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(Dis)entangling (non)violence in resistance: four areas of contestation

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ABSTRACT
Both ‘violence’ and ‘nonviolence’ are contested terms. Naming ‘violence’ or ‘nonviolence’ is often central to what resistance struggles are about. Such contestations are therefore inevitably inherently political and normative, never just scientific or theoretical. Four areas of contestation are discussed: the variety of phenomena labelled ‘violence’; the importance of public perceptions for ‘nonviolent’ resistance; the extent to which even ‘nonviolent’ struggles seek to cause discomfort that can be received as ‘violent’; and the way ‘nonviolence’ can become entangled in the (re)production of ‘violence’. Seeking to settle definitions is therefore a Sisyphean task, even though these labels are important to resistance.

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1. Introduction

Plenty of research has been concerned with the comparative effectiveness of ‘violence’ and ‘nonviolence’ in resistance. Rarer, however, are extended critical discussions of what is meant by ‘violence’ in this context and why that very naming is so contested. Scholars typically note definitional difficulties, but they then typically, and understandably, propose a tentative definition to move forward with the given study.

Part of the challenge is that, as is quickly evident when consulting political theory on the topic, ‘violence’ is a contested term. It is usually something that commentators *denounce*. For political actors, it is generally what the *other* side – the opponents, the ‘system’, etc – is doing. Both sides might accuse the other of ‘violence’, but those whose own actions get described as ‘violence’ will typically contest that label and advance alternative terms: *force*, *coercion*, *resistance*, *maintaining law and order*, etc, to describe what they might otherwise concede to indeed be doing. Naming as ‘violence’ or ‘not’ is thus often part of what the very struggle is about.

Our aim with this article is to reflect more broadly on what makes definitions of ‘violence’ and ‘nonviolence’ so difficult to settle when studying and practicing resistance; why the terms are so entangled and contested; and why disentangling them once and for all for scientific purposes is an unrealistic task – both because the way their boundaries are contested is inevitably context-dependent, and because these

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contestations make their very definition not just a scientific matter, but a *political* one. In other words, we aim to demonstrate the extent to which what is named as 'violence' is often precisely at the core of what resistance, not least 'nonviolent' resistance, is about.

We do this by consulting a range of literatures to identify four main areas of contestation and reflect on why they make the very labelling as 'violent' or 'nonviolent' normatively charged. These four areas are: the type of violence being discussed; the role of public perceptions; the extent to which nonviolence seeks to cause discomfort; and the extent to which nonviolence can become entangled in (re)producing violence, both within resistance and beyond. Each is examined in turn in the main body of the article below, after a shorter preceding section (given this Special Issue) that scans the resistance studies scholarship to locate the particular relevance of our contribution for that field – even though we also demonstrate the significance of our discussion both for multiple other scholarly fields and for resistance struggles on the ground. In identifying and reflecting on these challenges, our contribution is primarily conceptual, not empirical. We do evoke examples to illustrate conceptual issues, but our primary aim is to explore why, where, and how what is called 'violence' and 'nonviolence' in resistance is a source of debate and contestation.

This article therefore makes three original and interrelated contributions to the scholarship as well as to the lively political debates that flare up wherever the legitimacy of resistance is contested. Firstly, it reviews, takes stock of, and brings into dialogue scholarship on violence and nonviolence from different fields, including political theory, resistance studies, and peace studies, as well as critical literatures from (for example) feminism and postcolonial studies. Secondly, it contributes to those several fields of study by identifying and mapping the main areas of debate when it comes to violence and nonviolence in resistance. For resistance studies specifically, this helps bring into focus a theoretical discussion that scholars often overlook, given that the scholarship to date has tended to reflect more on acts of resistance themselves (their categorisations, dimensions, contexts, etc), often without attending to the contestations of these very terms in the particular contexts under scrutiny. But the discussion also contributes to debates about violence and nonviolence, about their mutual entanglement and contested legitimacies, across the multiple other fields we bring into this conversation. And thirdly, it demonstrates why seeking to settle definitions is both inevitably political but also possibly Sisyphean, because no single definition is likely to decisively muster universal endorsement, even though what earns the label remains very important to actual resistance movements.

2. 'Violence' and 'nonviolence' in resistance scholarship

The field of political theory has produced many rich discussions about what counts as – or should be named as – 'violence', what political violence might be legitimate, and, more recently, the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying contending positions (e.g. Bufacchi 2005, Finlay 2006, Thaler 2018, Frazer and Hutchings 2020b, Kennel 2023, McCreery 2023). Because the contributions in that scholarship often seek to identify or debate different *types* of violence, we discuss these further at the start of the next section rather than here.

With respect to *non*violence, a growing literature has sought to report and reflect on the examples of nonviolent resistance struggles that have proliferated in the past century (Ackerman and DuVall 2000, Sharp 2005, GNAD 2023), as well as to articulate and explore 'nonviolence' more theoretically (Sharp 1973, Burrowes 1996, Schock 2003, Martin 2008, Atack 2012, Holmes and Gan 2012, May 2015, Nepstad 2015, Vinthagen 2015). Some of that scholarship has overlapped with work on pacifism, although some advocates of nonviolence have been at pains to dissociate 'nonviolence' from 'pacifism' partly because of the connotations of absolutist naivety and moralising often – if inaccurately or over simplistically – associated with the latter (Lakey 2001, Schock 2003, Martin 2008, Howes 2013, Christoyannopoulos 2023).

