence will be covered, and how it will be framed.

Violence has degrees, is scalable, and can be tailored to achieve a specific aim. Its ultimate success as a tool is dependent on how post-event messaging is handled. Given the somewhat unpredictable nature of violence and public perceptions, violence is still a blunt force instrument with relatively crude and unpredictable results. It has, infrequently, been used to achieve progress which is regarded (in retrospect) to have been both necessary and good (e.g. Boston Tea Party and Stonewall).

The use of violence in politics and culture is generally counter-productive but is still an ethical gray area. There are times when it is justified, and likely necessary. The view that violence is always wrong is overly simplistic to the point of being demonstrably incorrect. Conversely, so is the idea that you can kill your way out of an insurgency. It is a tool of last resort that must be used to achieve limited, specific aims and done in conjunction with robust, unified messaging if there is to be any confidence in its success.

You too can

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