

1.2: The Nature and Nurture of Violence

The nature of violence

54 Violence is the most recognizable form of disrespect, a very public indicator that respect and understanding have broken down. It takes many forms but it is useful to make two sorts of distinction:

- First, between violence carried out in the course of ordinary crime for personal gain (robbery and the like) and political violence. Our concern is with the second, but the first is also important as robbery itself shows intense disrespect to the person whose property is looted or stolen or whose person is harmed. Nor are ordinary crime and political violence necessarily distinct, the two can merge: the overall cause of the leaders may be political but their supporters and followers may act with a mix of personal motives (looting can be for monetary advantage, acts of atrocity or honour can be carried out to enhance personal status, and organized crime pursued as a way to finance an illegal insurgency or terrorist campaign).
- The second necessary distinction is between violence that is primarily physical and violence that involves no physical contact but can have deep psychological effects. Violence of this sort can manifest itself as a form of intense yet unspoken disregard. The poorest people, those marginalized by their poverty, social status, gender, age or disability, tend to experience this form of ‘violent disrespect’ most intensely. It is communicated simply through passive rejection of their existence – by being treated as invisible or irrelevant in everyday life. It is often evident where inequalities are endemic and have become institutionalized; unfair treatment then becomes part of the social structure.¹
- Physical and psychological violence are often combined. Violence is rarely ‘just’ a physical attack aimed at causing hurt or pain. It is also an attack on personhood, on the human-ness of others, on an individual, community or institution’s sense of self-worth, on identity.
- The rape of women in war is an extreme example of an attack on personhood. Whilst it is a physical act that aims to cause individual women physical and mental pain, it is also a symbolic act that reflects the notion of women as embodiments of national and cultural identity that can be violated through their bodies. Violence against women is, therefore, aimed at destroying the honour and self-respect of the whole group, not alone in the present, but because of the special role of women in bearing the next generation, a destruction of the hopes for the future.

55 Violence of these types, although important in many contexts, and as we have noted frequently symbolic in various respects, has to be distinguished from the violence associated with terrorism. The victims of terrorist attacks may be the terrorist’s own community or even his or her own body but the target is authority. Terrorist forms of violence intentionally break basic human codes of conduct, so that by violating all social norms it provokes outrage and cannot be ignored. The motives can be complex: through his or her actions, a terrorist may be trying to force concessions, affect public opinion, or bring attention to their cause. It may even be an act of desperation. But in some cases, there is undeniably a much stronger symbolic aspect: the organizationally ‘weak’ terrorist group aims, in addition to drawing attention to their own injustice, to provoke the ‘strong’ authorities into a substantial overreaction that will damage their standing and moral authority both domestically and internationally.

56 Those who are most disadvantaged may even internalize their disadvantage and feel a sense of worthlessness; whilst acutely aware of their position they may be profoundly disempowered by it, particularly if previous attempts to change their status came to nothing. They may endure their situation without protest in case their demand for justice incites worse repression. This form of violence is rarely heralded by loud protest. It is endured by millions the world over as part of the ‘normal’ order of things.

57 Some of the most entrenched social, economic, political and cultural injustices are endured by women, half the world’s population. Young people may also be ignored as they also tend not to be the leaders of their communities or to have a voice in their institutions. They therefore lack the power to shape agendas. Even when their voices are heard they are not always systematically mainstreamed into national debates. Women and young people have to struggle particularly hard to command respect in countries where principles of patriarchy and seniority determine who holds power, and the damage suffered is transmitted inter-generationally. Again, this exclusion is not violence in a physical sense but a violation of their right to be heard and respected, which supplements the iniquity and barbarity of actual physical and sexual violence and abuse against women and young people by men. This is a priority issue in making the world a more just place.

The nurture of violence

58 Political violence is nurtured by psychological as well as physical factors. For violence to be sustained the ‘other side’ must be seen as not only different but also associated with beliefs or actions felt to be inimical to a way of life or dearly held values. In

short, the other side must be seen as a threat. Violence against the other can then be presented as protecting one's own way of life. If violence is seen as a form of self-defence ordinary people are more likely to accept it as morally justified.

59 A first and concerning step on the road to violence is, therefore, the truncating of identities down to a single category. It is not hard to see how this helps to draw potential battle lines. One of the most frequently used means of creating in-group solidarity comes from framing the out-group as threatening, parasitic or worse (a form of 'scapegoating'). Such sentiments take hold by denying the commonality of experience and interest that lies across and between groups. In the case of systematic, organized sectarian violence, this element becomes central to the ability of leaders to rally supporters and target a single common foe.

60 Two observations stand out when contemplating this problem in its severest form:

- The first is that extreme circumstances are hallmarked by a politics that rejects negotiation. That is to say, one side's willingness to discuss and negotiate the shape of the grievance or concern of the other side is completely undermined by their inability to see the other side in terms that are recognizable or have inherent value. The most extreme version, of course, is to portray the other side in non-human terms, thus obviating the need to justify hatred or violence.
- The second observation is that one-dimensional identity is fundamentally flattening in its purpose and in its outcomes. It is designed to deliver an all-powerful lens through which the world is seen, though not required to be understood. Wearers of the lens are provided with a world-view that is sufficiently all encompassing to relegate individual choice to the margins. In extreme conditions, it supplies a plentiful source of nourishment to build and sustain hatred. The odds against mutuality, or interlocking lines of empathy and solidarity, are heavy stacked as a consequence.