Scholars, especially since Gene Sharp's pioneering work (Sharp 1973), frequently distinguish 'ethical' or 'principled' nonviolence on the one hand, where violence is typically rejected and nonviolence preferred on deontological or *ethical* grounds, and 'pragmatic' or 'strategic' nonviolence on the other, where nonviolence is favoured over violence because it is believed to be a more *effective* method of resistance (Naess 1958, Ackerman and Kruegler 1994, Burrowes 1996, Weber 2001, 2003, Schock 2003, Martin 2008). Yet this dichotomous understanding of nonviolence has also been contested, with (for instance) Baldoli (2019) and López Martínez (2015) arguing that nonviolence encompasses co-constitutive, context-dependent, and complementary ethical-moral values and strategic techniques because, for example, *ethical* concerns inform nonviolent *strategies*, and (conversely) *pragmatic* strategies impact individual and collective *values*. Either way, nonviolence involves both principled and pragmatic dimensions.

Studies of resistance are aplenty. Some focus on *nonviolent* cases (Sørensen and Wiksell 2019, Wiksell 2020, Edwards 2021, Baaz *et al.* 2022, Ellefsen and Sandberg 2022, Bröckerhoff *et al.* 2024, Robertson 2024, ElAmoor 2025, El Meadawy 2025), others on *violent* resistance (Aliyev 2020, Betz 2020, Osorio *et al.* 2021, Schubiger 2021, Jentzsch 2022, Fakhoury 2023, Navarrete-Cruz 2024, Krause *et al.* 2025). More rarely, some focus on both forms, with some of these studies treating violent and nonviolent resistance as opposites (Both *et al.* 2022, Jentzsch and Masullo 2022) and others questioning the violence/nonviolence dichotomy (Gade 2020, Heidemann Simonsen 2020, Santos 2025). Hardly ever, however, do any studies discuss in detail the contestation of those key terms in the examined context, or the lessons we can draw beyond the case study in question.

Until recently, debates about the relative effectiveness of violence compared to nonviolence could be frustrating, with advocates of either trading examples of their preferred method appearing more effective and of the disliked method appearing ineffective. Chenoweth and Stephan's (2011) major contribution marked a step change in that debate by examining 323 cases of violent and nonviolent resistance from 1900 to 2006, and finding nonviolence to be twice more effective as well as more likely to beget societies more respectful of democratic principles and human rights. That study, in turn, has generated an explosion of further work building on it (Celestino and Skrede Gleditsch 2013, Chenoweth and Gallagher Cunningham 2013, Howes 2013, Chenoweth and Schock 2015, Nepstad 2015, Chenoweth *et al.* 2018) and sometimes disputing or nuancing some of its findings. Particularly robust, yet inconclusive so far, have been the rigorous debates about the potentially considerable effectiveness of 'unarmed collective violence' (Kadivar

and Ketchley 2018, Anisin 2020, Case 2022, Chenoweth 2023) and about whether a violent (or 'radical') 'flank' enhances or threatens the effectiveness of a nonviolent (or 'moderate') campaign (Chenoweth and Schock 2015, Tompkins 2015, Nimtz 2016, Delmas 2018, Anisin 2020, Chenoweth 2023, Dasch *et al.* 2024, Barker 2025b).

These are important questions not just for the scholarship, but for resistance agents the world over, who consult this research to inform their own strategic decisions and who vigorously debate the role 'violence' or 'nonviolence' ought to have in their own campaigns and/or individual actions. Anarchists and revolutionary Marxists, for instance, have a long history of such debates (Churchill 2007, Gelderloos 2013, 2018, Collectif Désobéissances libertaires 2019, Case 2022, Christoyannopoulos 2024, Di Nucci 2025, Barker 2025b). The climate movement has recently engaged in such debates, too (Malm 2021, Anfinson 2022, Martin *et al.* 2024, Barker 2025a), as have antimilitarists (Rossdale 2019), for example. Quite obvious from any review of these disagreements is not only how normatively charged they are, but also how different interlocutors assign differing meanings to key terms like 'violence' and 'nonviolence' to begin with.

The challenge of navigating this landscape is also evident when consulting literature on how commentators position 'nonviolence' with respect to 'violence'. Some, for instance, treat nonviolence as the simple negation of violence, assuming that most people perceive them as opposites, and associating the latter with physical harm and the former with its absence (Govier 2008). Others, however, propose that violence and nonviolence exist in a contextually grounded continuum where the extremes are *idealised* states of 'pure' violence and 'pure' nonviolence (Nojeim 2004). Others still have argued that violence and nonviolence are entangled in the sense that there can be violence in nonviolence, and nonviolence in violence (Butler 2020, Heidemann Simonsen 2020, McCreery 2023). For instance, an action considered by resisters as 'nonviolent', such as cursing, talking back, or even perhaps some property damage, can be perceived by others as 'violent'. This is why in this article we sometimes refer to '(non)violence', to acknowledge their entanglement. We return to this when discussing the third area of contestation below.

Our aim is not to settle such disagreements about definitions or about strategies or effectiveness, but, building and reflecting on both scholarly and movement literatures, to illustrate and demonstrate why and where these debates can be so challenging, and to show why the very naming as 'violence' and 'nonviolence' is a central point of contention and an unavoidably political move. To do this, we mobilise the aforementioned literatures in political theory and resistance studies as well as scholarship in (among others) feminism and gender studies (Deming 1971, Rigby 1974, McAllister 1982, Frazer and Hutchings 2020a, Huzard and Woodford 2021, Fakhoury 2023, Gallo-Cruz 2024, Di Nucci 2025), postcolonial studies (Chabot and Vinthagen 2015; Cornell and Seely 2023; Fanon 2001; Quiroga 2023; Trivedi 2011), and pacifism and nonviolence studies (Schock 2003, Christoyannopoulos 2023). We do not claim to have exhaustively consulted every potentially relevant contribution, but we do hope to have captured the main areas of contestation of 'violence' and 'nonviolence' relevant to resistance agents and resistance studies.

