People Are Violent When Oppressed but Peaceful When Free

The Slow Burning Fuse

1/12/25

The dominant story told by states, police departments, and those who own the world's wealth insists that human beings are naturally violent and must therefore be controlled. Strip away law, hierarchy, and property, they say, and people would descend into chaos. Without the soft glow of parliamentary authority and the hard edge of police batons, society would tear itself apart. This claim is so endlessly repeated that many take it as truth. Yet when we pay attention to how people actually behave, across history, in moments of crisis, in experiments in autonomy, and in everyday life we see the opposite. People are violent when they are oppressed, denied control over their lives, forced into artificial scarcity, and ground down by systems of domination. They are peaceful when they are free, meaning when they have autonomy, material security, mutual relationships, and the ability to shape their own communities.

Violence does not erupt in a social vacuum. It emerges from the conditions created by hierarchical systems. Capitalism, in particular, produces violence by manufacturing scarcity in a world capable of abundance. We can grow enough food, build enough homes, and generate enough resources for everyone to live without fear, yet the profit system requires deprivation. People who might otherwise cooperate are forced into competition for jobs, shelter, healthcare, and even basic survival. Violence under these conditions is not evidence of human savagery but the predictable result of a system that makes survival a fight. The working class clash with one another for opportunities that should exist for all. Communities disintegrate under pressures imposed from above. The state responds not by addressing the deprivation it created but by policing the people who suffer from it.

Domination, whether in the form of a boss, a landlord, a government minister, or a police officer, breeds resentment and conflict. Every hierarchical relationship carries an implicit threat of force. The landlord can evict, the boss can fire, the police can arrest, and the state can imprison. That threat shapes human behaviour, even if force is not immediately used. People comply because they fear punishment, not because they consent. Living under constant coercion suffocates the human need for autonomy. When that need is thwarted, frustration builds. People lash out, often at those closest to them, because they cannot strike at the structures that control them. Violence emerges within families, neighbourhoods, and communities not because people are ir-

rational but because oppression traps them in situations where choices are limited and dignity is denied.

The violence of the oppressed is always matched, and vastly exceeded, by the violence of the state. The state's institutions exist to enforce hierarchy – police maintain property relations; courts criminalise those who take what they need; prisons isolate and brutalise; militaries wage wars to protect geopolitical and economic interests. Every strike broken, every eviction executed, every protest kettled, every poor person punished for trying to survive, reveals the state's true nature. It does not respond to violence; it creates the conditions for it, then punishes those forced into conflict.

Oppression is not only a cause of violence – it is violence. The wage system compels work under threat of hunger and homelessness. Landlordism forces people to pay for access to land that should belong to everyone. Colonialism displaces entire peoples and destroys cultural and material worlds. Patriarchy governs through coercive expectations backed, explicitly or implicitly, by force. Racism structures life chances through constructed categories that disproportionately expose some to police, prisons, and deprivation. When these forms of structural violence define the social order, interpersonal violence flourishes. People raised in a world built on domination internalise domination as normal. They reproduce its dynamics because the social structures around them train them to do so.

If oppression nurtures violence, freedom nurtures peace. This is not a sentimental claim but an empirical one. When people have access to sufficient resources, when their basic needs are met, when they are part of communities grounded in mutual respect, violence drops. Crime declines not because police patrol streets but because desperation fades. This pattern appears across cultures and historical periods. Hunter-gatherer societies, the majority of human history, were largely egalitarian and organised through cooperation rather than coercion. Archaeological and anthropological evidence tells us that violence was far lower in societies without property, hierarchy, or the state. Co-operation, not competition, was the key to survival. Human beings did not evolve as isolated individuals clawing at each other; they evolved as members of communal groups dependent upon one another.

Even today, whenever disaster strikes, earthquakes, floods, fires, blackouts, people tend not to devolve into chaos but to spontaneously organise support networks. They share food, offer shelter, rescue strangers, and begin rebuilding without waiting for permission from authorities. Crime often decreases during disasters, despite widespread scarcity, because people shift into modes of solidarity rather than competition. Freedom in this sense does not mean isolation from others but the capacity to take responsibility collectively for shared wellbeing.

This is also evident when hierarchical structures temporarily retreat. In communities where policing is minimal and social supports are strong, interpersonal violence falls. When people feel ownership over their communal life, they protect and sustain it. Autonomy fosters responsibility. Participation in decision-making increases mutual respect. The experience of being heard and valued reduces resentment. Cooperative workplaces, where hierarchy is minimised or eliminated, show lower rates of conflict, higher satisfaction, and healthier relationships compared to authoritarian corporate structures. Freedom, properly understood, is not the absence of structure but the presence of collectively determined structures.