Identity politics and its distortion

61 The rise of identity politics of this kind is far from new. Even in modern times, there are no shortages of vivid illustrations of powerful, exclusionary hate-driven identity politics and movements that have denied even the most minimal value to others. National Socialism in Germany in the mid-twentieth century is arguably the most well-documented example. The partition of India in the 1940s was characterized by the same elements, most notably the sudden evaporation – and denial, in many cases – of cross-community links and bonds. And the chapter of African slavery in the New World (to say nothing of the related chapter of indentured labour throughout the European imperial world) from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, is a compelling example of the assignment of one racial identity as a means of creating political and cultural dominance.

62 But, even putting these large examples to one side, it is equally important to note a general trend towards the growth of one-dimensional identity politics and fundamentalism. This has been observed both in the developed and developing worlds. As a partial result of (a negative reaction to) globalization, it has meant that particular kinds of identity-based conflict are now much more rapidly projected in a range of otherwise quite dissimilar societies. For instance, contentious and campaigning forms of collective identity have emerged in recent years that centre on opposition to the potentially 'homogenizing forces of globalization'. These identities have found it relatively easy to fuse or find common cause with related concerns about the economic domination of global corporations, threats of environmental degradation and failure to tackle perceived regional injustices. Campaigns of opposition to all of these things often converge, and people with very different views campaign together against the authorities who they regard as being 'to blame', though often for quite opposite reasons.

63 One-dimensional identities are particularly nurtured where an overarching value system is put forward to justify the basis for being against each and all of these forces. The narrative of anti-globalization movements is a simple, ready-made way of supplying such a narrative, and this has had remarkably powerful effects in shaping a sense of common understanding. Given that the dynamics of a globalized economy are far from being perfectly understood, it is clear that this reaction is actually an emotional rather than an intellectual response, with fear being the dominant emotion involved. Nevertheless, a form of single dimension of identity has emerged that has been impressive in appealing to the multiple identities that underpin concern and opposition to various aspects of globalization. It is striking that a number of anti-globalization movements have been effective in doing just this.

Faith and identity

64 Faith has always been a particularly powerful force in the construction of identity. Faith is often a force for good; the values of all of the main faiths of the world promote love and understanding, respect and hope, care by the strong for the weak, and societies based on justice, fairness, co-existence and harmony.²

65 The Commonwealth Foundation has recently launched an innovative project examining faith, development and social cohesion. It aims to:

- encourage debate and advance learning about collaboration between faith-based groupings in addressing development and social issues, and

- investigate the value and relevance of inter-religious co-operation, and particularly the roles this can play in helping to address development and social issues.

66 This initiative centres on perspectives (mainly drawn from a nongovernmental background) on inter-religious co-operation. These are used to stimulate further debate on the scope and potential for inter-religious co-operation for greater social cohesion. It represents a basic building block of mutual respect and understanding across traditional boundaries.

67 However, faith has also been used throughout history to promote the interests of those with destructive aims. As a legitimising discourse for violence, faith has an advantage over purely political ideologies because of its ability to justify, inspire, empower – and not be proved wrong. This is due to the transcendental nature of belief (‘fighting injustice is God’s will’), the inspiration of religious hope (‘God will fulfil His promises’) and the centrality of faith (‘no matter how bad things get, this is the Right Way’). Fearful believers may come to accept, if only inadvertently, a ‘politically activist theology of violence’, which usually means reconciling ‘a single, simultaneously loving and violent God’.

68 Convinced by their leaders that their way of life or their belief system is both superior to others and is allegedly ‘supported by God’, they can be easily persuaded that their fundamental values and way of life is under threat. Once this threat has been internalized and a powerful sense of fear generated, it is a small step to believing that violence is justified and that a war must be waged to preserve the way of life that has been pre-ordained for them. As several authors observe, secular ideas can also be held religiously – extreme nationalism, communism and fascism have functioned religiously insofar as adherents are passionate in their conviction and motivation and are prepared to die, but also to kill, for their beliefs.

69 This is particularly pertinent today as leaders use single identity categorizations of the world to garner support for wider missions that have to do with their own bid for political and economic power, nationally and internationally. Leaders for whom their own political positioning is a primary goal will inevitably play down the identities and interests that ‘their’ group shares with others. They well know that it is when people come together on the basis of identities outside constructed dualisms – when they meet and act as women, as young people, as citizens of a state or as people who share a regional identity, a political outlook or an artistic interest – that relationships based on mutual understanding develop, that violence is eschewed, and respect comes to characterise their interactions. Violence cannot be maintained between those who understand and respect each other. It can only be sustained with a breakdown of respect and understanding.

70 It is these multiple identities and this sort of connectedness that the Commonwealth represents and that it tries to support through its different activities. From the Commonwealth perspective, each nation is first and foremost a society of individuals that have multiple sources of affiliation and many bases of relating to each other.

71 The aim in future must be to strive even harder to recognize and nurture connections between groups on the basis of their multiple identities in order to avoid the pressure of being coalesced into polarized worlds. Efforts can be made at many levels. The starting point is personal awareness. Each of us can resist the tendency of identity politics to ignore the complexity and multiplicity of our identities through broadening our understanding of the richness of human identity. A Hutu who is roused to hostility against a Tutsi can be reminded that they are both Rwandans, both Africans, perhaps even both Kigalians. He should be asked to recognize, too, that they share a human identity. Even though the British, French and Germans tore each other apart in 1914–1918, they now recognize each other, with little difficulty, as fellow Europeans.

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