3. Four areas of contestation

We identify four partly overlapping but distinct areas of contestation, whether by scholars or by a litany of political actors and observers, when it comes to naming and (dis)entangling violence and nonviolence in resistance.

3.1. Types of violence

In an oft-cited review article, Bufacchi outlines what he presents as 'two ways of thinking about violence: in terms of an act of force, or in terms of a violation' (2005, p. 193). The former is a narrower and more 'minimalist' (197) conception that echoes 'the normal or ordinary understanding of the term' as referring to 'interpersonal acts of force usually involving the infliction of physical injury' (195). However, as Bufacchi soon notes, the fact that an 'injury' is often perceived as 'intentional' or 'excessive' when it is labelled 'violence' means that the term 'violence' often easily becomes an 'evaluative' or 'normative' concept (Bufacchi 2005, p. 196). Hence the tempting slippage to a broader conception of 'violence' as 'violation', as this conveys the sense that something *illegitimate* is at play. Dissociating the 'violation' from the 'act of force' and vice versa, therefore, often proves difficult in practice. Put differently, broad and narrow definitions are already somewhat entangled.

Another difficulty with too narrow a conception is that 'it seems to be oblivious to the most pervasive and destructive form of violence: structural or institutional violence' (Bufacchi 2005, p. 198). Galtung (1969) famously named 'structural violence' the violence inscribed into the hierarchical social structures that – through social, political, and economic inequalities – impede the fulfilment of one's potential and basic human needs, and 'cultural violence' what happens when a particular cultural value or norm is used to legitimise other forms of violence (Galtung 1990). 'Violence', here, becomes a term that enables the denunciation of structural and institutional practices that cause harm – and such structural or cultural violence is often at the core of what resistance seeks to undermine. But as Bufacchi notes (citing Keane 1996, p. 66), it does make for a definition so broad that it includes '"misery", "alienation" and "repression".' One danger with such broad definitions is that they become removed from what people generally assume as violence, and the significance they attribute to physical violence (Govier 2008).

In any case, whether explicit or implicit, commentators usually convey normative judgements when naming a particular phenomenon as 'violence'. The way in which political theorists approach 'violence' illustrates this, just as it illustrates again, in the process, how varied what is named as 'violence' can be. For instance, Arendt (1969) distinguished between violence and power in order to differentiate between brute force and potentially terror and totalitarianism on the one hand (violence), and a politics derived through collective popular participation on the other (power). By contrast, for Butler (2020), violence and power are interconnected, especially because discursive power relations involving *who* counts as legitimate or illegitimate are embedded in naming something as violence, reifying a particular normative worldview and imaginary of violence. For Foucault (1991), violence is a technique of governmentality, i.e. a means by which populations are productively and subtly regulated. Bourdieu and Nice (1984,

1991, 1993) speak of 'symbolic violence' to name the violence that occurs when the specific cultural and linguistic practices of a dominant group are internalised and accepted as legitimate, normal, and even 'universal' by the rest.

What becomes evident when consulting different political theorists is not only the variety of phenomena labelled 'violence', but also how discussions of the term are entangled with discussions of political power, hierarchies, and resistance (Harris 1974, Lilja and Vinthagen 2014, McCreery 2023). From Sorel and Marx to Fanon, Machiavelli, de Beauvoir, and many others, a wide range of views exist among political thinkers concerning both the nature and legitimacy of statist violence, and the legitimacy or otherwise of resorting to violence for emancipatory projects (Finlay 2006, Thaler 2018, Frazer and Hutchings 2020b). Some advocate some degree of violence for political ends, but most also observe that existing political practices are violent already. Either way, there is no agreement among leading political theorists on the definition of violence, and the very *naming* of violence is generally precisely at the core of what is being contested.

Beyond political theory, it is also the case that the word 'violence' has been qualified and applied to cover a widening variety of phenomena, from gender-based and sexual violence (Russo and Pirlott 2006) to psychological (Winstok and Sowan-Basheer 2015), epistemic (Teo 2010, Dotson 2011, Brunner 2021), domestic, economic, religious, bodily or material, slow, against living beings, against property, against memory, etc. The definitions of some of these types of violence can muster more scholarly consensus than others. But their sheer variety illustrates both how broadly the term 'violence' is used to describe social reality, *and* how it generally conveys a sense of violation and illegitimacy and thus an implicit denunciation of what is being thus named.

Kennel (2023) argues that what is typically overlooked in established understandings of violence are the ingrained ontological and epistemological premises and contexts that inform them. He notes that 'no concept of violence is without basic ontological and epistemological assumptions about how violence can be known and how it ought to be known' (Kennel 2023, p. 13). Therefore, each definition of violence reflects a particular ontology and epistemology of violence, in other words, a normative account of how the world, the subject's relation with the world, and the connection with violence are and should be known (Kennel 2023).[1] Moreover, when someone labels something as violent, they have typically identified a violation, a transgression of a normative boundary line in terms of moral values dividing what they perceive as acceptable from what they perceive as unacceptable. 'Violence' thus functions as a diagnostic concept to delineate the value-laden boundaries of those who proclaim or contest a particular understanding of violence (Kennel 2023).

