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The Many Shades of Violence

Introduction

Of what is it that we speak when we speak of ‘violence’? The term possesses a great deal of rhetorical value, commands immediate attention and evokes strong reactions ranging from reluctant fascination, to shock, to revulsion and to disapproval. In the lexicon of the English language, the status of violence as an impact-word is, perhaps, unrivalled. Maybe that is why violence comes so readily onto our lips and trips so easily from our tongue. We tend to readily reach for the word/term ‘violence’ and disregard the fact that other words, which might capture and conceptualize a state of affairs clearly and more precisely, are also readily available. Think of moments when we began to describe an incident to a friend, for example, that Ram subjected his spouse Rati to a string of choice epithets. It is more than likely that we will use the term ‘violent’ instead of abusive when we stick a descriptive label onto Ram’s speech.

Words, of course, are tricky things and we can never be sure/certain/confident/assured that we have used the right word to express/convey what we wanted to say. An interesting exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass* might illustrate what I am trying to say. ‘I don’t know what you mean by “glory”?’ said Alice to Humpty Dumpty. The latter smiled contemptuously, ‘of course you don’t – till I tell you. I meant there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’ ‘But “glory” doesn’t mean “a nice down argument”’, Alice objected. ‘When I use a word’, Humpty Dumpty said scornfully, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’ The

question is', said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.' 'The question is', said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master-that's all'.

Lewis Carroll, mathematician and logician, excelled in the subtle art of satire and word play. Coded in this exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty, which appears a piece of delightful literary nonsense at first sight, is a message. The search for unequivocal meaning, Carroll seems to tell us, is doomed. Speakers intend that their words should mean more or less what they want them to mean. And readers or listeners interpret these words/sentences/paragraphs through their own prism of understanding. Within a given range, the term 'violence' can be infused with any one of the several meanings the author/speaker wishes to attribute to the term, ranging from intimidation, abuse, brutality, force, coercion, to harassment.

But we dwell too much on this point, and for this particular argument the point is relatively minor. The extensive and often unnecessary use of violence in everyday speech is hardly a matter of immense significance. In the hands of a skilled speaker, inclined towards extravagant propositions and fulsome overstatements, the substitution of violence for other words can be used tellingly and to dramatic effect. Violence is after all a high-impact word. There is absolutely nothing wrong here. We seldom choose the words we use with care and after considerable deliberation. That would prove fatal for whatever spontaneity or conversational skills we possess. Instinctively, though, we seem to know which word sounds better, or more effective, in a sequence of words we call a sentence.

When, however, the *concept* of violence becomes a stand-in for other concepts, which are infinitely more suitable simply because they illumine both the issue at hand and the implications that follow with greater clarity, it is time to wonder what this substitution does to conceptual understanding. It is a sad reflection on the present state of political science, wrote the great philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), that our terminological language does not distinguish between key terms such as power, strength, force, authority and violence, all of

which refer to distinct, different phenomena and would hardly exist unless they did. To use them as synonyms, she suggested, indicates not only certain deafness to linguistic meaning, it has also resulted in blindness with respect to the realities they correspond to.

Her essay on violence published in 1969 bore the stamp of the times, the cold war, the nuclear arms race, American intervention in Vietnam and above all campus and worker revolts in Europe and the United States. The late 1960s and the early 1970s witnessed substantial outpourings of philosophical literature as political philosophers rushed to think through what violence means, and what it stands for. And this was the urgent need of the day, for large numbers of students, activists and workers inspired by the Maoist dictum that power flows out of the barrel of a gun had revolted against the system and opted for violence.

In this context, Arendt set out to distinguish power from violence. Power, she argued, exerts a moral force. For this very reason violence cannot generate power. To make precisely this point, she warned against the practice of using violence either as a catch-all term or as a synonym for other more apt concepts. We cannot reduce, she argued, public affairs to dominion.¹

From a related vantage point, let me add to the critique of the indiscriminate use of the concept of violence, a concept that is explanatory, descriptive, normative, or all three. How does the substitution of violence for other terms help us comprehend the specific ways in which people are harmed? How does this switch help us to grasp the implications of specific forms of injustice? This work tries to negotiate these questions as part of a political project, of advancing the cause of justice. Simply put, in order to press for remedial justice, we have to be sure of what sort of injustice has been inflicted upon groups of people.

