Contextualizing Violence: A Hermeneutical Perspective

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The brutal gesture is one that halts and suppresses a free act.

– Jean Genet, "Violence and Brutality"

Violence and its Discontents

This article is *not* primarily a semantic analysis of violence and even less a contextual view that argues the possibility of meaning relative to actors in a situation where violence occurs. That violence is meaningful to its "perpetrators" if not to its "victims" is not enough reason to believe that it can always be explained. Explanations of violence that resort to the question of meaningfulness are deeply problematic and at times outrageously biased because those acts that do not fall within the scope of what is deemed meaningful end up becoming meaningless. I'm not interested in talking about metaphysical violence in the sense that Gandhi uses it, where violence becomes synonymous with the "human condition." As Bhikhu Parekh notes in his *Gandhi: a very short introduction*: "Gandhi called the body the 'house of slaughter' and was deeply anguished by the violence its survival entailed" (51). Violence from a Gandhian perspective is the essence of what the body is all about. To *exist* in terms of the "body" *means* to be violent. In other words, a non-violent body cannot be imagined and at best will be an imaginary or a constructed one to which a spiritual life aspires. At that level of discussion we are not talking about violence as we understand it at a more commonsensical level where killing a scorpion for instance would not be seen as an act of violence in the same sense that we would call violent the killing of a person. Therefore I call such a body "metaphysical" because in transcending the here and now it becomes ahistorical and not something that could be fruitfully debated. It ends up being a point-of-view albeit—a rather serious one—when we see to what extremes Gandhi would go to live up to his notions of non-violence.

The violence that needs to be contextualized is more along the lines of power and resistance that we associate with the body. The hermeneutical perspective is meant to throw light on the fact that violence more often than not is a matter of interpretation depending on whether one speaks from the point-of-view of the oppressor or the oppressed. Though the association of power with the oppressor and resistance with the oppressed seems like a plausible opposition, the very idea of contextuality emphasizes that terms are relative and fluid depending on more factors than one. However, for heuristic purposes we accept that latent to violence is the desire for power to control with the intention of manipulating the body of another human being. Such a definition given its breadth could be misleading because it ignores acts of resistance to power. The "discontents" at the heart of the discourse of violence are common to both power and resistance. There is nothing like "good" violence that is opposed to "bad" violence. Walter Benjamin makes the meticulous observation that "All violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates, it forfeits all validity. It follows, however, that all violence as a means, even in the most favorable case, is implicated in the problematic nature of law itself" (287).The "discontents" we associate with a definition of violence is "implicated" in how we define the law itself meant to contain the violence. What makes a hermeneutical perspective imperative for an understanding of violence

is the attempt to identify contexts which legitimize a certain use of power against another body.

Eric Hobsbawm notes that the "rise of violence in general is part of the process of barbarization that has gathered strength in the world since the First World War" (*Globalization* 125). Hobsbawm's point is that while "no society operates without *some* violence…violence has gradations and rules" (*Globalization* 125). The "barbarization" of individuals, peoples, and societies and the breakdown in "rules" connected to violence are intertwined in a mutually reinforcing manner. This is part of the reason why violence appears to be more and more illogical because there seem to be no rules to explain or justify why an individual or a group can act in a manner that is injurious to the physical and mental well-being of another person with impunity. The conventions which guide societies with regard to how one human being ought to treat another in times of war and peace are rendered meaningless in the "barbarization" of the 20th century which moved from an era of colonialism to that of globalization. The worst phase of individualism that thrives on moral indifference to the plight of the many or without a sense of the future of humanity is also one which brings out the worst in human nature. Thus the poor and the downtrodden of the third world, at the risk of being dismissed as enemies of humanity, are left with no choice but to resort to violence in their fight for visibility.