Commentators therefore label a considerable variety of phenomena 'violence', and such naming is generally normatively charged, i.e. aiming to render more visible and/or denounce what has been so named. That each of these ways of using the term can be justified demonstrates its very contestability. But it also does mean that any preference for one way of defining the term over another implies a particular decision about where and how wide to fix the lens of what is to be the focus of criticism and analysis. Whenever someone names violence, therefore – whether that someone is a resistance agent, a public institution, or a more distant observer – their act is a *political* one, seeking to draw attention to some particular phenomenon, in a specific context, and usually with a specific political purpose too.

3.2. Public perceptions

Contestations about naming as 'violence' or 'nonviolence' matter not only among resistance agents and their opposition, but also because the perception of the wider public, itself characteristically heterogenous, can be critical for resistance struggles to succeed. Advocates of nonviolence have long argued that one of the mechanisms that enables nonviolence to become effective is by making the opposing side appear *more* violent and, having made that more visible, gaining growing public sympathy and sowing doubts among some of the agents of repression. In the nonviolence literature, this is referred to as 'moral' or 'political' 'jiu-jitsu' or the 'backfire effect' (Gregg 1960, Sharp 1973, Martin 2005). To implement government policies, even oppressive regimes ultimately rely on some degree of consent from those who are being governed as well as those administering government policies (Sharp 1973, Sørensen 2024). That consent is what nonviolent resistance seeks to erode by exposing the 'violence' of those they oppose. By remaining stubbornly nonviolent despite the violence they face and denounce, resistance agents can pull apart the pillars of support for the regime, whereas violent resistance tends to pull them closer together (Schock 2003, Martin 2008, Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, Howes 2013, Nepstad 2015).

Incidentally, this applies not just to 'pragmatic' nonviolence, but to 'ethical' approaches, too. Pragmatically nonviolent activists are motivated primarily by 'what works' and might approach strategic discussions about repertoires of resistance purely instrumentally, but ethically nonviolent activists can be just as interested in rejecting whatever they denounce as 'violence', even if primarily as a matter of principle. The pragmatic and the ethical are further entangled anyway in that, even if one resists nonviolently for purely pragmatic reasons, the backfire effect one might seek to engineer is supposed to work in part because it is the illegitimacy or immorality of the oppressing side that is expected to be thereby better exposed (Heidemann Simonsen 2020).

Resistance scholars have identified three ways through which individuals can (non) violently withdraw consent from powerholders (Baaz et al. 2022, 2023, Lilja 2022), each inciting different public reactions to such resistance. The first, 'avoidance resistance', happens when consent is quietly withdrawn by concealing the resister's identity or the resistance act itself to avoid repression. Examples include exile, feigned ignorance, or web piracy (Scott 1985, Lilja 2022, Baaz *et al*. 2023). The second, 'breaking resistance', involves the public and direct challenge of power structures by temporarily or potentially transgressing a power relation or publicly refusing to obey a powerholder. Examples include strikes, civil disobedience, self-immolation, and conscious objection (Baaz et al. 2022, 2023, Lilja 2022). The third, 'constructive resistance', consists of actions that, in addition to criticising established power structures, seek to build an alternative, more desired, and better-than-the-status-quo society (Sørensen 2016, Lilja 2021). Examples include artistic experimentalism, counter-memory practices, cooperatives, and parallel educational systems. Decisions about which type of resistance to pursue reflect a mix of ethical and pragmatic considerations and in turn impact public perceptions of the nonviolent character of resistance in different ways.

Whatever the preferred method, however, 'violence' is usually and unsurprisingly what the nonviolent activists are deliberately rejecting – whether it is the violence of the 'other side', or violent methods of resistance because these are not primed to generate the

backfire effect. Activists explicitly embracing the vocabulary of 'nonviolence' are usually intentionally signalling this rejection. But only rarely in such contexts do activists offer precise definitions of 'violence', even though they might loosely use the term 'violence' frequently to label what they reject and oppose.

What often complicates discussions even further is that the *same* tactic might be described as 'violent' by some, but 'nonviolent' by others. Sharp famously listed 198 methods of nonviolent resistance in 1973, to which many dozens have been added since (Joyce and Meier 2012, GNAD 2023) – especially within the category of 'breaking resistance' (Lilja 2022, Baaz *et al.* 2023). All these methods are examples that have come alive in particular contexts, and every new campaign has studied many past examples to seek inspiration and learn appropriate lessons from them. Some of the methods on Sharp's list, however, have been labelled as 'violence' by others, whether public authorities or other activists. Even actions such as talking back, graffiti, or humour can be perceived as 'nonviolent' by some, 'violent' by others. In short, the same tactic can be claimed by some as nonviolence but labelled by others as violence.

The recent controversies about sabotaging oil pipelines illustrated by the publication of Malm *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (Malm 2021) and ensuing discussions provide but one illustration of this (Martin *et al.* 2024, Barker 2025a). Malm explicitly rejects 'pacifism'. He positions sabotage as a tactic that is *beyond* the 'pacifist' register but that he pointedly encourages. But for some advocates of nonviolence, sabotage and other forms of property damage are still *within* the repertoire of nonviolent resistance. And yet sabotaging pipelines, especially if this involves 'blowing them up', is something many observers and indeed public authorities *are* likely to decry as 'violence'.