One objective of the argument in the second part of this chapter is to try to distinguish violence from other sorts of injustices. But before that we have to grapple with the many shades of violence, simply in order to establish the meaning attributed to violence in this

essay. Since one of the tasks of a political theorist is to strive towards conceptual clarity, I explore some influential understandings and interpretations of violence and proceed to define what is meant by violence.

Overloading violence

We must know what we speak of when we speak of violence, simply because the concept has become a hot favourite of a number of influential theorists, particularly those belonging to the left. In the process, it has been subjected to some degree of over-extension. It has simply imploded. We no longer seem to know what the difference between torture in the police stations of Delhi and little babies dying of malnutrition in remote areas of India is.

Take the concept of structural violence, which has taken on a new lease of life after the intellectual labours of Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek. The anthropologist Akhil Gupta in a fascinating work on the arbitrariness and the randomness, with which the lower bureaucracy treats groups targeted by poverty eradication programmes, argues that structural violence is responsible for the paradox of Indian politics. The paradox is that huge numbers of Indians remain mired in poverty despite a plethora of anti-poverty programmes. Gupta makes the usual nod to Agamben but chooses to rely heavily on the Norwegian sociologist Johann Galtung's articulation of the concept.

In 1969, amidst a profusion of writings on violence, the concept of structural violence had been popularized by Johann Galtung. Galtung was interested in violence because he was interested in peace. Basically, he expanded the concept of violence to include injustice. A society in which no one physically harms another human is peaceful, but only in a negative sense. Positive peace can be obtained when structural violence, embedded in unjust social and political institutions and practices, is banished. Structural violence is not direct, nor can it be

attributed to identifiable individuals, but the net impact of this genre of violence is the same as that of visible and targeted acts. Structural violence impedes the somatic and mental realisations of human beings.² Direct violence causes harm. Injustice also causes harm. The similarity in outcomes puts both violence and injustice into the same category of structural violence.

Galtung seems to suggest that nothing less than the realisation of justice secures peace. The identification of two different sorts of objectives, howsoever desirable they may be, is, however, a little puzzling. We can easily subscribe to the proposition that justice can be realized only when that society is (relatively) peaceful, or that peace is a necessary precondition of justice, not its synonym. Scholars have identified other problems with Galtung's theory of structural violence,³ but here let us turn to Akhil Gupta and see how he conceptualizes structural violence.⁴ Gupta is concerned with invisible forms of violence in India, such as poverty that leads to the death of millions of the poor, especially women, girls, lower-caste people and indigenous people. Poverty is crippling because it prevents people from doing what they should be doing or what they want to do. It can, therefore, be seen as a case of structural violence. The unarticulated analogy is with physical violence. P by injuring Q prevents the latter from performing actions that make her life worthwhile. But, poverty prevents people from actualizing their capacities. Gupta's notion of structural violence goes much beyond physical injury; it includes exclusions from entitlements such as food and water, and also the exclusion of certain groups from particular forms of recognition such as citizenship rights, equal rights before the law, right to education and representation.

Faithful to Galtung, Gupta argues structural violence that produces victims and triggers suffering cannot be attributed to a particular agent. It represents in Gupta's memorable words a 'crime without a criminal'. But even though the identity of the criminal cannot be latched onto with precision, generally speaking, everyone who benefits from the system is complicit in the perpetration of structural violence on those who do not benefit. Expectedly, the doers of violence in India include

not only the elites, but also the fast-growing middle class, whose increasing number and great consumer power are celebrated by an aggressive 'global capitalism'.⁵ Certain classes of people have a stake in perpetuating a social order in which extreme suffering is not only tolerated but also taken as normal. Evidently, there is no collective wish to change the status quo. Clearly, all those who are poor are victims, and all those who are not poor are purveyors of violence.

The proposition is bound to take lovers of detective fiction aback. A murder most foul has been committed, but there is no murderer whose identity the author of the novel will unfold only in the last pages of the detective story. Surely in cases of murder, or even serious physical injury, there must be an agent of violence, and there must be some sort of force that voluntarily or involuntarily involves coercion. How on earth did these victims come to harm? Gupta tells us that in order to answer this question we have to commit regicide.