In order to contextualize the violence of the oppressed, one has to be aware of the need to be heard which is also a need among victims of globalization to be understood on their terms; this establishes the possibility of a genuine dialogue where victims are able to make reasonable demands connected to survival and human dignity. In a chapter titled "Third World" in his autobiography *Interesting Times*, Hobsbawm notes:

> Columbia was, and continues to be, proof that gradual reform in the framework of liberal democracy is not the only, or even the most plausible, alternative to social and political revolutions, including the ones that fail or are aborted. I discovered a country in which the failure to make a social revolution had made violence the constant, universal, omnipresent core of public life. (*Interesting Times* 373)

Globalization through economic liberalization and structural adjustment programs imposed on the poor has worked disastrously to render ineffective the possibility of a social revolution in the third world. As Michel Chossudovsky points out:

> The IMF-sponsored reforms had contributed to social polarization and the impoverishment of all sections of the population including the middle classes. Moreover, as the federal fiscal structure breaks down, there is the added risk of regional Balkanization: instability within the military, routine violation of fundamental human rights, urban and rural violence, and increasingly vocal secessionist movement in the south. (203)

What globalization in effect has done is to turn violence into an endemic feature of daily life. Left with no choice but "to take arms against a sea of troubles/ And by opposing end them" (*Hamlet* III.i.59-60), violence becomes a way of life or a culture with the poorest of the poor. When Jean-Paul Sartre in his article "About Munich" famously commented that terrorism "is a terrible weapon but the oppressed poor have no others" (7) what he meant was that a completely cornered people will fight back without respect to the means involved. The condemnation of vast populations to complete neglect is a distinctive 20th century

phenomenon. Terrorism might be a "terrible weapon" when we think and speak of it from a morally neutral position, but there is no simple argument as to what it is that must stop the poor from using terrorism as a weapon to assert their selfhood where even their bare existence might not be acknowledged! Barbarization is a situation of ruleless violence that combines the innocent with the guilty in the same breadth without making moral distinctions. An example of barbarization is where women and children become victims of a situation that primarily might involve men settling scores with one another. Ruleless violence eliminates the possibility of any compassion for victims. With those in positions of power "barbaric" violence can be seen through ideological justifications expressed through euphemisms such as the infamous "war on terror" that George Bush Jr. made the goal of his Presidency. As Shadia B. Drury remarks:

> Bush has declared a war on terrorism. He is convinced that terror and civilization are opposites. He considers himself a *defender of civilization*, while considering his enemies to be the enemies of civilization. And being a defender of civilization, he is determined to eradicate the enemies of civilization in every corner of the globe. Again and again, he echoes Jesus (Luke 11:23) in declaring that those who are not with him are against him; those who are not with him are with the terrorists. (146)

What Bush does not do is to contextualize what he means by terrorism. He is merely articulating its discontents without an insight into the situation as such. It is important to comprehend in a meaningful manner the anger of the so-called "enemies of civilization" who happen to be the bearers of a violence that turns men and women from individuals into numbers or figures of speech. With the oppressed it is a violence that comes from a haunting sense of helplessness. In *Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust*, James M. Glass notes that in the extraordinary situation of Nazi oppression, "The violent resistor had to literally relearn moral positions, creating an ethics adaptive to the demands of survival; the spiritual resistor fought against the ever-present reality of madness and the sinking into apathy. For both, resistance preserved sanity and protected the self's integrity from the implosive power of genocidal action" (25). Where the choice is between life and death, a person will make demands on him or herself that he or she would not do so under normal circumstances.

The ease with which powerlessness translates into violence is a fact of life. In an endnote on why the poor are willing to "gamble" when they experience a hopeless situation of disempowerment, James Scott writes that:

> Occasionally, when a whole community or a culture experiences an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and its categories no longer make sense of the world, such gambles take on millennial tones, with new prophets arising to proclaim the way forward. The colonial conquest of preindustrial peoples, the German Peasant War at the time of the Reformation, the English Civil War, and the French Revolution seem to belong in this category. (429)

Powerlessness—far from being a source of despair—is in fact a motivating force where "new prophets" come into existence for a community to reinvent itself. The case of the Jewish victims of the holocaust demonstrates that violence can be a strategy of survival and not a virtue celebrated for its own sake. As Glass points out:

> The damage done by Jewish partisan units including the Bielski Unit suggests their success in implementing the philosophy and action of violence. The Vilna detachments

> alone derailed 242 trains, 113 locomotives and 1,065 railroad cars; destroyed 12 storehouses, 35 bridges, 257 vehicles, 1,409 miles of railroad tracks, 4.2 miles of communication wires and 11 tanks; and engaged over 4,800 enemy soldiers. What is so striking about these figures is how strongly they contrast to the despairing diaries typical of ghetto life, and how critical the issue of violence was to Jewish survival and the recovery of Jewish self-respect. (82)

The barbarism of the Nazis could not have been fought through less violent means than what Glass observes in the above quote; violence therefore results in a philosophy of survival based on an existential need for the Jews to recover from the painful denudation of their self-respect. The violence of the insulted and the injured is not the violence of the oppressed but the violence of oppression. It does not emerge from a sense of futility but a situation where rules that regulate common human behavior preventing individuals from resorting to Sadean excesses come to a standstill. The Manichean encounter between opposing forces acquires a virulence that is at once brutal and devastating. Defending the Red Army Faction in a 1977 article "Violence and Brutality," Genet remarks, "What we owe to Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, Holger Meins, Gudrun Ensslin, and Jan-Karl Raspe–to the RAF in general–is that they have made us understand, not only by words but by actions, both in and out of prison, that violence alone can bring an end to the brutality of men" (172). Genet continues to examine the basis of the RAF violence which was not meaningless as it was portrayed to be since its roots lay in the terrible violence of colonialism. In the case of the Norway attacks Karen J. Greenberg argues that "Breivik's terrorist attack is only the most stomach-churning byproduct of a European-wide Islamophobia that has progressively taken on more frenzied overtones." Genet makes an identical observation when he notes that the brutality in the "colonization of the third world" meant to benefit powerful companies is the apparent reason for the RAF violence:

> The colonization of the Third World was nothing but a series of brutal acts, very numerous and very long, with no other goal than the now rather atrophied one of serving the strategy of the colonialist countries and the wealth of companies investing in the colonies.
>
> From this there resulted a poverty; a despair that could not help but breed a liberating violence.
>
> But never, in all that we know of them, have the members of the RAF allowed their violence to become pure brutality, for they know that they would immediately be transformed into the enemy they are fighting. (172-73)

Interestingly, Genet's observation is that the RAF did not allow their violence to descend into the brutality true of the government, state, or society they were fighting against. If it were to be a fact that the RAF turned as brutal as the "enemy" they were fighting against, there would fundamentally be no difference between the violence that liberates as opposed to the violence that enslaves. The "liberating" dimension of the violence, however extreme it may seem to the immediate onlooker, cannot be ignored in understanding the RAF or why Genet is sympathetic towards them. In *Bringing the War Home* (subtitled "The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies") Jeremy Varon rightly recognizes the parallels between the antiglobalizaton movements of the 1990s and the "militant radicalism of the 1960s."

> The phenomenon of antiglobalization calls for—or even demands—a new look at 1960s protest, especially its violent edges. Now, as then, the core perception is that the prosperity of the few presupposes the exploitation and misery of the many. The catalyst for this awareness is a not a single, galvanizing "event" like the Vietnam War, but the grinding persistence of staggering levels of poverty, disease, and despair in a world capable of dramatically diminishing them. And now, as in the 1960s, the conclusion is that true justice must be global justice, making international solidarity the paramount value. (310)

The war that is brought "home" like the proverbial "chickens coming home to roost" (32) as Malcolm X called the Kennedy assassination, is the outcome of a politics of systematic plunder of working classes and third world poor that globalization has sought to legitimize.