Or to take a different cause, Palestine solidarity activism has generated plenty of public controversies about the 'violence' or otherwise of different acts of resistance. For example, when members of the Palestine Action collective threw paint at aircraft at a Royal Air Force base in Oxfordshire, damaging UK military property, a wider public debate erupted about the classification of this act of dissent. While public authorities labelled and prosecuted the group as a terrorist organisation, thousands of observers contested this classification, arguing that the movement was nonviolent and protesting the genocide in Gaza and the UK government's complicity in Israel's war crimes. The UK government nonetheless insisted on the 'terrorism' label and went on to arrest thousands of protesters, many over 60 years old, who publicly supported Palestine Action (Amnesty International 2025, Browne *et al.* 2025). Elsewhere, the rap groups Kneecap and Bob Vylan calling to 'end the genocide' or even for 'death to the IDF' during concerts (combining 'breaking' and 'constructive resistance' in what some perceive as nonviolent calls for solidarity with Palestinians and condemnation of colonialism and war crimes) have also generated considerable backlash: several music festivals and enterprises condemned these artists and cancelled their performances; some European public authorities labelled them as vile and antisemitic; and the Hungarian government banned Kneecap from entering the country (Braun 2025). Even everyday resistance acts as simple as wearing a keffiyeh in public spaces has caused public controversy: in Germany, it is now illegal to wear one at some schools and university campuses because German authorities perceive that as violent and a threat to school peace (Nia 2023).

These labelling battles matter. How the wider and heterogenous general public perceives resistance in terms of (non)violence shapes the support or backlash that

activists receive (Thomas and Louis 2014, Simpson *et al.* 2018, Hsiao and Radnitz 2021, Orazani *et al.* 2021). When resistance is perceived as violent, public support tends to decrease, and backlash increases because the method is seen as less legitimate than a nonviolent one (Thomas and Louis 2014, Simpson *et al.* 2018, Feinberg *et al.* 2020; Orazani *et al.* 2021; Ünal *et al.* 2022). Also eliciting a reduction of support and a potential backlash is resistance that is perceived as threatening the everyday security of workers by interrupting their daily mobility and economic activity, as with nonviolent climate sit-ins in Portugal, for example (Da Silva and Santos Under review).

Notably, however, the public perception of violence and nonviolence is influenced not only by the characteristics of the resistance method, but also by the characteristics of resisters and the political objectives of resistance. In particular, resistance from racialised groups, immigrant communities, and women who contest patriarchal assumptions often receives less support from the public, which more readily perceives them as angry, violent, and less legitimate, thus reflecting the ongoing percolation of colonial and patriarchal legacies (Hsiao and Radnitz 2021, Valentino and Adam Nicholson 2021, Naunov 2025). By contrast, when large sections of the public identify and sympathise with the resisters' political aims and favour the demanded outcomes, support for resistance increases (Ünal *et al.* 2022, Dasch *et al.* 2024.

Broader contextual dimensions also shape wider public perceptions. During an armed conflict, for example, the normalisation of violence as the prime form of political participation and the predictable broader militarisation of society caused by this wider conflict tend to erode and delegitimise pacifist nonviolent resistance, while armed resistance is increasingly constructed as more legitimate and adequate against perceived aggressors (Iñiguez de Heredia 2017). An example is what has been happening in Ukraine among LGBTQ+ Ukrainian resistance agents (Santos 2025). A changed international context can therefore alter public perceptions of the legitimacy of different forms of resistance back in the domestic political sphere.

In short, activists are aware that public perceptions are crucial for the success of their resistance, and they recognise that what earns the label 'violent' and 'nonviolent' is critical. Precisely *what* and *who* is 'violent' is often therefore at the core of what resistance campaigns are appealing to the wider public to consider. 'Nonviolence' can thus be said to be discursively constructed: the term has come to signify various ways of being, acting, and thinking in a specific context, depending on what is labelled as 'violent', who participates in this labelling process and why, and who is excluded from this process, and this in turn shapes public understanding of resistance and how social structures respond to it (Butler 2020). The struggle over public perceptions is therefore a second reason why it is unlikely that universal definitions of 'violence' and 'nonviolence' can be reached, and why researchers need to be attentive to and respectful of the way in which not just resistance agents and the public, but also public authorities, deploy and contest the terms in each specific context.

3.3. Causing discomfort

There are several further reasons why it is difficult to disentangle 'violence' and 'nonviolence'. One is that nonviolent resistance, even when straying away from questions of property damage, tends to be entangled in symbolic or epistemic 'violence', if only in the

way the resistance is subjectively *received* by those to whom it is addressed. It is difficult to arbitrate where violence ends and nonviolence begins when violence occurs to or in a person's psyche (Nojeim 2004).

One way this can happen is in actions that the wider public does not typically perceive as resistance, such as in the words that activists might use in the heat of the moment. In nonviolent protests for Indian independence, for example, sometimes individuals swore and cursed British colonisers, which Gandhi (1961) conceded were violent elements in supposedly nonviolent campaigns. Swearing and cursing are indeed forms of aggression that receivers might legitimately frame as (verbal) 'violence'. Artistic experimentalism, like humour or graffiti in private buildings, can also trigger discomfort, particularly for the owner of the redecorated building or more sensitive listeners. The use of queer hate and dirt rhetoric among LGBTQ+ people, for example, can be perceived as harmful by non-heterosexual or other LGBTQ+ individuals (Wasshede 2017).

