The Brains of the Living: A discussion on political violence - by Dilip Simeon

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“The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is a more violent world”. Hannah Arendt, in Reflections on Violence

“The very first essential for success is a perpetually constant and regular employment of violence.” Adolf Hitler, in Mein Kampf.

Introduction

1.1/ The argument that I would like to develop may be summarised thus. Whereas violence is considered by various political tendencies as radical, productive of closure, and susceptible to legitimising (ideological) control; the truth is quite the opposite. First, violence is the most conservative, even primordial social relation in the history of human society. To treat violence as a radical element in the polity is to forget that it emanates from the lizard's brain that still resides in the human cranium. Second, violence does NOT result in the closure of any issue. Rather, it becomes autonomised in state-hood and reproduces itself in an endless spiral, much like the accumulation of capital, to which (in modern times), it is inextricably tied. Third, the ideological bonds of legitimacy, by means of which society seeks to contain violence, have always remained tenuous and fragile, leaving space for the autonomisation of systemic physical brutality and exterminism. This tendency (realised to greater or lesser degree) of violence to break free of institutional constraints, occurs across the political spectrum, and across the boundaries of state and civil society. Violence, to my mind, is not merely the symptom of a malaise, it is a malaise in itself. Understanding violence does not require a pragmatic debate (about its efficacy in this or that situation), but a phenomenological analysis about its intrinsic qualities, functions and effects.

1.2/ The contemporary world is witness to the universal degeneration of democratic governance - viz, power exercised with the consent of the governed. The rulers of the world order have decided (as do the Indian authorities from time to time) to expose the brutality beneath the mask of ‘civilisation’ and ‘the rule of law’. From Gujarat to Iraq, New York to Chechnya, Bosnia to Palestine, we find growing evidence of a contempt for human life. To use the language of Indian politics, communalism is now operating on a global scale. This is a complex historical issue, requiring much study and analysis. One stark aspect of political reality is the blurring of lines between state violence and violence deployed by those who claim to represent oppressed people. Another is the public awareness of brutality as a political tool.

1.3/ The Sri Lankan anthropologist Pradip Jeganathan has an interesting explanation for this awareness. In his view, ‘violence’ is “an analytical name for events of political incomprehensibility”. This name has gained currency because of the “de-legitimization of received political narratives that produced that political comprehension in another time”. Today we point to Rwanda, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Chechnya and Iraq as examples of the genocidal mania sweeping the world. However, the wars and political upheavals in Vietnam,
Indo-China and Indonesia in the 1960's and 70's cost over 2 million lives. Was there less violence then? Jeganathan says the violence of earlier decades had acceptable political names such as “imperialism”, “communist aggression” and “nationalist uprising”. What is known as ‘violence’ today cannot easily be placed under a suitable political sign. We suffer from “a profound loss of political space”, which in his view, is the reason for the appearance of a new anthropological focus on ‘violence’.

1.4/ Jeganathan’s implied suggestion that this is a matter of suitable nomenclature, is, to my mind misleading. There is indeed something new about the violent phenomena of our times, such as the normalisation of genocidal politics, the recruitment of child soldiers and the complete erosion of the distinction between combatants and civilians. Society’s ethical and political sensibilities change with experience, and democratic movements must acquire wisdom from these changes. Participants in the First World War departed for distant battlefields in an atmosphere of romance and adventure. This changed irrevocably in the first months of bloodletting in the trenches of northern France. In the late 1930's the bulk of European sentiment was decidedly against war. When Hitler made war inevitable, it was not a matter for celebration as it had been in 1914. After 1945, strong anti-war sentiment obliged the major powers to establish a global conflict-resolving institution, the UNO. It also inspired long-lasting peace movements across the world. And it is not accidental that the most violent decades of humanity’s existence also produced profound interventions for non-violence such as those led by Mohandas Gandhi, Ghaffar Khan and Martin Luther King, and mass movements for peace, over the Vietnam war in the late 1960's and 70's, and against the installation of MX nuclear missiles in Europe in the 1980's. Social attitudes towards violence and war have undergone major changes in past decades. I believe another such change is both possible and necessary.

1.5/ It is not that there is more violence today than there was in the 1940's or the 1960's. But, as the recent massive anti-war movements demonstrate (unlike the days of the Vietnam war, these began before, rather than after the outbreak of hostilities), there is an awareness that violence does not result in resolution, closure and a settlement of tensions, but rather, feeds an unending spiral of brutality. (Till this day, the dynamic effects of Partition and the Second World War continue to generate conflict in South Asia and the Middle East). What Jeganathan calls “a profound loss of political space” might actually signify the failure of available ethical and political explanations for the phenomena associated with human destructiveness. Is violence incomprehensible, or are we too frightened to confront the truth about our theories and practices?

