



April 2022

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Recommended Citation

Brostoff, David (2022) "The Tale of Two Revolutionaries: Jefferson, Marx, and the Proper Use of Political Violence," *Compass: An Undergraduate Journal of American Political Ideas*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.jsu.edu/compass/vol5/iss2/2>

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Title: The Tale of Two Revolutionaries: Jefferson, Marx, and the Proper Use of Political Violence

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Abstract: While Americans generally condemn the use of political violence, the topic has been put into the spotlight in recent years. What can Thomas Jefferson and Karl Marx's juxtaposing ideas teach us about the proper use of political violence?

The very foundation of the United States is rooted in political violence. Beginning in 1776, American colonists took up arms against the British government and proclaimed the birth of a new nation. Today we venerate the American Revolution and label the rebels—such as Thomas Jefferson—as patriotic heroes. Political violence is therefore embedded in our nation’s history; nevertheless, Americans generally hold a definitive position against the use of violence in politics; they tend to believe that change must be pursued through non-violent means. Eschewing violence, Americans have peacefully protested, they have lobbied for legislation, and they have engaged in civil discourse to bring reform. Perhaps the common opinion is correct; but perhaps, as the American Revolution seems to indicate, violence sometimes *is* the answer.

Debates over the proper use of political violence have existed long before our time, and Jefferson’s views have been opposed by many other thinkers. In the introduction to his 1843 essay entitled “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” Karl Marx laid out an alternative vision of legitimate political violence. Arguing that wealthy classes oppressed the lower classes, Marx called for a violent revolution to overthrow the capitalist system. Today, Marx remains a polarizing figure in the United States. For many Americans, his very name evokes profoundly negative emotions; they consider his ideas violent and extreme. Yet one must question why we venerate Jefferson and the Founders’ violent deeds while simultaneously rejecting Marx’s bloody call to action. What might juxtaposing the ideas of Jefferson and Marx teach us about the proper use of political violence?

Writing one of the most famous documents in American history, Thomas Jefferson revealed his truest thoughts on political violence. To cultivate a foundation for his argument, in the second paragraph of the Declaration, he penned:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed (Jefferson 1776, 239).

Beginning with this assertion, Jefferson introduced the concept of the social contract. Individuals, he claimed, are born with God-given rights—namely “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Although all men may be born with them, Jefferson recognized that these rights were still vulnerable. So, in order to preserve them, men formed governments. Therefore, a government’s sole purpose is to protect individuals’ natural rights by enacting and enforcing laws that safeguard them.

However, one must question what should be done if a government fails to adequately protect individuals’ natural rights or tyrannically infringes on them. Jefferson responded in the Declaration of Independence by introducing his belief in a right to revolution:

That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness (ibid.).

If men construct a government to preserve their natural rights, but that government then fails to adequately protect them, the people have the right to abolish and replace the government. To effectively revolt against a government, however, the people may need to employ political violence, as happened during the American Revolution. Believing that the British government violated their natural rights, American colonists took up arms and launched a bloody revolution to depose British tyranny. Thus, through the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson legitimized revolutionary warfare—he legitimized political violence—in situations in which governments fail to protect individuals' rights.

However, it is essential to note that Jefferson's justification for political violence has one glaring flaw, and that is "the pursuit of Happiness." The term is ambiguous and vague, making it hard to discern whether or not violence is legitimate. Many governments have enacted laws that ban the use of drugs, cutting off a substance user from their potential pursuit of happiness; governments try to prevent underage drinking, obstructing a young adult's potential pursuit of happiness; and during pandemics, governments have prevented individuals from attending large gatherings, blocking a party's potential pursuit of happiness. Could someone use Jefferson's argument to claim that these laws are reason enough to revolt? Individuals are often unhappy with their governments, but is that a legitimate reason to launch a bloody revolution? Ultimately, people are not likely to revolt against their governments unless the offense is severe enough. Launching a revolution creates instability and requires a tremendous amount of dedication. Moreover, it requires the acknowledgment that one can die for their cause. No rational citizen would risk their own life over a trivial benefit, revealing that "the pursuit of Happiness" would not likely present too grand of a problem.

Now we must turn our attention towards Karl Marx and his interpretation of political violence. Writing during the industrial revolution, Marx recognized capitalism's deleterious effects on society as a whole. Capitalism, he argued, forced individuals into a rigid class system that allowed owners of capital to increase their wealth while the working class was actively oppressed and robbed of their identity. On the basis of this critique of the current economic system, he advocated for revolution. Whereas Jefferson's conception of revolution simply sought to replace those in power, Marx called for a complete transformation of society:

But war upon the state of affairs in Germany! By all means! This state of affairs is *beneath the level of history, beneath all criticism*; nevertheless, it remains an object of criticism just as the criminal who is beneath humanity remains an object of the *executioner*. In its struggle against this state of affairs criticism is not a passion of the head, but the head of passion. It is not a lancet but a weapon. Its object is an *enemy* which it aims not to refute but to destroy (Marx 1844, 55).

Marx recognized that Germany was in shambles: its economic structure was failing the German people, so a revolution was needed. In this situation, Jefferson would have demanded a personnel change; he would have called for a revolution to topple the existing government and replace it with new leaders. Marx, however, saw a philosophical problem rather than a leadership problem. Criticism alone, he proclaimed, would not alleviate the problem. Instead, he declared that the current governing philosophy was an "enemy" that needed to be violently "destroyed."