Moreover, some social groups, their speeches, and body behaviours are more readily perceived as aggressive and violent than others due to pre-existing and discriminatory power structures. Research indeed demonstrates, for instance, that when Black women and Muslim communities assertively talk back in an act of everyday resistance, their discourse and bodily expressions are more likely to be perceived as 'violent' than if it were a White person responding (Jones and Norwood 2017, Ellefsen and Sandberg 2022). That is, not only do racism, sexism, and Islamophobia hinder public sympathy as explained above, they also aggravate the perceived threat posed by an act of resistance. Context therefore shapes the level of discomfort triggered by different forms of resistance, and it is difficult to try to compare the 'greater' or 'lesser' degree of discomfort that each resistance practice might provoke.

More generally, nonviolent resistance generally does seek to cause some discomfort. It seeks to disrupt the status quo, which many have accepted as comfortable or acceptable enough. Some will experience this challenge as 'violence', and ignoring how unwelcome the triggered discomfort can be for them does not refute the potential legitimacy of that label to describe it. For example, pacifist anti-militarism will understandably be perceived as threatening the job security of the many workers whose employment depends on the military-industrial complex. Or, when decolonial and anti-racist nonviolent campaigns demand that former colonial social institutions and colonisers' descendants recognise their own internalised racist violence, this can legitimately be perceived as violent by targeted people and institutions that are forced to see themselves as wrong or bad (McCreery 2023). More broadly, when nonviolence seeks a particular ideal like freedom, equality, or justice, it discursively (re)produces the term, but to (re)produce and assert a specific formulation of these terms is to apply symbolic violence against other formulations. There is violence, in other words, in (re)producing what counts or not as free, equal, or just, and establishing such definitions as normal or commonsense. In short, to the extent that nonviolence generally always seeks to disrupt the status quo, it thus always implies a form of violence (McCreery 2023).

In turn, the extent to which even just calling for change can be 'violent' is something that state hierarchies are prone to use to their advantage, by (re)naming any resistance as 'violent' and from there criminalising and repressing it accordingly. The racial justice movement in the US, the pro-Palestinian movements in Western countries, and the migrant solidarity initiatives in European countries, are examples of resistance

movements that do not consider their repertoire as 'violent' but that have found themselves denounced and treated as such by state hierarchies (Butler 2020). These hierarchies then mobilise the 'violent' label to punish dissent, in what constitutes a growing and troubling trend of criminalising solidarity (OHCHR 2019, PICUM 2024). For such movements, it is the current state-backed status quo and geopolitical economy that is 'violent', but that violence can appear and be presented as nonviolent because it is assumed as normal or not as violent (Žižek 2016, McCreery 2023). And tempting though it might be for some to describe police restraint in maintaining law and order as 'non-violent' compared to the 'disruptiveness' of resistance, its embeddedness in structural and cultural violence should not be overlooked (Springs 2016). Just as with claims that there are 'nonviolent forms of right-wing extremism', such instrumentalisations of the term 'nonviolence' appear like attempts to appropriate its positive connotations in a broader effort to flip the perceived legitimacy of opposing political actors (Baldoli 2019, Butler 2020). Here again, then, contestations of what should earn the terms 'violence' and 'nonviolence' are evidently at the heart of the political issue, with contestations about the causing of discomfort here overlapping with contestations over public perceptions.

In any case, in addition to discomfort triggered in the *other* (whether observers or powerholders), nonviolent resistance generally requires the *resister's* willingness to suffer (Heidemann Simonsen 2020). Whether it is the acceptance of non-retaliation against the violence of state repression, or the willingness to impose self-suffering through fasting or self-immolation, non-retaliatory self-suffering is presented by both Gandhi (1961) and Sharp (1973) as an obligation, the price for achieving the resistance goals. This demand for acceptance and willingness to impose suffering on oneself can be perceived as violence upon the *self*, and has incited understandable criticisms. The feminist critique of nonviolence, for instance, sometimes deplores how mainstream approaches to nonviolence glorify self-suffering, perpetuating male-dominated legacies of martyrs and demanding that already vulnerabilised communities, such as women and racialised persons, further increase their vulnerability and sacrifice themselves (Deming 1971, Rigby 1974, McAllister 1982). McAllister (1982) and Gallo-Cruz (2024) therefore seek to transform a nonviolence of self-suffering into a nonviolence of self-affirmation, namely through care politics and communal care practices, like mutual aid initiatives, that aim at repairing the world and maintaining it as liveable as possible for everyone (see Tironi and Rodríguez-Giralt 2017, Krystalli and Schulz 2022, da Silva and Dixit 2025). Other scholars have raised the question of self-defense, i.e. whether or not resistance agents should preserve a right to (potentially violent) self-defense against repression, and if so, under which circumstances and with which methods (see e.g. Mann 2018, 2024, Butler 2020, Cornell and Seely 2023, Di Nucci 2025, Barker 2025b).

In light of such challenges, some have argued that discussions on (non)violence must be embedded in social accountability. In other words, understandings of violence and nonviolence should be contextualised within social bonds of responsibility and underpinned by a commitment to a socio-economic and political order where everyone lives better and works through the contradictions of social interdependence (Butler 2020, Kennel 2023). Even if nonviolence is inevitably violent to some extent, those who have embraced nonviolence have by and large rejected the severe physical, structural, and cultural violence (re)produced by power-knowledge structures (Žižek 2016, Butler 2020,

Kennel 2023). Nonviolent anti-racist campaigns, for example, will always imply symbolic violence and possible discomfort for colonisers' descendants, but this violence is hardly comparable with racist and colonial violence that still brutalises racialised bodies (Mbembe and Corcoran 2019, Butler 2020). Moreover, contrary to racist violence, the violence of anti-racist nonviolence is underpinned by a desire to build more liveable societies for everyone. Either way, although reactionary forces cannot be prevented from borrowing its repertoire and vocabulary, nonviolence has historically been nurtured and advanced by broadly 'progressive' forces resisting the violent injustices of their contexts.

