

Radical Ideals Aren't the Same as Utopian Visions

I come at questions about policy from a different angle than most. I don't believe in policy or politics at all. Specifically, I don't believe that some humans ("rulers") should get moral sanction to use violence against other people ("the ruled") to get what they want.

If that doesn't sound controversial to you, you either 1) agree with me or 2) aren't paying close enough attention to how politics works.

Force is the essence of all governments from top to bottom. Whether we're talking about Louis XIV funding the palace of Versailles, George III raising an army to crush a revolt, Vladimir Lenin redistributing confiscated land, or your local police officer enforcing a drug law/tax law/business law (or else...), you're talking about people who rely on violence or the threat of violence to get compliance for their plans. They ultimately do not ask or require your consent. Their authority ultimately rests on the implied threat that they will beat you up if you don't do what they say.

It's a long story, but somehow we came to believe that this was a normal state of affairs.

I don't believe in violence. If I have one ethical ideal for how human beings should relate to each other ("politics"), it's that – non-violence. There's a lot more to say about ethical societies and ethical human behavior, but when it comes to politics, I'm really not much more complicated than that. My views are actually pretty mundane.

But my views are also pretty radical, because a consistent commitment to non-violence means I don't think "governments" as we know them should exist. **Governments are easily the most organized and pervasive violence-users on the planet.**

Radical ideals aren't "utopian"

Ideals like mine often get confused with utopianism. We've all been there. We've all heard the refrains:

- **"The world has always been like that."**
- **"Human beings are violent by nature"**
- **"Human beings always create violent systems/governments, though!"**
- **"But that's utopian!"**

These critiques miss the point entirely.

I'm not against violence because I believe that the world was once perfect or peaceful or whatever. If I didn't recognize that the world has a violence problem, I

wouldn't make getting rid of violence a main focus.

Human history is bloody beyond belief, and we only get better at devising new ways to use violence to kill and manipulate each other. Those stakes and our harsh reality only make a non-violent ideal more important to hold.

I'm not against violence because I believe that the humans are inherently good or bad, peaceful or violent. I tend not to think that humans are either. But it really doesn't matter much (for this question at least) what humans are. It matters what the action in question is.

Whether humans are prone to violence or not doesn't say much about whether violence is good for human flourishing. If it's not, why should I not oppose violence regardless of our tendency to use it? And if humans are indeed corrupt **by nature**, how much more should I want to limit their access to violence and violent tools like government?

I'm not against violence because I believe I could somehow create a society without violence. Human beings will always be able to turn to violence (and therefore to governments) to get what they want (as far as I can tell). But if violence still gets in the way of human flourishing, I'm going to fight to stop and reduce it. I'm going to fight to stop it even when it comes in the form of government policy.

None of my opposition to violence is contingent on me getting a fairy-tale wish fulfillment of a society free of violence.

There are plenty of things we choose to consistently oppose on ethical grounds: murder, rape, theft, etc. All of us realize that these crimes will never go away completely. But none of us makes an ethical exception for these acts. None of us is slow to condemn these acts.

So my question is this: **why should we not condemn violence even if we can't get rid of it? Why should we not then condemn violent governments even if we can't get rid of them?**

I bloody hate utopianism

The accusation of utopianism misunderstands both utopianism and nonviolence.

The actual utopians we've seen in history are social planners. They have a vision for a world they will build, usually from the top down. The communists and the Nazis were by-the-book utopians, as have been the social organizers and religious leaders of hundreds of social experiments and colonies. The really earnest utopians love to use violence (or the threat of violence) to get the magical new world order they want.

These utopians are not likable guys. They make life hell for everyone.

A political ideal like “don’t do violence” is perhaps the most anti-utopian one you can find.

“Don’t do violence” is not a vision for what a society **should be**. It’s not a plan for how millions of people should make their billions of daily decisions. It’s only a prohibition on one way – the destructive way – to relate to other people. It’s a humble way of living with other humans, and it’s effectively a prohibition on utopianism.

Realistic optimism

I hope I have a pretty sober view of the world through history. The world is full of darkness and violence. It’s also full of peace and creativity.

I have a pretty sober view of human nature. It doesn’t really change. But it also has a broad range.

And I think I have a pretty good idea of violence and political violence. It won’t go away, not easily. We’ll probably always have authoritarian systems (governments, gangs, warlords, what have you) in some form. **But just because something won’t go away doesn’t mean we don’t fight it.**

When I ask people to join me in condemning politics, I’m asking them to do the same thing.

I have no desire to plan a society or create a new human being from scratch. **I see no utopia ahead, only a long, slow chain of ethical decisions I have to make.** Individual people choose in every moment of their political lives whether they will use violence, participate in violence, or cheer on the “popular” violence done by someone in a government promising them safety/wealth/etc.

As for me, I won’t sanction it. Maybe you’ll decide that you won’t either. And hell, if enough of us start doing things differently, we might just make the world better. I am a hopeful guy. I do think we can live in a world with 95% less violence. **But regardless, we win any time we stop violence from happening.**

But whether we succeed or not (in our lifetimes or a dozen generations from now), we still have to make a choice for ourselves. I **choose non-violence, and I guess that means I’m a radical. But I sure as hell am not a utopian.**