1.6/ Human beings need to invest their pain and suffering with some meaning. However today, a growing segment of public opinion is beginning to question ideologies that glorify violence. Perhaps people are beginning to understand violence as the self-reproducing language of authoritarianism, even when it pretends to represent the oppressed. The appearance of ‘violence’ in the theoretical universe of the social sciences could represent a realisation (as yet implicit rather than political), that mass murder and physical brutality are not ‘tactics’, but a manifestation of a social relation with its own dynamic.

2.1/ Some Questions: There is, in short, a new question-mark on the matter of violence. Certain issues require interrogation for a new perspective. These may be briefly stated as follows:
Is violence simply the brutish power of oppressive social groups, or does it have deeper roots?
Why have democratic movements reduced violence to a tactical question?
What explains the agreement amongst rivals on the so-called inevitability of violence?
Is organised mass violence an aberration in the polity, or a mode of governance?
What is the link between caste and communal violence?
What are the political functions of religion, sentiment and identity?
What are the flows and functions of violence as a social vector?
Can social-democracy afford to be neutral on the question of violence?
How should civil society deal with the concepts of revenge, retaliation and collective guilt?
What are the links between political violence and authoritarianism?
Why has political conservatism become dynamic and socialism become conservative?

2.2/ Contemporary society can ignore these questions only at its peril. I suggest that violence has acquired institutional autonomy in the modern world, and that treating it as a tactic will add fuel to the flames. Can we argue that World War II with its 55 million deaths, the genocide of six million European Jews and the explosion of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki have left the question of ‘violence’ at the same uncomplicated place that it was at the beginning of the 20th century? Violence has been ‘democratised’ to the point where all civilians are considered fair targets for murder, where the very distinction between civilians and combatants has been abolished. The century that invented the term ‘exterminism’ has left us with the fearful task of re-examining the crises of modernity, of re-stating the platform of social-democracy.

3./ Abstract and specific characteristics of the political realm
3.1/ What are the chief elements and paradoxes of the domain of politics? Politics is concerned with the social universe, the public interest. In modern capitalist society, with its nation-statist forms, it is also the place wherein the interests of ruling groups and dominant social relations are represented as the universal interest, as a ‘natural’ state of affairs. Politics is supposedly the art of the possible - the practice of compromise. It is the place where pragmatism reigns, the zone within which it is said that the end justifies the means.

3.2/ The forced separation between ends and means exemplifies the instrumentalist ideology that dominates the mental universe of capitalist modernity. Is state power merely an amoral instrument of class domination, and violence merely the expedient method of seizing it? Do political ends remain unaffected by the means employed to reach them? Or do the ends get transformed by violent means? We need a clear picture (as far as possible) of virtuous political ends; of the difference between ‘peace’ based on oppressive and exploitative production relations, and a peace that denotes more equitable social relationships. Moreover, as Arendt points out, since even the greatest political goals have shown tendencies to go astray, we had better take more notice of the means we employ to attain them.

3.3/ The term ideology is not a synonym for political theory. Ideologies represent historical social forms as if they were a part of nature - in brief, they naturalise social relations. Today’s ideologies must be subjected to theoretical criticisms that demonstrate that class, caste, race and patriarchy are not the inevitable products of human nature, but historical forms, subject to change
3.4/ One form of modern ideology is the ‘timeless community’ known as the Nation, service to which is supposed to be the highest virtue. The ideology of nationalism masks the ways in which social, economic and political relations are globally produced and upheld. The ‘national good’ cannot be the starting point of political knowledge because the nation-state is itself a historically produced institution, whose form and stability is explicable only in a world-historic context.

3.5/ Despite its rational self-image, the modern nation-state regularly deploys sentiment in the form of tradition, honour and loyalty. This happens in warfare and in legal systems, for example, in emblems of regiments and oaths taken upon holy books. These psycho-social forms and conventions exemplify the mobilisation of ‘culture’ and sentiment for purposes of governance.

3.6/ Colonialism placed India in a subordinate position within the capitalist system. The period saw the emergence of new forms of capital (such as managing agencies), hybridised landlordism, and mediated, ethnographically marked methods of recruitment and management for labour-intensive work-processes. The colonial politics of labour embraced ethnicity and caste as ‘essential’ attributes, which became part and parcel of labour management. This remains true today. Indian capitalism uses social stigma, patriarchy, caste and the constant threat of violence to keep down labour costs, avoid the construction of social security systems, give permanent tax-exemption to employers in the informal sector and the rural rich, and undermine the potential of modern citizenship.

