

Everyday Forms of Resistance to Everyday Oppression

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A great many people, indeed most people, are targets and victims of everyday oppression. What do I mean by *everyday oppression*? I'll start off by defining some terminology: *Statism, coercion, and authoritarianism*.

As Immanuel Kant (Kant, 1797/1996: pp. 363-506, Ak 6: 203-372) and Max Weber have correctly pointed out (Weber, 1994: p. 310), all States possess a territorial monopoly

on the (putatively) legitimate control of the means and use of *coercion*; and as philosophical and political anarchists from 18th century William Godwin to 19th and early 20th century Peter Kropotkin and into the 21st century (see, e.g., Hanna, 2018b) have also correctly pointed out, States are also inherently *authoritarian*. By *coercion*, I mean: either (i) using violence (for example, injuring, torturing, or killing) or the threat of violence, in order to manipulate people against their will according to certain predefined purposes of the coercer (*primary coercion*), or (ii) inflicting appreciable, salient harm (for example, imprisonment, termination of employment, or large monetary penalties) or deploying the threat of appreciable, salient harm, even if these are not in themselves violent, in order to manipulate people against their will according to certain predefined purposes of the coercer (*secondary coercion*). So all coercion is a form of *manipulation*, and proceeds by following a variety of strategies that share the same core characteristic: treating people as mere means or mere things. Correspondingly, by *authoritarianism*, I mean the doctrine that telling people to obey commands and do things is legitimated merely by virtue of the fact that some people (the purported authorities) have *told* them to obey those commands or do those things—“it’s right just because we say it’s right!”—and are *also* in a position to enforce this by means of coercion, not on any rationally justified or objectively morally defensible grounds. Therefore, authoritarianism and coercion per se are non-synonymous and logically independent, because although all authoritarianism requires coercion, nevertheless the converse is not the case: coercion can occur without authoritarianism—for example, if you’re threatened or attacked on the street by some random thug.

The crucial takeaway point is twofold. **First**, all States are inherently *coercive* insofar as they claim the right to compel the people living within their boundaries to heed and obey the commands and laws of the government, in order to realize the instrumental ends of the State, *whether or not* those commands and laws are rationally justified or morally right on independent ethical grounds. And **second**, all States are also inherently *authoritarian* insofar as they claim that the commands and laws issued by its government are right *just because* the government says that they’re right and possesses the power to coerce, *not* because those commands or laws are rationally justified and morally right on independent ethical grounds. To the extent that what I call *the military-industrial-digital complex* in fact controls *all* States in the contemporary 21st century world, then it now controls coercive authoritarianism everywhere.

Against that backdrop, by *everyday oppression*, I mean States or State-like social institutions that systematically, by means of coercion—especially primary coercion, but also by means of secondary coercion— and in a way that’s fully normalized, violate the universal obligation to treat everyone, everywhere, with sufficient respect for their human dignity (Hanna, 2023a). For example, the crime-&-punishment system (Hanna,

2024a) and the widespread poverty created by advanced or late capitalism (Hanna, 2023b) in modern neoliberal capitalist democracies like the USA, are everyday oppression. This is precisely because our universal obligation to treat everyone, everywhere with sufficient respect for human dignity morally requires that everyone everywhere not be treated as mere means or mere things, no matter what legally-defined “crimes” they’ve committed, and also that they have enough income, and also free access to adequate healthcare and housing, so that they can freely live creative, meaningful, productive, useful lives. Yet if people living in poverty or on the verge of poverty try to claim the basic income that is owed them simply by virtue of their human dignity—for example, by stealing it or by engaging in the gangster-economy or underworld-economy of drugs, etc.—then not only are they branded as criminals and thieves, and violently coerced by the police, they also fully expose themselves to gun violence.

So, how can we resist everyday oppression? Now, resistance to oppression is either *violent* or *non-violent*. Famous examples of violent resistance to oppression include the French Revolution starting in 1789, the European revolutions of 1848, the Mexican Revolution starting in 1910, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Chinese Revolution of 1949, and hundreds of other revolutionary or at least violently resistant insurgencies in the 20th and 21st century. Starting with the French Revolution, it is self-evident that violent resistance inevitably turns into *counter-oppression* and into some or another version of *The Terror*. Therefore, only *non-violent resistance* is morally acceptable. In turn, the very idea of non-violent resistance is essentially connected with Martin Luther King Jr’s general doctrine of *civil disobedience* (MLK, 1967/2018) as per the following eight-step argument.