If violence ought not to manifest itself in the form of brutality in order to be a political weapon meant to achieve calculated successes, an honest recognition of its limits in a movement organized to fight for social justice would serve its long-term purposes. Brutality is where one is violent for the sake of being violent: violence becomes an end rather than a means working towards a specific end. In any struggle for justice, irrespective of whether it claims to be democratic or not, it is essential not to overstate the importance of violence as a potential weapon. Violence cannot be a replacement to the end for which it was invoked in the first place, which is social and political justice. Interestingly, a warrior like Kambei Shimada, the head samurai in Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, holds the same view: that violence cannot be an end in itself. Shimada says to the farmers who want to murder a kidnapped bandit: "He's a captive who has confessed. He's begging for his life. You can't just chop him to pieces." Yet Shimada as an ageing samurai at the end of a strife-torn life displays tendencies towards enlightened humanism in his awareness that violence is ultimately useless with no higher purpose to serve. With the calm resignation of a Shakespearean poet-persona at the end of the play, Shimada responds to the sight of the farmers who have gone back to work on the soil: "In the end, we lost this battle too. I mean, the victory belongs to those peasants. Not to us." Thus violence, given its inherently "destructive" character, cannot either be celebrated or turned into a virtue or a way of life. Violence could never be a normal state of affairs except where the social order has completely broken down or when it is essentially repressive.

In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin states that: "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values" (241). Through the aestheticization of violence the fascists could successfully turn politics into a form of art without space for basic humanity. The narrator in the 1955 documentary film "Night and Fog" by Alain Resnais, a tale of the horrors of the concentration camps, recounts that: "A concentration camp is built the way a stadium or a hotel is built: With businessmen, estimates, competitive bids, and no doubt a bribe or two. No specific style-that's left to the imagination. Alpine style. Garage style. Japanese style. No style. Architects calmly design the gates meant to be passed through only once." Fascism through its aesthetics as expressed in the stylization of the concentration camps integrated violence with the politics of murder. The acceptable limits with respect to how far a person could go in being violent were

rendered meaningless by the Nazis. Hobsbawm remarks that, "when societies or social groups unused to a high degree of social violence find themselves practicing it, or when normal rules break down in traditionally violent societies, the established limits on the use or degree of violence can go" (*Globalization* 126). In the context of violence that emanates following the breakdown of social restraints, Hobsbawm notes rather interestingly that peasants "were not usually very bloodthirsty" (*Globalization* 126) because "customary behavior" played a role in retaining social controls with respect to how we treat ordinary folks or those who are defenseless despite being in a potentially violent situation. The success of Colombian narco-gangsters in the US was because, "in their struggle with rivals they no longer accepted the customary macho convention that one does not kill one's adversary's women and children" (*Globalization*126).

An appraisal of brutality therefore is the real issue and not just a critique of violence as if it existed as an independent category of thought. The brutalization or barbarization of a social order happens when limits on individual actions are removed. This is true as much of Nazis in Europe until the end of the Second World War as it is of the Khmer Rouge government led by Pol Pot in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. Theoretically speaking there is nothing to stop a person from descending into a state of utter brutality—even more so if he finds justification in ideology of some sort or the other for his actions. What kind of a society would it be where violence is *not* accepted as a normal feature of daily life is the real issue! From a realistic perspective, such a society is an abstraction invented by anarchists, who in the words of Peter Marshall "argue that the State is a recent development in human social and political organization, and that for most of history human beings have organized themselves in society without government and law in a peaceful and productive way" (12). The fact that a non-violent social order does not exist is not an indication that people accept violence as normal either. Either way the discontents of violence need to be imagined within a plausible context rather than theorized in purely abstract terms.