3.7/ Democracy implies prior agreement on the definition of the demos - a concept that resembles religious concepts of ‘the chosen race’. The practice of democracy has been linked to the concept of identity. Thus, the rule of the people presumes that we know who the ‘people’ are, even before we speak of their right to ‘self-determination’. Ideologically defined boundaries of the self and ‘the people’ are presupposed in the practice of democracy. This issue is related to the development of the nation-state and the notion of sovereignty. Identity is an ideological construction, a matter of political power and class interest. It is expressed in various forms, religion-based, ethnic and linguistic, etc. Communalism is one type of identity, but all political identities are not communalist in orientation.

3.8/ The popular terms Left and Right are products of modern history. They refer to political spaces that are stable, but they represent changing social vectors and fluctuating political ideas. These include Progress versus Conservatism; Industry, Modernity, Science and Reason, versus Tradition, Stability, Hierarchy and Religion. What is noteworthy is that the Right has become dynamic and the Left has become conservative. The Right argues for (its version of) internationalism and institutional change. The Left defends nationalism and the status quo, and sections of it even flirt with xenophobia, or a hatred of things ‘foreign’.

3.9/ Authoritarianism operates in all segments of the political spectrum, albeit with different historical functions. We have two ways of interpreting this fact: one, that authoritarianism is (apparently) politically neutral, and two, that the appearance of authoritarianism signifies the right-wing degeneration of the Left. I would argue that the organisation of violence is the beginning of a process that merges political authoritarianism, even when it appears otherwise. In concept and epistemology, the appearance in the Left’s world-view of manicheanism (the reading of all issues in black and white terms) and Absolute or Revealed Truth, exemplifies
this merger of authoritarianism.

3.10/ Democracy is a political principle of association, and a democratic constitution is an institutional arena wherein the tensions of class society play themselves out in an ongoing process. Democracy is unstable, and subject to inner growth or decay. The growth of democracy implies greater popular involvement in control of daily life and at the workplace. The decay of democracy results from the action of those vested interests which are threatened by the existence of popular movements for social transformation.

3.11/ The persistence of democratic institutions is a threat to those class forces and structures that benefit from conventional forms of social oppression. This is the foundation for authoritarian politics. It has been present since the advent of democratic movements in India, and has had major successes - most notably, the communal Partition. Then as now, communal politics has denoted, first and foremost, an assault on secular citizenship.

4./ Theorising violence

4.1/ Violence may be systemic and structural; or immediate and corporal. Political violence is an outcome and expression of systemic violence. The more it is practiced, the more does corporal punishment become normalised in daily life. Violence is a social relation embedded in all forms of authority and oppression. (If violence and intimidation were subtracted from gender, caste and racial oppression, these structures would collapse). Hence it carries a relationship with politics as well as religion. It is the grammar of economic exploitation, social oppression and patriarchy; the saturated form and expression of oppressive production relations. The modern state is a crystallisation of centuries of violence and domination.

4.2/ Because humans are the only species to invent ethical justifications for mass murder, the phenomenon of violence is associated with explanations of evil and criminality. This is why God, Nation, etc are brought into the picture, as legitimisers of ‘selfless’ violence. The concept of Revenge (the emotional basis for justice, and a predominant theme in religious traditions), gives violence (like Courage) moral fluidity, the potential of attaching itself to virtue. This provides space for theological and political justification.

4.3/ As substratum of state institutions, violence requires institutionalisation and instrumentalisation. The organisation of violence requires and generates despotism and authoritarianism. As grammar of power, violence reproduces itself and generates a dynamic that (potentially) can transcend politics.

4.4/ The dynamism associated with violence derives from a spiral of revenge and irrationality, and is sustained by norms of virility, honour and shame. Its generator is binary otherness, through which all forms of brutality become justified by reference to chronological sequence, as in the phrase: they started it.

4.5/ As regards its impact on human sensibilities, violence bends time, distorts the sense of sequence, confuses cause and effect, and perverts historical consciousness towards one-sidedness (the violence perpetrated by my enemy always seems much worse than that indulged in by me or my allies). Such intellectualising, however, evaporates in the extreme moments of exterminism and annihilation, when pure destructiveness takes over. This tendency, of self-generation beyond self-control is the clue to the autonomous dynamic
referred to above.

4.6/ The arms industry and ethnicity-based politics are complementary poles in global capitalist governance. The first represents a gigantic investment in violent conflict on the part of the global system (with its concomitant political, psycho-social and institutional arrangements); the second is capitalism’s assimilable, acceptable form of violence.