That is we should unpack the state, decompose it into the myriads of constituents that comprise the institution and detect thereby the production of a culture of indifference. This culture is manifested through slippages, casualness and randomness with which targets of anti-poverty programmes are viewed. Bureaucratic casualness and arbitrariness guarantee not only that people live in dire want, but also that some sections of needy people win, and others, who are equally needy, lose out. Gupta's anthropology of the fragments of the Indian state explores the modalities of violence-corruption, modes of writing and governmentality. This is undeniably the strong point of the book. From the perspective of political theory, the focus on structural violence is also one of its possible weaknesses.

Maximal notions of violence

Consider the currently fashionable concept of structural violence, at once both theatrical and imprecise. As an expansive notion of violence, it can mean anything, from the production of violence by

social orders to the production of social orders by violence. Violence does not have a beginning, a mid-point or an end. It is part of institutions, practices and culture, embedded in the very woodwork that frames the life of the social collective. Certainly, the ascription of violence to the intricate and confusing pirouettes of capitalism produces an argument that is both appealing and persuasive. Why should we only see police brutality as an instance of violence that is attended by great harm, but not see artificially created food shortages that cripple little children, or damage expectant and lactating mothers, as violence? All too often cases of direct and transparent violence get precedence in news reports, and malnutrition is seen as the product of a malfunctioning system. Admittedly, the imaginary produced by the concept of structural violence is deeply persuasive. It has convinced many a friend on the left that capitalism and violence are conjoined at the hip, Siamese twins no less.

Yet doubts remain, simply because the expansion of a concept beyond recognizable boundaries can also loosen it out to an alarming degree. Nuclear war that kills millions and irremediably scars generations to come represents a straightforward case of violence. This is clear. Do great divergences in income also represent a case of structural violence, or do they properly belong to another category, say inequality and injustice? I will come back to this later in this section of the argument, here let us explore some of the other weaknesses of what, otherwise is a powerful, even a seductive political argument.

First, is nothing going on in society outside the frame of violence? Second, are these theorists using violence descriptively or conceptually? Third, do structures predetermine action or do we impact structures by our actions? Indisputably, structures inhibit individual actions, for example patriarchy seriously hampers the capacity of women to live lives the way they want to. On the other hand, the institution of patriarchy has been impacted by the rise of the feminist movement, and by the way the movement has shaped the political consciousness of women and some men. Structures constrain but they also enable.

These are interesting questions and worth exploring, but it seems to me that the problem with theories of structural violence lies elsewhere. The concept simply does not distinguish between intentional violence and violence as the unintended outcome of a host of other factors. But there may be, and often is, a qualitative distinction between the two. Consider the case of a government that has taken on the responsibility of providing reasonably priced food to poor citizens. But food just does not reach this segment of the population. Failure to ensure that people have assured access to food will almost certainly lead to starvation and premature deaths.

Before rushing to condemn this government of inflicting violence on hapless and vulnerable citizens and of causing harm, we would do well to ponder why the government lapsed on its responsibilities. For instance, citizens living in region X may not get the food allotted to them because of poor administration, inadequate infrastructure, unseasonal rains which lead to losses of food stocks, corruption in the distribution of food, imperfect mapping of target populations, general insensitivity and cynicism, all those features of bad governance that Gupta elaborates so well. Irrespective of the exact combination of reasons why food has not been delivered, people have been harmed. This is indisputable.

Now consider a government that intentionally denies food to the poor in region Y, simply because it is inhabited by a religious or caste group that did not vote for the present government in the last election. The elected government decides to reward its supporters and penalize its opponents, even though it has announced a food-aid programme to help the poor, and a majority of the poor live in region Y.

Can we equate the two cases of failure to provide food? Surely not. In the first case, hunger and starvation is the outcome of a host of processes that might well belong to happenstance, for example a tornado might visit the region. Or, the government may be unable to extend help to people in need, because road robbers, or mercenaries or insurgents routinely hijack the convoy of trucks carrying food.

In the second case, the government decides not to provide food to citizens and *can* be held responsible for hunger-related deaths. In this case, harm has been caused by the intentional denial of basic rights of citizens. Let us not mistake the matter. Gupta is perfectly correct when he damns the Indian government for failing to implement its own programmes. Would he have not dammed the government in stronger terms if it had purposefully withheld anti-poverty programmes from militancy-hit areas such as Assam, Manipur, Chattisgarh and Kashmir?