Idealizing the "Gospel" of Non-Violence

Intrinsic to the idealizing of non-violence is a double standard in a social order which seeks it *outside*–in how we expect others to relate to us; however, there tends to be enough justification as far as "our" own violence is concerned. Chomsky brilliantly illustrates this point with an example to demonstrate the effect of propaganda in our understanding of violence:

> During the thanksgiving holiday a few weeks ago, I took a walk with some friends and family in a national park. We came across a gravestone, which had on it the following inscription: "Here lies an Indian woman, a Wampanoag, whose family and tribe gave of themselves and their land that this great nation might be born and grow."
>
> Of course, it is not quite accurate to say that the indigenous population gave of themselves and their land for that noble purpose. Rather, they were slaughtered, decimated, and dispersed in the course of one of the greatest exercises in genocide in human history. (Peck 138)

In idealizing the Indian woman, her family and her tribe in a naïve manner without a dint of irony attached to it, an important point is made with regard to all the sacrifices that these generous and non-violent people made "that this great nation might be born and grow." There

is no mention of the fact that the "sacrifice" was imposed on them from above. Rather than volunteering to be sacrificed, the Indians were "slaughtered, decimated, and dispersed" in one of the worst genocides in history. Chomsky ironically adds that Americans who feel a sense of satisfaction at seeing the inscription on the gravestone "might react differently if they were to visit Auschwitz or Dachau and find a gravestone reading: "Here lies a woman, a Jew, whose family and people gave of themselves and their possessions that this great nation might grow and prosper" (Peck 138-139). While the double standard is one dimension to the idealizing of nonviolence, the other dimension is where there is a genuine ideal of a non-violent social order. If the ideal society is one where people do not hurt, maim, or kill one another with or without reason, a real society is one where those with an inclination to be violent are effectively reined in. However, North et al mention that "All societies face the problem of violence. Regardless of whether our genetic makeup predisposes humans to be violent, the possibility that some individuals will be violent poses a central problem for any group. No society solves the problem of violence by eliminating violence; at best, it can be contained and managed" (13). Tolstoy's story "Too Dear" brilliantly parodies the efforts of the modern state to violently restrain crime. It is about a kingdom where the decision to sentence a man to death for murder cannot be implemented for lack of a guillotine and an executioner, both of which are too expensive for the state–yet neither could the man be given life imprisonment because to build a prison and keep him in it was as *dear* as executing him. In the end the man is let off on a small pension to keep him going. Thus Tolstoy ends the story: "It is a good thing that he did not commit his crime in a country where they do not grudge expense to cut a man's head off, or to keeping him in prison for life."

The kingdom in the story is far from an ideal one with its principal source of income being a gaming house. Yet, ironically, there are practical reasons why we can do away with prisons and instead invest in human development. In the article "Prison Math: What are the costs and benefits of leading the world in locking up human beings?" Veronique de Rugy says that in the US the "growth in the prison population mainly reflects changes in the correctional policies that determine who goes to prison and for how long." Coming to the costs, she notes that "state correctional spending has quadrupled in nominal terms in the last two decades and now totals $52 billion a year, consuming one out of 14 general fund dollars." Going back to Tolstoy's point in the story "Too Dear," it could be far more practical, economical and humane to use this kind of money to reduce social and economic inequalities thus leading to the possibility of a relatively non-violent society.

That a non-violent society is an ideal to be sought does not alter the fact that the idealizing of non-violence as an end in itself along with an element of hypocrisy has a strongly one-sided character to it. In the process of questioning the moral basis of such false idealization, Martin Luther King asks this rhetorical question: "what kind of nation it is that applauds nonviolence whenever Negroes face white people in the streets of the United States but then applauds violence and burning and death when these same Negroes are sent to the fields of Vietnam?" (36). The "gospel" of non-violence in no way refers to what Pamela Oliver points out in her work "Racial Disparities in Criminal Justice:" "US imprisonment rates are much higher than the rest of the world, and within the US, African Americans are imprisoned at least eight times as often as European Americans, while American Indians and Hispanics are

imprisoned at two to three times the European American rate." Given the wide disparities in "imprisonment rates" depending on the race of the person involved in the crime, Angela Davis writes of the context specific to Black incarceration in the US:

> During the post-slavery era, as black people were integrated into southern penal systems—and as the penal system became a system of penal servitude—the punishments associated with slavery became further incorporated into the penal system…black people were imprisoned under the laws assembled in the various Black Codes of the southern states, which, because they were rearticulations of the Slave Codes, tended to racialize penality and link it closely with previous regimes of slavery…as a means of controlling black labor. (31)