1. By *violence*, I mean the use of actually or potentially destructive force, and by *nonviolence* I mean the refusal to use actually or potentially destructive force.

2. In view of broadly Kantian nonideal dignitarian moral theory (see, e.g., Hanna, 2018a, 2023a), violence with respect to people is rarely if ever rationally or morally justified; indeed, except in last-resort cases of self-defense against violent attack or in order to protect the innocent from violent attack, universal nonviolence with respect to people is rationally justified and morally obligatory.

3. Nevertheless, sometimes it’s not only permissible, but even rationally justified and morally obligatory, to be nonviolent with respect to *people* yet also violent with respect to *private property*, if the relevant private property represents a basic and widespread source of violations of sufficient respect for universal human dignity—for example, if it’s private property owned by technocratic global corporate capitalist conglomerates or corporations, that expresses and implements an inherently oppressive

social system, such as the symbiotic combination of systemic racism, technocratic global corporate capitalism, and the coercive authoritarianism of the State (for example, of the police and the legal justice system of mass incarceration)—and the purpose of the violence with respect to private property of this kind is solely to change this inherently oppressive social system into something fundamentally better, in that it sufficiently respects universal human dignity.

4. Martin Luther King Jr (henceforth MLK), argues that massive nonviolent (with respect to people) civil disobedience is required in order to effect fundamental social change for the better in inherently oppressive social systems, and also that this nonviolent civil disobedience can include “direct action” such as the disruption of the daily operations of the inherently oppressive symbiotic social system of systemic racism, technocratic global corporate capitalism, and the coercive authoritarianism of the State, perhaps even including violence with respect to private property owned by technocratic global corporate capitalist individual magnates, conglomerates, or corporations (MLK, 1967/2018).

5. Although MLK does not explicitly draw this distinction, there’s nevertheless a basic difference between (5i) *coercion*, which is either (5ia) imposing or threatening to impose violence on people (primary coercion) or (5ib) imposing or threatening to impose salient although nonviolent harms on people (secondary coercion), in order to compel those people to do various things, or heed various commands or demands, in order to bring about egoistic or publicly beneficial ends of the coercer, and (5ii) *noncoercion*, which is the refusal to engage in coercion.

6. Since coercion treats other people as mere means or mere things, and not as persons with dignity, it violates sufficient respect for human dignity; hence all coercion is rationally unjustified and immoral, *even if* it’s beneficial for many people.

7. So only *nonviolent (with respect to people), noncoercive civil disobedience* is rationally justified and morally acceptable for the purposes of effecting fundamental social change for the better in inherently oppressive social systems, and *only* nonviolent (with respect to people), noncoercive civil disobedient “direct action” or “disruption” is fully consistent with MLK’s overall moral and political philosophy and with broadly Kantian dignitarian moral and political theory (Hanna, 2023a, 2023b).

8. Therefore, nonviolent, noncoercive disobedient “direct action” or “disruption” *with respect to everyday oppression* is fully consistent with MLK’s overall moral and political philosophy, and with broadly Kantian nonideal dignitarian moral theory, alike.

Obviously, in the USA at least, the classic protest strategies of non-violent, active, public resistance that were deployed during the 1930s IWW (aka “wobblies”) era, the late 1940s/early 50s Hollywood Ten era, the 1960s civil rights/Martin Luther King era, the 1970s Vietnam protest era, the 2010s Occupy Wall Street era, and, more recently, are still available to us: e.g., unions and strikes, Committees for the First Amendment, boycotts, demonstrations, occupations, sit-ins, walkouts, etc., etc. But these classic protest strategies, for all their fanfare, noisiness, and media-driven fame or notoriety, are, sadly, usually very fleeting and without any long-term, significant impact – an almost literally Warholian 10 minutes of fame in the newspapers, TV news, online news, or your favorite social media.