Theorists of structural violence rule out intentionality as central to violence and responsible for harm. Harm is produced through a complex of processes that are difficult to unravel and moreover seem to be produced unintentionally. Consider now the implications of this formulation. Our roles in a society are produced and reproduced by violence and are predestined, or so it appears. We are fated to be either the vendors of or the addressees of violence. It depends on the social class we are born into. This practically rules out agency or the capacity to act according to our political judgement. Let alone act against the grain of our class dictates, we cannot, ever, be trapped in Hamlet's classic dilemma – to 'be' or not to 'be' violent.

There is more. If Ram intentionally injures Rati through acts of violence, he is morally responsible. We can allot moral responsibility for harm, only if we are convinced that Ram had set out deliberately to injure someone. Recollect that criminal law distinguishes between pre-mediated murder and extenuating circumstances such as diminished responsibility. If Ram has infringed the negative right of Rati not to be harmed, and in the process violated his own duty not to cause harm, he must be prepared to take responsibility for the act. This may range from imprisonment, to paying of compensation to the addressee of violence and/or her family, to community service. But if injury is caused unintentionally, or because Ram is the bearer of roles that structures have laid down for him, can we demand that he take on responsibility?

When it comes to the state and its personnel, the detachment of harm from intention and responsibility bears serious implications. State officials are practically liberated from complicity and thereby responsibility. And targets of violence have no one to fix blame on. They cannot, after all, demand redress or compensation from impersonal structures. Nor can they drag these structures to the bar from which justice is dispensed. The addresses of violence are, thereby, denied agency. Structural violence theories cannot really explain this aspect of human behaviour.

Speaking back to history

Recollect the upsurge against the state as well as dominant social groups in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Morocco and other countries in the Middle East from December 2010 onwards. Protests that marked the 'Arab Spring' were sparked off when on 17 December 2010 a 26-year-old vegetable vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire before a government building in the rural town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia. He committed self-immolation in protest against public humiliation heaped on him by a police officer. The act sparked off massive protests across the country and resulted in demands that President Zina El Abidina resign. A month later the president fled the country.

Notably, some countries that were rocked by protests were under military regimes, others under individual despots. The inhabitants of these societies had been denied basic rights such as freedom of expression and right to association. They had been harmed by unjust state structures. Yet people came together in crowded public places to protest against harm caused by definable acts, from abuse of authority, to upping bus fares in Brazil, to denial of rights. The protestors identified the perpetrators of injustice, demanded that they be punished for the injuries wreaked upon people and insisted on both retributive and remedial justice. What had been thought of as the unthinkable and

improbable had been translated into the probable and the achievable. A number of successful autocrats were forced to demit office, Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen.

The Arab Spring might have fetched mixed results, significantly, however, civil societies in these countries have shown that they are able to stand up and speak back to histories not of their making and not to their liking. For many years, scholars had spoken of the resilience of authoritarianism in the Arab world and of dismal prospects of liberation. The adverse impact of neo-liberal reforms on the lives of people, combined with perceived lack of legitimacy of these regimes, culminated in massive protests, which took the government, the opposition and even civil society organizations by surprise. Notably in Egypt, the demand was not only for bread but also for freedom and human dignity.

Contesting violence

The proposition made by votaries of structural violence, that the state is nothing but a condensate of power and illegitimate violence, and that societies are governed by the relentless impulse to violence, or that violence runs rife, is frankly trite, outright banal. All states and all societies exhibit a relentless will to power. Our modern democratic state, backed as it is by weapons of mass destruction, is embedded in violence and engaged in a constant effort to subdue citizens. This is well known; it is even a given. But the modern democratic state also speaks the language of entitlements and rights, of representation and participation and of accountability and responsibility. Therefore, the state is, for many political groups, a field of expectations. It naturally becomes the target of collective protest when these expectations are betrayed. Protests against the state spill over into protests against symbolic or material power wielded by 'big men' in society. Where democracies have not been institutionalized, or where the army or dictators rule, the idea of democracy inspires people to fight for

their right to liberty against the state and authoritarian societies. Where democracies have been inadequately institutionalized, protests demand the rollback of injustice and realization of the democratic idea.

Institutions of democracy often falter and falter seriously. This is particularly true of Indian democracy, which is, but, imperfectly realized. What is important is that the idea of democracy has inspired marginal groups to fight for what is right and what is their right both in state and in society. Some groups recover agency; some do not. But structural violence underplays crucial factors of intention, moral responsibility and agency. The concept cannot come to terms with the fact that yesterday's victims have today revealed enormous capacity both to speak back to histories not of their making and to make their own histories. These histories may not be the one they wanted to make in the first instance, but this is politically not all that significant. None of us make history in conditions of our own choice as Marx reminded us. What is important is that people want to make the transition from subject to citizen. It is this crucial factor of agency that often goes missing in theories of structural violence.