The question of a non-violent order becomes a practically difficult one to envisage where the larger goal of social justice is not achieved. Victims of an unjust order are left with little choice but to turn into bricoleurs ready to use every available means at their disposal in order to further the cause of resistance. The idealization of non-violence could be as difficult to justify as turning violence into an ideal. The dividing lines between what precisely constitutes violence and what does not are blurred to the extent that it may not be feasible to arrive at a reasonable definition of violence that includes diverse contexts. The definition by Hannah Arendt that "violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power" (35) is unfortunately rooted in the bias that those who are violent seek power as an end in itself. Only someone without an in-depth knowledge of the history of resistance movements could come up with a simplistic notion that blankets all violence as a craving for power. Critically evaluating the view that a revolution is "a paroxysm of violence or eruptions of uncontrollable passions" (80), Selbin observes that "Only rarely in revolutionary processes is there violence simply for its own sake, a radical immersion in blood, but excesses have been committed" (80). The "flagrant manifestation of power" as a definition of violence applies to situations where violence exists for its own sake. In any other case violence especially where it is political is as much about resisting power as it could be a defining trait of power itself. A monolithic view of violence as being intertwined with power is thus a limited one. John Keane begins his book *Violence and Democracy* by asserting the inherently anti-democratic credentials of violence: "Violence is anathema to its spirit and substance. This follows, almost by definition, because democracy, considered as a set of institutions and as a way of life, is a non-violent means of equally apportioning and publicly monitoring power within and among overlapping communities of people who live according to a wide variety of morals" (1).

The heuristic limitation of an argument that looks at violence as being fundamentally anti-democratic rejects the space of dialogue on the multiple contexts where we could look at violence in a more nuanced manner. The hermeneutical argument with regard to violence is an attempt to discover the rationale of violence from the point of view of those who indulge in it without reducing it to an either/or opposition. The sense of "vacuity" underlying violence as in Stanley Kubrick's 1971 movie *A Clockwork Orange* does not explain situations where violence is a means with a given end in view. Therefore, Pasolini's 1975 movie *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom* politicizes the vacuity of meaningless violence as exhibited in violent sado-masochistic behavior in order to study its fascist dimension. A democracy is not only a space where institutional means are used to achieve ends not always clearly described within the institution

itself, but one where non-institutional means are used by non-institutional actors to achieve ends such as addressing the grievances of a marginal group. A protest in the form of a demonstration by a group of unemployed youth is an example of the latter. The protest could turn violent and the protesters could be conveying a serious point to the government. Violence in itself is not the issue here but the fact that the poorcould be fighting for exactly what they have been promised and denied within the parameters of a democratic state.

A political system that fails to deliver on its promises is as guilty of violence as those who respond to the failure in a violent manner. As Kevin Gosztola writes in "London Riots: A Symptom of the 'Burning' & 'Looting' of UK Public Services," "What seems lost on those in power is their role in triggering the riots—how the UK coalition government's assault on the middle class, working class, students, school children, the working poor, the unemployed, the disabled and everyone else who does not count themselves as rich or super-rich ultimately led to this eruption of arson, muggings and looting." No democracy can thrive on the politics of exclusion and neither should we call that which keeps the contradictions of a class society intact a liberal state. The idea of a democracy that is more or less universally accepted as legitimate is one that is egalitarian before it is expected to be non-violent. In a democracy, violence, especially political, could either emerge from the space of dissent or could be a method to dissent from mainstream positions. To the extent that he or she is violent with an intention of producing a certain impact on the system, that particular person continues to be democratic because his or her expectations are built into what a system is capable of giving them. Anthony J. Langlois says that, "the idea of democracy has come to play a crucial role as a legitimizer of political rule around the globe, to the extent that even those regimes which have no intention of acting democratically adopt the language and many of the external trappings of democracy" (1). The examination of violence in a democracy is not just to find a meaning to violence albeit an inclusive one, but to find meaningful ways through which the poor and powerless are able to legitimately voice their concerns.

