

The Raised Hand of Darkness: Considering Violence as a Method of Non-Compliance

Oppressed peoples are taught that violence never solves anything, is never the answer and will never accomplish our goal of freedom from the tyranny of oppression.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is invoked as an example of nonviolence as resistance, his legacy used to shame us if we dare speak of answering assault in kind. Would the same people who use King as a cudgel defend themselves with deadly force if their only alternative was death? Undoubtedly. Afterwards, they would remind us that the law protects an individual who kills in self-defense. And they would be correct. Except that while theoretically that protection is afforded to every citizen, in practice we see it is only selectively applied.

For example, in 2010 Marissa Alexander, a Black woman living in Florida, fired a gun into a wall as a warning to her abusive ex-husband, who was threatening her life. The shot resulted in no injuries, but Alexander was charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. She attempted to use the “Stand Your Ground” defense and was denied. After 12 minutes of deliberation, a jury sentenced Alexander to 20 years¹. Months later, also in Florida, George Zimmerman, a white and Latino man, stalked and killed Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman used the “Stand Your Ground” defense successfully and received acquittal. Objectively, Alexander was in greater danger, but our society

1. Starr, Terrell. “She Went to Prison for Firing a Warning Shot at Her Abuser. Now She’s Free.” *The Cut*, 28 Mar. 2017.

assigns a lower value to Black lives, both the victims and the accused. Just as an individual’s right to self-defense is selectively extended based on their social group, so too is a group’s right to self-defense in the face of an existential threat. Violent outbursts from individuals in privileged classes—such as that of Dylann Roof, the white man convicted of killing eight at a Black church in Charleston, SC—are greeted with calls for sympathy², while violence from Black folks protesting their systematic extermination at the hands of police are framed as opportunists looking for a reason to riot.³ Violent white folks, media tells us, are misunderstood and mentally ill; violent Black folks, they say, are born criminals.

While nonviolence and civil disobedience have their place in the arsenal of weapons against oppression, they are most effective when paired with the threat of violence should said oppression not be remedied. It’s worth remembering that 1950s and 60s white America was moved not only by their compassion to the plight of MLK Jr.’s nonviolent protestors, but also by their fear of the potential for violent resistance on the part of members of the Black Panther Party, disciples of Malcolm X, and other arms of the Black Liberation movement. Whether nonviolence would have accomplished the same goals in a vacuum is debatable. But few white folks seem to consider this when demanding that others remain nonviolent in order to honor the memory of Dr. King.

2. Paddock, Barry, and Rich Schapiro. “S.C. Judge Urges Support for Dylann Roof’s Family.” *NY Daily News*. N.p., 19 June 2015.

3. Bliss, Laura. “LAPD’s Police Reforms and the Legacy of Rodney King.” *CityLab*. N.p., 01 May 2015.



There are some recent examples of violence catalyzing change that had yet to take place despite years of peaceful action. In 1992, Los Angeles rioted in response to the acquittal of police officers charged with brutality in the Rodney King case. Although lives were lost and property was damaged, the riots also resulted in national attention being paid to the issue of police brutality, and started the LAPD down a path towards reform.⁴ In 2015, riots erupted in Baltimore after Freddie Gray's death in police custody. The unrest resulted in the indictment of the six officers involved, and furthered the national dialogue around the killing of Black folks by police. It also led to a consent decree being issued by the U.S. Department of Justice that mandated changes in Baltimore's police department.⁵ Although the charges were later dropped against three of the Baltimore officers and the other three were acquitted, given the justice system's aversion to prosecuting police officers, it's difficult to envision any indictments being issued without the threat of protracted violent conflict. The effectiveness of nonviolence, in part, depends on oppressors moving to remedy a situation with no imminent threat to their existence, relying on their conscience to be their guide rather than relying on their survival instinct. Unfortunately, the conscience is a much less powerful entity when it comes to forcing action.

4. Bliss, Laura. "LAPD's Police Reforms and the Legacy of Rodney King." CityLab. The Atlantic, 01 May 2015.

5. Hermann, Peter, and Sari Horwitz. "Federal Judge Approves Baltimore Police Consent Decree." The Washington Post. WP Company, 07 Apr. 2017.

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But rather than ask ourselves what violence accomplishes for the oppressed, and whether it's an acceptable means of resistance, why not ask ourselves what violence accomplishes for the oppressor, and why it's an acceptable means of ensuring the compliance of oppressed people? Oppressors violently force compliance with the status quo with a two-pronged approach: physical violence, through systematic brutalization and victimization, and psychic violence, in the form of shaming and silencing those who refuse to submit. Our culture creates narratives that encourage and condone the use of violence against those who dare to challenge white heteropatriarchal supremacy, while simultaneously discouraging and condemning the use of violence in response. Trans people, people of color, women, and queer folks are expected to turn the other cheek, always forgive, and never retaliate. The dominant culture exhibits more outrage over the killings of lions and gorillas than those of trans women and Black folks, or the forty-plus rapes Bill Cosby committed.

This two-pronged approach ensures every aspect of society participates in violent subjugation. The mass media perpetuates the narratives that justify violence on the part of a dominant group: a black person was acting suspiciously and therefore police had a right to be afraid, a woman dressed provocatively and therefore a rapist had a right to their body, a trans woman didn't disclose her status and therefore a cisgender man had a right to react violently when the "discovery" was made that he'd had sex with a trans

woman. We as individuals accept these narratives as valid, telling each other "well, you shouldn't have been out at night alone dressed like that," or "if you don't want to get shot by police, don't commit a crime." These narratives don't allow for resistance, they demand submission and acceptance—anything less and you're basically complicit in your own assault.

If violence isn't the solution, then it needs to not be the problem, either—which means working to dismantle the systems of oppression that demand its use as a means of enforcing the status quo. We can't sustain a double standard that allows one group to inflict violence on another with no repercussions, and that's essentially what we have now. Rape culture, the prison industrial complex, the criminalization of poverty—these are all forms of institutionalized psychic violence that must be eliminated before we, as a society, can demand that violence as a resistance tactic be taken off the table. Until we're willing to confront the reality that the biggest perpetrator of violence is not oppressed people, but oppression itself, we will not know justice, and we will never know peace.



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