

# The Staton Essay Prize 2018



## **Is violence ever justified in the pursuit of empowerment?**

I consider violence to be defined as harm to people, objects and possessions. I define empowerment as the idea of becoming more free and having more control over one's will and life. Emancipation and increasing authority in this sense are good things in life, however, I opine that violence is never justified in the pursuit of empowerment. In this essay, I will argue for my opinion by considering a political point of view, put forward by writer Erica Chenoweth, and religious ideas, namely in Christianity. Despite my thesis, I admit that there are positives of using violence to pursue empowerment, notably to hold a key tool in overcoming an oppressive leader or government (as put forward by philosopher John Locke), and to gain attention in the media helping to strive towards achieving a just cause which promotes fairness and equality. Yet, although violence can be useful, I will argue that it is never justified when aiming for empowerment.

It can be argued that violence is never justified in the pursuit of empowerment because it contradicts the ideology of one's pursuit. This means that the peace that comes with achieving emancipation is undermined by the conflict of violent action. This point was argued by Erica Chenoweth in her article 'Violence Will Only Hurt the Trump Resistance'<sup>1</sup>. Violence may deter possible vigilantes from joining a cause as these people may prefer to seek resolution through non-violence. Violent protest is more likely to deter "at-risk communities",<sup>1</sup> like women or children, from participating. This decreases a movement's diversity, and, seeing as "diverse participation are better at eliciting

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<sup>1</sup> <https://newrepublic.com/article/140474/violence-will-hurt-trump-resistance>

sympathy”<sup>1</sup>, the movement’s chances of success decline. Furthermore, violent protest in the pursuit of empowerment can enable an oppressive group to actually gain public support. Chenoweth uses the example of Nazi Germany to illuminate this point when she comments that anti-facist violence enabled “facist groups...to appeal to nationalist impulses, soaring to power at the polls”<sup>1</sup>. Thus, people using force against an evil ideology only made things worse as they helped it to become an established political power. Violence does not necessarily work in achieving its aim.

On the other hand, supporters of these violent tactics argue that violence helps to protect non-violent activists - such as the “at-risk communities”. Plus, violent protest seems to satisfy the human desire for action as one does not feel then completely passive and powerless. On top of this, it is important to consider the issue of media coverage. It is the violent clashes with police, the images of cars on fire and the news of people being injured that brings a protest into the public eye via the media. Violent actions appear to be an effective way to evoke attention for one’s cause. Personally however, whilst I see that there are benefits of violent protest, I consider violence to never be justifiable in the pursuit of empowerment because it goes against the peaceful cause that one is fighting for - e.g. violent protest in the media is good in one way, but it also inevitably causes more of the consequences that Chenoweth sets out in her article.

On the other hand, John Locke considered that violence is justified in the pursuit of empowerment. In his work ‘Two Treatises of Government’, Locke offered the view that people should always have the rights and means to overthrow a government. Locke is saying that if a ruler becomes like a tyrant and takes away the rights of the people (e.g. property) and so diminishes their freedom - Locke’s political philosophy was heavily based upon his libertarian beliefs - then people are within their rights to demand and establish a new, fairer government<sup>2</sup>. In this way, Locke advocates the

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<sup>2</sup> Video: Youtube - The School Of Life: Political Theory - John Locke

use of violence to fight oppression and gain control and freedom in one's life. In other words, he is saying that violence is a useful and justifiable tool in the pursuit of empowerment.

One counter argument to Locke's idea was put forward by another philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes' point, written in 'Leviathan', was that too much of the violence that Locke advocated would lead not to eternal social freedom, but rather to a state of anarchy. Where everyone is free and equally powerful, we start to compete and human life becomes "nasty, brutish and short"<sup>3</sup>. In this way, emancipation and empowerment through violence only leads to pain and thus should never be justified. Hobbes' solution is that we must set up a government or democratic system to prevent this eventuality. Personally, I consider that setting up a successful democratic system as Hobbes suggests would eliminate the possibility of a tyranny, thus solving the problem that Locke tried to find an answer for. Also, I agree with Hobbes that reaching empowerment through violence will ultimately lead to a state of chaos. Thus, I opine that violence cannot be justified in the pursuit of empowerment as it only makes matters worse for all parties in the long run.