The capitalist economic system, however, was widely accepted across European societies. In fact, Marx notes, the public was so deeply indoctrinated into venerating the capitalist system that even the exploited workers came to believe that their oppression was legitimate: “they [were] forced to recognize and acknowledge this fact of being dominated, governed and possessed, as a concession from heaven” (ibid., 56). A revolutionary, then, must wonder how an economic system can be overthrown if it is so internalized in the public consciousness.

Marx responded to this predicament by arguing that to depose the capitalist order, revolutionaries need to eradicate its supporters—they need to kill those who have been indoctrinated. He did not care who was killed because “in such a fight it is of no interest to know whether the adversary is of the same rank, is noble or *interesting*—all that matters is to *strike* him” (ibid.). To Marx, one’s class was irrelevant in this regard; whether an individual was a member of the *bourgeoisie* or the *proletariat*, they were a threat to the revolution so long as they harbored capitalist sentiments. He saw capitalist indoctrination as akin to cancer: for society to become truly free and equal, the cancerous cells must be removed, the indoctrinated people, purged.

Despite Marx’s reasoning, his argument is inherently flawed. The poverty of Marx’s philosophy is two-fold: on a practical level, it requires the perpetual use of violence, and on a moral level, it treats human life as expendable. Beginning with the first claim, Marx’s justification for political violence would require endless violence. To restate his argument, revolutionaries must use violence towards anyone—regardless of their class—who harbors capitalist sentiments; no society can be truly free and equal until dissenting opinions are eliminated. However, no population in human history has ever succeeded in reaching homogeneity of thought. In republics and totalitarian regimes alike, diversity of opinion has existed. In the United States, Americans have fundamentally disagreed on a wide range of issues, ranging from economic policies to abortion rights. Even in the communist Soviet Union—a state that attempted to enforce unitary opinion—dissenting beliefs persisted: many Soviet citizens believed in the capitalist system. In any society, dissenting opinions will always exist. Marx’s conception of the revolution, therefore, requires endless violence. In Marx’s propertyless society, individuals would seek to transcend the barriers put into place because human nature is inherently self-interested and will always have men searching for ways to accumulate more wealth and possess more property. Even in a classless society, dissidents would still exist. To preserve the integrity of the revolution, therefore, the violence *must* continue. Unending violence would, ultimately, damage a society’s ability to maintain internal stability. Thus, at a practical level, Marx’s justification for political violence is flawed, for it would require the perpetual use of force.

Yet Marx’s ideas were not only erroneous practically but also morally. Jefferson advocated for the use of revolutionary violence towards an oppressive government. If a government is destructive of natural rights, the people have the right to take up arms. Marx, however, did not make the same connection. Instead, he held that political violence was required to overthrow the capitalist system. Although oppressive political elites determine society’s economic structure, Marx did not limit the scope of violence only towards them. Instead, he held that “the nation must be taught to be terrified of itself, in order to give it *courage*” (ibid.). Ultimately, Marx believed that the purpose of violence was to terrify an entire population in order to stimulate social transformation. At heart, Marx thought that if violence was targeted at the population at large, the people may—out of fear—reject the current philosophical assumptions (capitalism)

and adopt a new system (communism). In his willingness to sacrifice innocent lives, Marx revealed his moral corruption at the level of his most deeply held convictions about humanity: human life has no inherent worth and is, therefore, expendable for political change. Unlike Jefferson, Marx did not see life as a natural right. Instead, Marx saw the world as *his* chess game, and all of humankind was *his* pawns; they were pieces that he could sacrifice for a desired political outcome. Marx's willingness to sacrifice *innocent* human life for political gain, therefore, demonstrates the moral failure of his justification for political violence.

Thus far, we have examined both Jefferson's and Marx's conception of proper political violence. Beginning with Jefferson, we observed his declaration that if a government infringed on its citizens' natural rights, the people had a right to a revolution. Ultimately, Jefferson believed that all violence should be directed at the government, with the intent of establishing new leadership. Marx, however, believed that changing the political leader would not fix the underlying social problems. Instead, he advocated for the use of violence to cultivate a foundation for transformational change within society. I questioned Marx's conception of political violence on the basis of its practical and moral flaws, but I have yet to answer my initial question: what can Jefferson and Marx's juxtaposing ideas teach us about the proper use of political violence?

Marx was partially correct at a foundational level: *real* change does not result solely from a change of personnel but also from philosophical changes. Jefferson's interpretation can be used to supplement Marx's deficiencies. To begin, a revolution should not occur unless the *status quo* is destructive of life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness. But once that burden has been met, there is justification for political violence. Just as Jefferson argued, the revolution should be aimed at the oppressor—it should be aimed at the government rather than the population. Marx failed to understand the power of individual leaders: philosophical change within society *can*, in fact, occur alongside a personnel change. In deposing British authority and electing George Washington as President, the Americans succeeded in transforming their society from the colonial appendage of a monarchy to an enlightened republic. To this end, the proper use of political violence uses Jefferson's criteria to cultivate philosophical change.

While America's foundation is rooted in violence, it has managed nearly two and a half centuries with the Civil War being the only violent revolution after its initial establishment. Rather than having the looming threat of political violence, most of our revolutions have been peaceful: they occur at the ballot box and culminate in stable transitions of power. Perhaps violence may sometimes work—but it is better to preserve our stable and peaceful system.

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