Anarchists argue that hierarchy itself is the engine of violence. Authority requires force. A power that cannot enforce its will through coercion ceases to be authority. This is true whether the authority is a government, a corporation, or an individual manager. Once a structure is built

around command and obedience, the threat of violence – sacking, eviction, arrest, punishment – becomes its functional core. Those wielding power grow accustomed to domination. They develop entitlement and a diminished sense of others' autonomy. Those subjected to power develop resentment, hopelessness, and anger. These psychological relationships, replicated millions of times across society, form the bedrock of interpersonal violence.

Capitalism exacerbates this by rewarding domination. Profit depends on extracting value from others. Landlordism depends on extracting rent. Political careers depend on managing and containing the public rather than empowering them. The system does not reward generosity; it rewards the logic of capital – competition, accumulation, and exploitation. Even those who wish to behave ethically find themselves compelled to act in ways that harm others simply to survive within a system built on competition. Violence becomes embedded not only in the actions of individuals but in the very structure of social life.

The state protects these violent arrangements. Its role is not to mediate conflict neutrally but to ensure that property relations remain intact. It exists to maintain a class hierarchy through coercion. It criminalises acts that threaten these hierarchies, such as strikes, occupations, refusal to pay rent, while sanctioning and normalising the much greater violence necessary to maintain wealth and power. Historically, when people organise alternatives the state intervenes to crush them precisely because they threaten the ideological and material foundations of hierarchy. The state cannot permit genuine freedom to exist alongside it because freedom makes the state unnecessary.

These dynamics are not just theoretical. History is full of examples where people organised their lives without states or hierarchical authority and did so peacefully and productively. During the Spanish Revolution of 1936, millions of workers and peasants collectivised land, factories, and entire towns. Police forces were dissolved in many areas, and communities organised their own safety and dispute resolution systems. Even amid the external violence of civil war, crime within anarchist territories dropped and daily life flowed through cooperation and shared responsibility. Work was voluntary, resources were distributed according to need, and community assemblies collectively shaped decisions. Peace was not imposed; it emerged through freedom.

Beyond explicitly anarchist experiments, everyday life provides countless illustrations of horizontal organisation. Worker cooperatives, volunteer organisations, community gardens, intentional communities, and countless informal mutual aid networks show that people are fully capable of organising themselves without coercive authority. Far from descending into chaos, these groups often operate more smoothly than hierarchical ones because members share responsibility and ownership.

At the heart of all these observations lies a simple but politically explosive truth: humans are not inherently violent. They become violent when placed in situations designed around domination, deprivation, and powerlessness. Conversely, they demonstrate remarkable capacities for care, solidarity, and cooperation when allowed to live in freedom. The myth of innate human violence serves a very specific function – it justifies the continued existence of the state, the police, the military, and the capitalist class. If people are naturally wild and dangerous, then we supposedly need governing institutions to restrain us. If we are inherently self-interested and competitive, then capitalism appears natural and inevitable. If inequality is rooted in our biology, then struggling against oppression seems pointless.

But this myth crumbles when confronted with evidence. People living in dignified conditions, able to shape their own social life, with access to all they need, rarely engage in violence. The

less hierarchy there is, the less coercion is required. The less deprivation exists, the less crime appears. Freedom does not create disorder; it creates the conditions for peace. Oppression creates the disorders that rulers attribute to human nature.

Anarcho-communism seeks to create a world in which the structural causes of violence are dismantled. This means abolishing the wage system so that labour is not extracted through economic threat; abolishing private property so that the resources of the world are shared according to need; dismantling the state so that coercive authority no longer structures social life; and building federated, communal forms of decision-making where people collectively shape the conditions of their own existence. Co-operation, not competition, becomes the norm. Responsibility, not obedience, becomes the way people relate to one another. Abundance replaces scarcity. Solidarity replaces domination.

Such a world would not eliminate all conflict, disagreement is part of any dynamic community, but it would eliminate the structural conditions that turn conflict into violence. Relationships would be guided not by fear or coercion but by reciprocity and collective wellbeing. Harm, when it occurs, would be addressed through restorative processes embedded in the community rather than punitive systems wielded by a distant authority. People would not need to resort to violence because their needs would not be thwarted by design.

Saying that people are violent when oppressed and peaceful when free, is not making a moral appeal but observing a material reality. Violence is the language of domination. Peace is the language of solidarity. Oppression creates violence because it forces people into conditions in which violence becomes a tool of survival or a manifestation of despair. Freedom fosters peace because it aligns human behaviour with our natural tendencies toward cooperation. The lesson is clear:… if we want a peaceful world, we must build a free one. Oppression cannot be reformed into benevolence; it must be abolished. Only then can people live in ways that reflect not the fear and brutality of hierarchy, but the creativity, empathy, and communal spirit that flourish when human beings are truly free.

The Slow Burning Fuse
People Are Violent When Oppressed but Peaceful When Free
1/12/25

https://theslowburningfuse.wordpress.com/2025/12/01/people-are-violent-when-oppressed-but-peaceful-when-free-4/