The writing of John Locke was heavily based on religion, namely Christianity. 'Locke's Law' for instance is that no one should harm another person's life, health, liberty or possessions<sup>4</sup>. This law is based on the fact that we must "preserve the rest of Mankind"<sup>5</sup> as we are all servants of God.

However, one argument that contradicts Locke's view that violence is justified in reaching empowerment comes from the Christian faith itself. Christianity argues that humans are special as we were created by God - just as Locke says - and that this means that God's creation cannot be harmed. This contradicts Locke's point as, even if it is to achieve a perfect level of empowerment, violence cannot be the answer because it involves harming sacred human life. In Matthew 7:12, for

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ttu.ee/public/m/mart-murdvee/EconPsy/6/Hobbes\\_Thomas\\_1660\\_The\\_Leviathan.pdf](https://www.ttu.ee/public/m/mart-murdvee/EconPsy/6/Hobbes_Thomas_1660_The_Leviathan.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> 'An Introduction to Political Philosophy' - Jonathan Wolff (Chapter 1, P17-23)

<sup>5</sup> 'Two Treatises of Government' (Second Treatise), s.6, p.271

example, it is written “do to others what you would have them do to you”<sup>6</sup>. This is the ‘Golden Rule’ of Christianity and suggests that harm is the ultimate evil that we can cause somebody, as it is the worst thing that we can think of happening to ourselves. From this, Natural Law<sup>7</sup>, a term coined by St Thomas Aquinas, has become a pillar of Christianity as it argues that seeing as everything was created by God, it has been perfectly designed and ordered. Anything that goes against this design (e.g. the death of humans) is morally wrong. Therefore, violence, because it causes harm to God’s creation, is morally wrong in all cases and is therefore totally unjustifiable even in the pursuit of empowerment.

However, could the problems of Christian teachings be avoided if a group searching for empowerment damages only property and not other humans? The Suffragettes were one such movement. This group of women were activists in the early 20th Century who campaigned for women to gain the right to vote in public elections. These women did not hurt human life and so did not go against Natural Law, instead they rose to prominence by damaging famous pieces of art and historic and important property. For instance, “in 1913, a suffragette attacked the glass cabinets in the Jewel House of the Tower of London”<sup>8</sup>. This damage promoted the group’s status and message eventually leading to success in their overall aim. Contrary to this argument, I define ‘violence’ to include the harm to people’s possessions, thus, I consider the suffragettes to still be an immoral movement as they used violence. Plus, God’s creation’s (man’s) objects have been damaged which could be argued to damage the natural order of God and so go against Natural Law. The Suffragettes used violence and thus went against the Christian teachings in a highly religious society. I opine that violence is never justified in the pursuit of empowerment because violence to objects and possessions causes mental harm to humans if not physical harm. From my point of

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+712&version=NIV>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/education/guides/z9c4srd/revision/3>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bl.uk/votes-for-women/articles/suffragettes-violence-and-militancy>

view, any and all violent acts have no place in our society, thus making violence certainly not justifiable under any circumstances.

In conclusion, I posit that violence is never justifiable in the pursuit of empowerment. I consider violence to be morally wrong from a religious and social point of view. I think that violence contradicts the message of peace that comes with empowerment. On the contrary, I do recognise the undeniable fact that violence in protest does gain media coverage. This coverage naturally will aid such a cause to reach its goal and aim and complete its pursuit of empowerment.

Philosophically, however, I agree with Hobbes in the view that man is at risk of being consumed by power. Thus, the overuse of violence when there are other methods of action available (e.g. peaceful protest), will only produce negative consequences (e.g. the state of anarchy Thomas Hobbes describes).

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