I do not mean to dismiss the concept of structural violence. It undeniably articulates the sense of frustration and anger at the high degree of tolerance society exhibits towards harm in general, and deprivation and exploitation in particular. But when we draw attention to these features, we *castigate* the kind of society we live in. We do not *conceptualize* violence. Arguably, theories of structural violence should be able to explain why I bear moral responsibility for something I did not do to another person who has been harmed, or if I did not intend that harm should be caused to another through my actions. This has to be explained and clarified. But it is precisely this theorists of structural violence do not explain.

If we need to know of what we speak when we speak of violence because we want to clarify processes that lead to political judgement, we should try not to extend the concept, overload it or using it as a handy synonym for other concepts. This route leads nowhere except to considerable conceptual muddles.

Discrete virtues of a parsimonious theory of violence

It is possible that the over-extension of a concept can lead to its implosion. For this reason, a coherent and a *political* concept of violence must necessarily be parsimonious (in the dictionary meaning of sparse or cheese-paring) *if* we want to know what we speak of when we speak of violence. For this, we need to distinguish the characteristics of violence and figure out which of these features *defines* violence.

The most obvious feature of violence is the use of force. In the English language, the etymological origin of violence can be traced to two terms of which the first is *violentus*. The term *violentus* captures the property of an act. For example, we could describe Rahim's act in shutting the door of his car with great force as violent. All that we mean to indicate is that Rahim shut the car door with more force than was required, or that he slammed the door shut by using excessive force. Here 'violent' is used purely descriptively. We can of course push the implication of the statement further and suggest that the act told us in graphic detail about the state of Rahim's mind. He was either furious or desperate, either frustrated or threatened or he might just have been in a hurry to keep an appointment because he was running late. What is incontrovertible is that the term 'violence' captures the dominant property of an act, or that it is used evocatively. Doors are opened and shut at fairly regular intervals and we hardly register this empirical fact. It is the insertion of 'violent' as a prefix to the act of shutting the car door that marks the act as worthy of note.

Note that as of now, Rahim's act in slamming the door shut with excessive force did not hurt anyone or infringe anyone's negative right not to be harmed. Matters are qualitatively different if his action injured Rehana, who exiting the car from the rear door had her hand on the doorjamb at the exact moment that Rahim slammed the door shut. The description of an act that harmed someone, because it was performed with more force than needed, as violence, corresponds to the word *violare* or violation of the right not to be harmed. This brings

us to harm as the second component of violence. But, before we discuss harm, let us dwell on force a little more.

Force is, arguably, a generic feature of violent acts. Is force the *distinguishing* feature of violence? Perhaps not, for it is possible to distinguish between force and violence. Force can be used to protect someone. Rehana has to use some degree of force if she wants to prevent her child from running into a crowded road. Or, Rati might have to slap Rita, who is bent on committing suicide, hard so that the latter to her senses and reverses her decision to jump off the bridge into the angry, foaming sea. Rehana and Rati have used force, and the use of force causes injury. But it also prevents greater harm, an accident in the first case, and a suicide in the second. Second, in games such as soccer or boxing, the players use a great deal of force and often injure each other, but this can hardly be termed a case of violence as the deliberate infliction of harm. Descriptively we can describe these sports as violent. Third, actions can involve force but this does not harm anyone. Rahim, as we have seen, slammed a door shut with great force, but he did not harm anyone. Here again violence is used descriptively.

Conversely, people can be harmed without being subjected to excessive force. Think of sophisticated modes of torture that leave no trace on the corporeal body. Someone can be drugged before he is killed, or she can be put to death by administering highly sophisticated forms of poisoning that do not cause convulsions such as frothing at the mouth and savage biting of the tongue.

The strange story of the death of the Sphinx who guarded the doors of Thebes comes to mind in this context. Wandering through the land after he had visited the Oracle at Delphi, Oedipus confronts the Sphinx. This creature, half-human and half-animal, had been sent by the Gods to Thebes to punish the inhabitants for the sins committed by King Laius. Many moons ago, a soothsayer had warned Laius, the King of Thebes, and his wife, Jocasta, that their son would kill his father and marry his own mother and thus commit both incest and parricide.