4.7/ Commenting on goondaism in Calcutta in 1947, Gandhi said that “evil by itself cannot exist in this world - it must feed upon the good. The minute it is deprived of the sustenance of the good, it ceases to exist”. This insight points to the ethical fluidity engendered by the practice of violence - a fluidity that perverts our moral capacities. Good and evil fluctuate in a constantly vacillating series of personae, like images in a hall of mirrors. The marriage between transcendent ideologies (incorporating Religion, Nation etc) and Violence has channeled humanity’s baser instincts in an ongoing spiral of psychological, ethical and intellectual degeneration. This may only be countered by a well-considered re-integration of political and ethical approaches.

5./ Religion, ideology and political violence
What is the meeting ground between the religious and the political realm?

5.1/ Politics is not merely the art of obtaining and retaining power - it concerns a normative stance towards the present and the future. This is why we are obliged to rethink our positions disregarding religious or political authority; owning responsibility by exercising judgement and applying mind.

5.2/ Modern political science, economics and the sociology of administration, assume the pretense of rationality. In fact the ‘science’ of politics requires the calibrated deployment of sentiment, from zones of law and ceremony to war and legitimised murder. There is an inbuilt tension in structures of governance. On the one hand modern state institutions require social stability and restraint for day-today functioning; on the other, the capitalist system breeds brutality and lack of restraint.

5.3/ Religious concepts engage naturally with universal values such as the human being, human life. But insofar as religion is associated with identity politics and power, a contradiction appears between the implicit universality of religious philosophy and the ethical requirements of pragmatism (the suggestion that ends justify means). This is the beginning of moral chaos. In part this is due to the denaturing of theology, a decline in value systems directly linked to religions’ new political functions. Religion is admirably suited to co-option within the instrumental rationality of advanced capitalism. It takes the appearance of an antidote to the spiritless secularism of money economy, but in fact becomes implicated in techniques of mass control.

5.4/ The more religion accepts a new role as insignia of political identity in modern mass society, the further does it move from its ethical function. The dubious role of the Catholic Church with its pathological anti-semitism in the European crisis of the 1930's and in the career of Nazism; the implication of American Baptists and the Dutch Reformed Church in the racist politics of the American deep south and South Africa respectively; the stranglehold of expansionist Zionism over Judaism after the second WW; the prolonged degeneration of the fundamentalist current in Islam to the point that it has reached with the Taliban and Al
Queda; the ease with which the violent right-wing in India has been able to assume the mask of Hindu resurgence; the transformation of the Akalis from their origins as an anti-imperialist and reformist movement into an elitist communal political vector; the involvement of Buddhist clergy in anti-Tamil violence in Sri Lanka over the past decades - all this points to an alarming fact. Despite the existence within world religions of pacifist, democratic currents, these have proven incapable of developing a new civilisational ethic of non-violence. All religions are today in an advanced stage of ethical decomposition. The crux of the matter turns upon the question of violence and the doctrine of collective guilt.

6./ A New Agenda

6.1/ Fascism is fixated by Thanatos, death and violence. The celebration of masculine virtue, the scape-goating of entire communities, the cult of victimisation and the search for lost glory are forms of this fixation. Common to all forms of fascism is a profound disrespect for human life. If any section of the Left cannot distinguish between the quest for human liberation and the fascist perversion of that quest, this indicates how far the age-old grammar of power and oppression has eaten into the socialist intellect. The more that social-democratic resistance uses violence, the further it strays from social liberation. Social democracy needs to reconstitute itself to struggle for a new global social contract. Its first principle must be the acceptance of non-violence by parties that aspire to run governments.

6.2/ Any serious social-democratic programme has squarely to address the question of violence, and place on its agenda society’s determination to liberate itself from fear and brutality. Because violence is both the expression and the symptom of social degeneration and political crisis, placing it at the centre of a regional democratic agenda will generate a highly overdue social debate about the roots, forms and functions of violence. Questions of the iniquitous relations between the sexes, between social castes and classes, and the structured violence of the global polity, will acquire a fresh charge. The relationship between democratic institutions and the military-industrial complex; arms-dealers and insurgents; between violence in the family and in society at large, will come under social scrutiny.

6.3/ The debate about violence needs to be generalised beyond political groups, and into civil society globally. Without the adoption of a firm politics of resisting violence, even as we articulate and struggle for the most radical of demands, an alternative world order will remain fantasaical.

