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On Gentle Violence

Maurits Fennis

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In anarchist circles, we often hear about the subject of violence in its direct forms, such as the violence in state repression, violence enacted by the police, violence perpetrated by individuals with a different ideological alignment. We also hear about violence originating from within our own circles, such as violence during protests and uprisings, defensive violence against aggressors, the destruction of property and looting, etc.

In short, when we discuss violence, we talk about it as physical violence, which we either endure or initiate.

Discussing violence within this context automatically introduce moral conundrums, such as whether the people who assume roles that enforce state domination, such as the police, should be treated humanely or not. Whether properties such as small, local stores should be damaged during a protest or not. In other words, if physical violence, and the intention to harm is directed at us, should we counter this aggression with aggression of our own? And if we do, what are the limits to this violence? Although these are important questions to address and violence in the face of oppression should not be condemned, the discussions that follow

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do lead us away from discovering what else could be considered violent and what its effects might be.

To give an example, if we as anarchists reject the legitimacy of the state, this is a form of violence towards the idea of the state. If I were to be asked to describe the nature and characteristics of the state, in my attempt I would roughly describe the state as something fictitious; a house of cards held together by rituals, ceremonies and bureaucratic duct-tape. To me, the state has no legitimacy and so removing the legitimacy from the idea requires little cognitive effort. I do not have to suddenly change my perspectives on where I live, the broader environment and my social and professional relationships. In other words, I don't have to remove the scaffolding of my life because it is built on top of a different foundation; on anarchy.

Now, if we tried to convince someone else of our convictions, when we try to explain our perspective and this person considers the existence of the state as something unquestionable, immutable and permanent, we are committing violence to that idea. In order for this person to consider other methods of social organization, they first need to abandon the concept of the state.

To abandon what we know can be an alienating experience, and can cause a visceral response; we truly believe that what we think we know is real and to abandon it is to rip out a part of ourselves, leading to responses that are often involuntary. We might feel offended, violated or disgusted at the alternative that is presented before us. Our response to such alienation can result in anger and outrage.

Moreover, to people who are inclined to be intellectually conservative, any new idea is not only confusing, but a real existential danger to the status quo. If a person sets out to take care of and maintain something their ancestors have painstakingly built and slowly grows to be fond of it, considers it to be important heritage and develops an affinity with it, the worst thing that could happen to them is its very destruction. To them, there are no other real op-

tions and if there are, they should appear to be as significant and grand as what they are asked to abandon.

The absolute nature of the state comes from its self-imposed historical significance and its entanglement within our lives. Although it might be our intention to liberate others from it, we will have to provide them with something to conserve first. To simply propose something new is *violent*; to guide someone to something new that needs stewardship and care is *gentle violence*.