Dialectical Rights of the Oppressed

In the quest for a genuinely non-violent order it is essential not to idealize either non-violence or democracy in the simplistic moral terms that we are familiar with of being either "good" or "bad." Violence is a certain form of power not in the negative sense of a "flagrant manifestation" but in a positive sense as that which demands rights elementary to one's *being-in-the-world.* The Heideggerean phrase being-in-the-world is not used only in a philosophical or a metaphysical sense but as the sense of fulfillment which a person experiences when she or he does not have to wake up each morning to experience an uncreative life that leaves one with little hope of a decent future. The lack of hope is exactly the situation that makes one completely indifferent to the politics of power thus becoming complicit in one's own victimization. As the narrator in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* says: "The man who is more than his chemistry, walking on the earth, turning his plow point for a stone, dropping his handles to slide over an outcropping, kneeling in the earth to eat his lunch; that man who is more than his elements knows the land that is more than its analysis" (120). Reduced to his or her "chemistry" and not allowed to transcend the "elements," a person's being-in-the-world is

taken away when dispossessed of language and a way of life. This is what Hernandez-Zamora is deeply critical of in his book *Decolonizing Literacy: Mexican Lives in the Era of Global Capitalism*:

> To turn the dispossessed into 'literate' people (*alfabetizarlos*) is thus integral to technocratic educational agendas in both Mexico and the US. Paradoxically, while portrayed as 'illiterate,' 'unskilled' or 'uneducated,' these groups have historically been excluded from the educational institutions of the dominant literate society. Thus, when they are urged to become literate they are somehow required to get their heads back into the lion's mouth, since education and literacy imply that the subjugated must enter into institutions and discourses from which their groups of origin have been expelled, and where those who enter often experience cultural and linguistic loss, alienation, ambiguity towards the dominant language or a decline in their educational expectations. (30)

The essence of colonial education is when the dispossessed are taken away from social and political change and increasingly made to agree with the dehumanizing aspects of a consumer society. What makes it colonial is the fact that the excluded are prevented from knowing their history. Thus someone becomes a doctor or an engineer without internalizing values that would make him or her sensitive to the needs of the community or the environment. This lack of care is an element of colonial education where a person could aim high in terms of performance but fails at the level of personhood because of a lack of a culturally rooted self. Malcolm X constantly emphasizes the need for the Blacks to know their history because it plays a role in psychologically freeing them from a sense of inferiority that comes as a part of colonial education:

> We have among our people those who are experts in every field, but seldom can you find one among us who is an expert on the history of the black man. And because of his lack of knowledge concerning the history of the black man, no matter how much he excels in the other sciences, he's always confined, he's always relegated to the same low rung of the ladder that the dumbest of our people are relegated to. (40)

The dispossession of selfhood is blatantly inhuman because it takes away a person's sense of beingness and dignity that from a humanist perspective we assume to be natural to any human person. This is what Pier Paolo Pasolini means when he claims that "the tragedy of the loss of dialect as one of the saddest moments in our loss of reality" (Hirschman 144). The "subjugated" who have lost their means of sustenance are forced to "experience cultural and linguistic loss" (Hernandez-Zamora 30). Other than violence there is no socially acceptable means for the poor to express themselves or to be heard. The violence that reminds the poor of their powerlessness serves the function of an aphrodisiac instilling a sense of destructive energy with no reason to recognize any bounds. To quote Pasolini:

> The people are fundamentally free and rich: They can be chained, stripped, gagged, but they're basically free; you can take their job, passport, even the table they eat on, but they're more or less free. Why? Because they've their own culture, and to have this vehicle to express yourself is to be free and rich, even if what you're expressing (in relation to the ruling class) is misery and a lack of freedom. (Hirschman 145)