Much more seriously, by engaging in classic protests against the coercive, authoritarian powers-that-be – aka *sticking it to The Man* – you yourself might very well end up being expelled from your high school, college, or university, fired from your job, overtly or subtly blacklisted, imprisoned, or even – as in the IWW strikes, civil rights protests, Kent State, and at Standing Rock – seriously injured, tortured, or dead. Martin Luther King’s assassination in 1968 is a worldwide emblem of martyrdom resulting from the coercive, authoritarian repression of those who pursue classic protest strategies of non-violent, active, public resistance to oppression. So if that kind of repressive oppression happens to you, as it almost always does to at least some of the resisters, then in the end what almost always happens is this: you’re expelled, fired, blacklisted, imprisoned, seriously injured, tortured, or dead, yet everyone else eventually goes back to normalized business-as-usual, oppressing-as-usual, and being-oppressed-as-usual, and nothing really changes. So it’s not at all unreasonable for you to fear the possibly dire consequences of participating in classic protests whereby you try to stick it to The Man.

For these reasons, I think it’s high time that we radically re-think our strategies of non-violent resistance, and seriously consider what the Yale political anthropologist James C. Scott, in his brilliant book from the mid-80s, *Weapons of the Weak* (Scott, 1985), calls *everyday forms of resistance*. In the context of that book, Scott was talking specifically about Malay agrarian peasants in the 1960s and 70s. But the social and political phenomena that Scott was studying generalize to any modern state, especially including contemporary neoliberal democratic states like the USA, in which the rich governing elite and their lackeys will not only be callously indifferent to, but also cynically exploit and directly benefit from, both individually and as a ruling class, widespread everyday oppression.

Now, according to Scott, everyday forms of resistance arise from:

the prosaic but constant struggle between [oppressed people] and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them. Most of the forms this struggle takes stop well short of collective outright defiance. Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. These Brechtian forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms.... Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines. Just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so thousands of individual acts of insubordination and evasion create a political or economic barrier reef of their own. There is rarely any dramatic confrontation, any moment that is particularly newsworthy. And whenever, to pursue the simile, the ship of state runs aground on such a reef, attention is typically directed to the shipwreck itself and not to the vast aggregation of petty acts that made it possible. (Scott, 1985: pp. 29 and 36)

How can *you and I* engage in everyday forms of resistance? In the text I quoted above, Scott lists “the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth” (Scott, 1985: p. 29). And a few paragraphs earlier, he also mentions “passive noncompliance, subtle sabotage, evasion, and deception” (Scott, 1985: p. 31). These remarks provide us with some helpful, suggestive input.

So, updating “the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups” to the third decade of the 21st century, here’s what I’m proposing.

First, if you’re in poverty or otherwise economically oppressed, then *never* envy billionaires or other rich people, and *never* uncritically believe what they say: nine times out of ten it’s bullshit, and they’re just trying to screw you.

Second, *always* vote, and *always* vote for the people who are most committed to ending and reversing everyday oppression, and *never* let yourself be carried away by hopelessness or faux-progressive purism into not voting.

Third, if, by virtue of wage slavery, you have a shit job—i.e., a job that’s either dangerous, demeaning, or pointless—then *always* do it as badly as you possibly can, without being specially noticed, reprimanded, or fired by your boss(es).

Fourth, if you have a shit job, then in your time off, then *never* think about your job but instead *always* think about the people you love and like, and about the creative, meaningful, productive, useful activities you really care about and enjoy doing, or in any case you would be doing if you could afford to quit your shit job.

Fifth, make edgy, profane fun of your oppressors at *every* possible opportunity by means of anonymous, pseudonymous, or in any case private, unmonitored, electronic-surveillance-protected (for example, encrypted) blogging, e-mail, texting, online comments, or social media, because this gradually erodes and undermines the normalization of everyday oppression.

Sixth and finally, engage in counter-cultural escape into independent, creative, meaningful activity, for example: what I call *free reading* (Hanna, 2024b: sections 10-13); artistic activity of all kinds; crafts of all kinds; scholarship of all kinds, especially including philosophy; and, more generally, J.S. Mill's "experiments of living" (Mill, 1859/1978: esp. ch. III)—all of whose fundamental purpose is to escape from and thereby resist everyday oppression.

Individually, we're relatively powerless against everyday oppression. But by using everyday forms of resistance, we can be a small but very real part of the giant coral reef on which the coercive, authoritarian, repressive, and relentlessly oppressive ship of State finally runs aground and sinks.

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