In short, nonviolence is arguably inevitably 'violent' to the extent that it seeks to disrupt the status quo, to cause discomfort, to push for some emancipatory agenda or to impose self-suffering – a third area of entanglement and contestation. But then, for many activists, the status quo is what is incomparably more violent and in need of denunciation. Crucial therefore in deciding whether to label political acts as 'violent' or 'nonviolent' is their purpose, i.e. what they are aiming to achieve. It is difficult for researchers or indeed observers outside the academy to avoid revealing a normative stance when deciding how to use those terms.

3.4. (Re)producing violence

Finally, the contestation of 'violence' and 'nonviolence' occurs *within* resistance, too, with some activists denouncing the entanglement of nonviolence with the (re)production of various types of violence. This can occur in multiple, overlapping, and intersectional ways.

One such occurrence concerns the policing of the boundaries of acceptable protest, which proponents of nonviolence have sometimes been accused of. Some anarchists, for example, have long decried the hegemonic position that 'nonviolence' has taken in emancipatory struggles in recent decades and how this has resulted in some activists being pushed out, disowned, and betrayed (Churchill 2007, Gelderloos 2013, 2018, Case 2022, Christoyannopoulos 2024). That such situations would arise is not surprising given the core theoretical premises of nonviolence theory discussed above. Activists who embrace '*non*violence' often pointedly seek to reject or resist violent tactics from their repertoire, framing their action as *not* violent and therefore deliberately different from not just the violence of their opponents, but also the more 'violent' tactics of some fellow radical activists. There is therefore an incentive to discourage the adoption of 'violent' repertoires and denounce them as too radical. But this internal contention of the repertoires of resistance leads to two sources of tension.

Firstly, the pool of tactics accepted as 'nonviolence' can often become particularly narrow, excluding for example more confrontational tactics, such as property damage or the construction of parallel governmental institutions, which some would argue are still within the repertoire of 'nonviolence'. But even if the keeping quite narrow of the range of acceptable tactics might be driven by anxieties about public perceptions and the risk of compromising a potential 'backfire effect', in view of some of the research on 'unarmed collective violence' (Kadivar and Ketchley 2018, Anisin 2020, Chenoweth 2023), the vetoing of more militant tactics might actually hinder the chances of success.

Secondly, some activists who are potential allies perceive such regulating of resistance as a form of violence against them – certainly 'symbolic' violence for one, but when more

militant activists are framed as 'bad protesters' and denounced in public or to public authorities, they are also betrayed and exposed to the violent repression of those authorities. For example, pacifist, anti-police, and anti-army voices from Ukrainian LGBTQ+ grassroots activists and collective groups have long been marginalised by mainstream LGBTQ+ NGOs in Ukraine, and after the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion, these voices have further been silenced and socially excluded, under the pretext that their political stances are divisive, non-patriotic, and dangerous for LGBTQ+ Ukrainians overall (Santos 2025).

Beyond the debate about regulating resistance, however, nonviolence is also entangled with the (re)production of various types of violence – structural, racist or colonial, patriarchal, etc – both within resistance and in the impact it can have on wider society. For example, some anarchist critics of nonviolence have deplored the irony that some advocates of nonviolence, typically White and based in the Global North, preach non-violence in their context and feel good about themselves while activists in the Global South campaign against the same forces but do more of the vigorous fighting and dying (Churchill 2007, Gelderloos 2013, 2018, Delmas 2018, Di Nucci 2025). It is similarly problematic for middle-class activists to preach nonviolence and restraint to poorer activists whose suffering and anger has led them to consider more aggressive tactics (Churchill 2007, Gelderloos 2013, Rossdale 2019, Di Nucci 2025, Barker 2025b). The way in which particular forms of oppression are resisted can thus sometimes reproduce particular types of violent inequalities.

Another common gripe concerns how nonviolent resistance can often (re)produce forms of structural violence. De Jong illustrates, for example, how some cases of joint Israeli-Palestinian protests reproduce unequal power relations and structural violence by opting for strategies that do not address the underlying causes of what they are denouncing and in fact reinforce some of the simplistic identities that need to be destabilised (de Jong 2020). Barker (2025b) and Di Nucci (2025) accuse nonviolent campaigns of being complicit with capitalism and imperialism by depriving the working classes of the few mechanisms and resources they have left to resist, and helping the bourgeoisie tolerate structural injustice. Muslim and decolonial feminists have criticised White European liberal feminist movements for reinforcing racism, Islamophobia, and patriarchal control over women's bodies under the narrative of 'saving Muslim women' by supporting restrictions on veil usage, as if they knew better how 'inherently oppressive' Islam supposedly is (Vergès and Bohrer 2019). Scholars have also voiced concerns that if the feminist proposal for care politics and communities of resistance is more about charity than solidarity, and preserves power inequalities and divisions of race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality, it (re)produces intersectional forms of structural violence that hinder its emancipatory potential (Tronto 1993, Heidemann Simonsen 2020, Hobart and Kneese 2020, Spade 2020, Campbell 2022). And art-related resistance, such as Picasso's pacifist paintings, can be co-opted for imperial and nationalist projects and reify an elitist, neoliberal capitalist notion of art, while downplaying the artworks of *invisible* artists (Richmond 2022).