Speak the truth
Stop the killing

Forgiveness is a complex philosophical and ethical matter whose implications differ depending on the nature of the wrong committed. When looked at from the viewpoint of victimised individuals, the issues may be (relatively) simple. From recent events we have the example of Mehsana, Gujarat, (1992), where the known culprits in a case of communally inspired murder decided to publicly confess their crimes to the family of the victims and ask their forgiveness. This was a moving demonstration of the power of grace and may be held up as an inspiration for those affected by such violence. But is personal forgiveness by the
victims sufficient? It could be argued that the offender has transgressed the limits of society and harmed the social fabric. That the forgiving person/s may forgive for the wrong reasons, such as fear or the desire for acclaim. That society too, must obtain adequate recompense and guarantees.

Yet more complicated issues arise when we think of wrongs committed over long periods of historical time. How may we comprehend the extent of the violence and humiliation inflicted for centuries upon the untouchables by the Brahmanical social order, wherein social hierarchy and differentiated justice were (and still remain) sacralised? The constitutional avowal of affirmative action was a gesture of attenuation, but the extent of its success in inaugurating a regime of social equality remains a matter of debate. Who can compute the pain of African villagers torn from their homes and sold into slavery, both by (Muslim) Arab and (Christian) European slave-traders? Who will or can offer them recompense, given the fact that their descendants are till this day the underclass of the most ‘developed’ society on earth? Does anyone remain who may forgive the Caucasian race for obliterating Native Americans from the face of North America? Can Germany ever compensate Russia for two vicious and bloody invasions in the course of the century? Has Christianity really repented for anti-Semitism? Or has it enabled its victims to transmute themselves into Zionists and make Palestine into a Bantustan, thus perpetuating violence and bitterness?

The Rock of St Peter nurtured the Inquisition from the 13th century up to 1870. Thomas de Torquemada, Grand Inquisitor of Spain alone sentenced over 10,000 ‘heretics’ to the flames, and nearly a 100,000 to the galleys. Using the Biblical mandate, “thou shalt not permit a sorceress to live”, papal bulls from the 13th century onwards ordered millions of women murdered on suspicion of being witches. In matters of systematic mysogyny and anti-Semitism, the Protestant tradition was no better. It would be interesting to recapitulate the theological justifications for so much violence. Who remembers all this? Will the Vatican, which took over 450 years to withdraw the calumnies against Galileo (let alone atone for having blackmailed him with instruments of torture), ever ask for forgiveness from God or from the souls of its victims?

I have no desire to single out the Church in my citations. All of the world's great religious traditions have rationalised violence and hatred against perceived enemies, weak and defenceless persons and women to some degree or other. I am convinced that unless the contemporary bearers of these traditions remember the enormities committed in the name of God, take steps to alter their holy texts in the light of humane reason and in the language of their own spirituality, ask for forgiveness with genuine contrition, they stand before society as being incapable of practising what they preach.

From personal experience of violence, I can say that forgiveness is only possible as a gesture among equals, in an atmosphere where true contrition is perceptible on the part of the wrong-doer. Equal does not imply social equality but an equality in spiritual status, in human dignity. Where equality and contrition are lacking, the act of forgiveness becomes a psychic device for assuaging the sense of injustice in the heart of the wronged person or party and little different from the aspiration that the Almighty will dole out justice (read retribution) to his/her/their enemies in the end. Insofar as political life is a mediated reflex of social and individual interests and sentiments, it is imbued with the psychological element.

Collective memory is the substratum of human history and culture. As such the relationship between history and memory is a vast subject, generalisations about which would be difficult and could be trivial. We should note however, that both examples cited in the seminar outline - Gandhi and Mandela - are of men who insisted on an equality of status (and
that of the people they represented), with their oppressors. They insisted on justice being done and being seen to be done and did not budge from their positions until they achieved satisfaction on these counts. The element of forgiveness entered their politics as a potential, as the proferred hand of an equal, whose commitment was marked by faith in non-violent transformation. Politics in the Gandhian sense is the laboratory *par excellence* wherein ethical truths may be tested. It is the social sphere which fuses the experience and conduct of mundane existence with those of the moral and if you like, spiritual dimension.

Within politics (defined in this way), the quality of forgiveness can only possess meaning when it is the basis of an ongoing project of transformation. When we are being continually oppressed, it is not given to us to be continually forgiving, without in some way reducing our human stature. Such forgiveness will degenerate and/or be ideologically absorbed into the discourse of the oppressors. We may forgive, or hold out the prospect of forgiving, when we have refused humiliation. Gandhi's *ahimsa*, in its spiritual as well as political sense, is an outstanding expression of the doctrine of forgiveness. As he used to say, it is not a doctrine of the weak but a weapon of the brave. It is an active, not passive, choice in favour of dignity, humanity and self-restraint. And it stands intact as a positive alternative in the context of a troubled and rapidly changing world.