The relationship between globalization and the "fundamental threats to people's social subjectivity, the coherence of their cultural world" (Kirby 106) is most visible in the case of

language as it is "arguably *the* core feature of all our cultural worlds that resources, bonds and inspires the values, customs, beliefs and practices which constitute our distinctive ways of life" (Kirby 106). Language is the space of difference in which the subject discovers his or her otherness. Globalization creates a false sense of otherness by homogenizing the cultures of countless peoples in various parts of the world to the benefit of a free-market economy that thrives on reducing the space of difference to a point where an authentic life based on choices emerging through one's language and cultural self become impossible. Deprived of dialects through which they could protest because they are of little or no importance in comparison to the standardized languages of global consumerism, a new kind of alienation sets in where a person emptied of cultural restraints internalizes the soullessness of a soulless order. The violence of an instrumental world-view where the subject's subjectivity or "soul" is connected to how much it is capable of consuming, in turn leads to the violence of consumption. The "soulless order" is another phrase for the consumer's sedated paradise in which there is no space for creative struggles that enhance one's humanity.

One of the worst kinds of violence would be that which takes away a person's ability to resist in his or her language and replaces it with a neutral discourse that renders a person ineffectual except in the terms set by a global capitalist discourse. In a system rigged against the poor, a neutral discourse that condemns violence in high moralistic terms without respect to the context that generates the violence does not give the poor a chance to speak for themselves. Effective ways of speaking against the violence of power are curtailed through the manipulation of mass media. The media as a tool of corporate power becomes the space where we see the suppression of dialects in favor of a standardized language. The cultural and social complexities of vast groups of people are turned into simple formulaic ways of understanding these *others*, thus justifying the hegemony of a certain class of people. The economic basis of the violence of power is manifested in how dialects are deliberately pushed into a state of inferiority. As Pasolini observes:

> Culture and economic conditions are perfectly coincident. A poor culture (agricultural, feudal, provincial) "knows" really only its own economic conditions, and from that vantage point, it articulates poorly, but according to the infinite complexity of existence. Only when something foreign infiltrates (something that now happens almost all the time with the constant contact with the totally different economic conditions), *then* that culture will be in crisis… A symbol of this "deviation" (so brutal and not at all revolutionary) of their cultural tradition, is the annihilation and humiliation of dialect, which, even though it remains statistically—spoken by the same number of people—is no longer a way of being nor a cultural value. (Hirschman 145)

To respond to the question of violence is to respond to the "annihilation and humiliation of dialect." The question of violence is not a *question* that needs to be logically examined unless we connect it to the larger issue of social and political justice. Where large numbers of people are deprived of a share in the global economy and left to perish at the margins, where their ability to articulate "the infinite complexity of existence" is taken away from them, where people are left with no alternative but to experience the alienation of soulless labour, where the poor through a politics of fear and regimentation are drugged with futile entertainment—that is a scene ripe for an outbreak of total violence. Yet, a violent act cannot be contextualized

without an intense probing into the moral basis of the action. If violence is going to be a means to replace one kind of an order with another, we need to ask: what is the shape of the alternative order going to be like? In his last interview, shortly before his murder, Pasolini said:

> My nostalgia is for those poor and real people who struggled to defeat the landlord without becoming the landlord. Since they were excluded from everything, they remained uncolonized. I'm afraid of these Black revolutionaries who are the same as their landlords, equally criminal, who want everything at any cost. This gloomy ostentation toward total violence makes it hard to distinguish to which "side" one belongs. (Hirschman 239)

Moral questions and ethical positions assume significance when we seek to understand the ways in which the "revolutionaries" are different from the "landlords" both in the means they use and the ends towards which they struggle. Where these distinctions are not made in a clear manner the remedy becomes as dangerous as the poison. If the end-view is not a just order that eliminates divisions, it "makes it hard to distinguish to which 'side' one belongs." My point, however, is that violence is built into a "violent" social condition which needs to be altered before anything else. Resistance is a dialectical position that places oppressed individuals and groups with the "inalienable" right to fight back a violent condition in which they are trapped. To understand why people fight when they experience the humiliation of a life without dignity is to arrive at a hermeneutics of violence that can situate it from the point of view of victims rather than their oppressors.

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