Besides structural violence, nonviolent resistance can also (re)produce symbolic, epistemic, or epistemological violence. Feminist scholars have, for instance, criticised mainstream nonviolence studies and activists for reinforcing a male-dominated and male-centric theory and practice of nonviolence centred around figures like Gandhi

and Martin Luther King, while erasing women's legacies in nonviolent resistance praxis and knowledge, such as Rosa Parks, Dorothy Day, or Joan Baez (Rigby 1974, McAllister 1982, Gallo-Cruz 2024). Similarly, decolonial approaches have criticised mainstream Western nonviolence scholars and activists for, on the one hand, excluding non-Western and Indigenous voices and actions from nonviolence's philosophical traditions, language, funding, and strategic choices, and on the other hand, ignoring how insistence on nonviolent action has previously been used to discredit Indigenous and decolonial resistance movements. These scholars thus demand the decolonisation of nonviolence praxis and knowledge (Chabot and Vinthagen 2015, Quiroga 2023, Vinthagen 2023).

Also relevant here is the complaint that more radical activists sometimes make of the limited reformist focus of some resistance campaigns. There is considerable debate among feminist theorists and activists, for example, concerning the project of *naming* violence against women and sex and gender-based violence because the emancipatory impact of such efforts can be mixed (Frazer and Hutchings 2020a). Similarly, radical pacifists have long complained that the reformist efforts of more liberal pacifists – such as those focused on arbitration, arms control, or international institutions – leave the underlying dynamics of militarism and war largely intact (Cooper 1991, Castelli 2018, Christoyannopoulos 2024). More generally, for advocates of revolutionary nonviolence, seeking mere reform through existing institutions (e.g. international carbon-reduction targets or better public health funding) can never suffice, because the changes such institutions will typically concede to will be limited and will not tackle the underlying distribution of power and wealth that generates problems in the first place (Jackson *et al.* 2020, Vinthagen 2023).

In short, there are multiple ways in which nonviolence can become entangled in (re) producing violence – a fourth area of entanglement and contestation. This is why some insist that resistance should be intersectional, undermining multiple non-egalitarian power relations and exposing the violent intersections of power relations (Heidemann Simonsen 2020, Vinthagen 2023, Garny and Murru 2024). Global warming, some authors for instance argue, cannot be addressed without also revising some of the fundamentals of our capitalist political economy and ongoing colonial responsibilities (Moore 2016, Vergès 2017, Malm 2021). Vinthagen (2023) and Butler (2024) moreover argue that, in resisting intersectional systems of oppression, social movements should gather and establish transnational intersectional alliances that, even with antagonisms (which might sometimes even legitimately be decried as 'violent'), create a struggle across differences and produce a compelling ethical-practical, political vision that exposes and opposes the destruction in circulation and seeks the life-affirmation of all social beings.

And here, it is actually those who have been, and still are, benefiting the most from the global order who have a greater responsibility – typically the richer demographics especially in the Global North. Even if their discomfort is triggered by resistance, particularly by the potential 'loss of privilege' threatened by pressure to change the status quo, they have a sociopolitical responsibility to resist and support marginalised communities in their resistance. Subordinated people rarely have opportunities or resources to resist openly through protests, hence their most common resistance being expressed in everyday acts (Scott 1985). They are also more likely to face more violent repression when they do protest more visibly.

4. Concluding remarks

Contestations of what or who is 'violent' or not are not just 'academic', but often partly precisely what the very resistance struggle can be about. Such contestations can erupt both where resistance happens and where it is discussed, including in the scholarship about it, and those doing the contesting can be activists, adversaries, external observers, or researchers.

To label as 'violence' is often to denounce and reject, as is evident in the multiple types of phenomena that have been labelled 'violence'. To be decidedly *not* violent while simultaneously denouncing the other side as 'violent' is often particularly important for nonviolent resistance, even though the same tactics can sometimes just as legitimately be labelled as 'violent' by some, yet 'nonviolent' by others. Nonviolence is also entangled with violence to the extent that it seeks to generate some discomfort and some change to the status quo, and to the extent that nonviolent resistance can often (re)produce violence of different kinds – structural, symbolic, colonial, etc.

Whereas the first area of contestation discussed above concerns especially the contestability of what is defined by 'violence', the others are particularly important for internal resistance dynamics and debate. Public perceptions matter for any intended 'backfire effect', but the last two areas of contestation are also particularly significant for critical reflection and introspection among advocates of nonviolence.

These debates, and the inevitability of the normative and political connotations of these labels, are important both for activists and for resistance scholarship. For activists, a more perceptive awareness and recognition of the contestability of these terms can facilitate greater mutual respect between activists with different resistance inclinations and across different causes. For researchers, greater attention to how these labels are contested in specific contests can add depth and nuance to their findings, and by extension to their implications for resistance praxis. In a world whose multiple forms of violence are not about to disappear, and seem to be getting worse, a sharper and more reflexive understanding of how violence operates and how those opposing it can be entangled in it can only help enhance the study and practice of resistance, providing a better account of social reality while also increasing the potential effectiveness of resistance and ameliorating the livelihoods and solidarity networks of all those struggling for collective liberation and a more liveable world.

Note

1. For example: defining violence as physical force typically reflects an ontology of equality of humans in terms of their body integrity and assumes that violence is visibly and corporeally known. Or: Galtung's definition of structural violence emerges from an ontology of inequality, and treats violence as known when basic human needs are denied. Or: Butler's definition of violence as an attack on social interdependence is grounded in an ontology of unequal relationality from where violence is known in the denial of the social relational ties that are essential for the existence of social beings.

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