A panic-stricken Laius ordered that the feet of his newly born son should be pierced and bound together, and that the baby should be abandoned on Mount Cithaeron to perish. Fate had a different future in store for the infant. Overcome by compassion, the servant handed over the infant to a shepherd who tended the sheep of King Polybus of Corinth. The baby, christened Oedipus because the injury to his ankles had led to swollen feet, was adopted by King Polybus and his Queen. In due course of time, Oedipus, rendered distraught by the rumour that he had been adopted, trekked to Delphi to consult the Oracle. Terrible news awaited him: that he was fated to kill his father and wed his mother. Determined to sidestep these twin scourges, Oedipus took the road away from Corinth. On the way, he entered into an altercation with a group of attendants carrying an elderly gentleman in a palanquin. During the ensuing scuffle, our benighted hero struck the elderly gentleman with his stick. The gentleman, who turned out to be King Laius, was killed on the spot. Completely oblivious to the fact that he had, after all, committed the grave sin of parricide exactly as a malevolent fate had ordained, Oedipus fled the spot. He subsequently came across the Sphinx who sat astride the gates of Thebes.

From this strategic perch, the Sphinx allowed people to enter into the city only if they could solve a riddle she posed to them. A dreadful fate awaited people who could not answer. They were devoured by the Sphinx, who had developed a taste for human flesh. The Sphinx, who had been anointed by the Gods to slowly but surely ruin Thebes, cut the city-state off from the rest of the world. Oedipus proved a saviour because, much to the astonishment of the Sphinx, he was able to solve the riddle. The Sphinx was so taken aback by his sharp intelligence that she threw herself off the cliff in either shock or utter desperation, or both. The fall put a violent end to the gatekeeper of Thebes. This must be the only case in history of a death brought on by a person, who in our world would be hailed as an expert at quizzing. In sum, the use of force may be used to prevent harm, it may not harm anyone and harm can be produced by factors other than force. Force is a component of violence, but it is not its defining feature.

Is then harm the constitutive aspect of violence? Despite major disagreements, theorists of violence generally accept that harm is central to the concept. But this is not the end of the story because harm can be caused intentionally or unintentionally. There is a finite difference between intentional and unintentional harm. To illustrate this point, let us revisit our earlier example. Rahim shut the car door with some force, and in the process, hurt Rehana whose hand was on the doorjamb. But Rahim might not have meant to hurt Rehana at all. He simply may not have noticed that the latter was also exiting the car. Can we seriously hold Rahim responsible for injuring his passenger? He acted thoughtlessly, we can conclude with some justification, and this thoughtlessness, or absent-mindedness or whatever his state of mind might have been at that time, caused distress.

Can we, in all honesty, blame him quite as much as we would have if he had shut the door on Rehana's hand intentionally, in full knowledge that she had placed her hand on the doorjamb? As suggested above, we cannot but acknowledge the difference between a government that fails to provide food to its citizens because trucks carrying food were hijacked and a government that intentionally holds back food from one section of citizens. In both cases, citizens suffer, but the moral responsibility of the government towards these citizens is surely greater in the second case than in the first. The distinction between knowing and not knowing, or intention and happenstance, has important implications for any judgement on violence.

This point is not of consequence to utilitarian philosophers who focus on harm and dispense with intentionality. Utilitarians insist that people are responsible not only for acts of commission, but also for those of omission, not only for what they did, but also for what they did not do. That is, they do not see any major difference between acts that cause harm and failure to perform an act, provided that we know that non-action will cause harm. Knowledge is in this case identified with intention.

The Marxist Utilitarian philosopher John Harris argues that deaths caused by indifference and neglect of society and its rulers

must be seen as being as much as a part of violence as violent acts of revolutionaries. Why do we see a murder as a violent act, and not see that men can die because of starvation, neglect or abandonment? We assign moral responsibility to agents for acts of commission as well as omission, argues Harris, only if they intend to cause harm. They are equally responsible if they have done nothing to prevent harm. Within the conception of negative actions, Harris argues that people must be held responsible for not acting if they knew that they could prevent harm, and if they were in a position to do so.

The utilitarian argument, which attributes moral responsibility to both action and non-action, is both powerful and deeply disturbing. Someone somewhere has caused harm, and that person must accept moral responsibility and make amends. The implications are, however, troublesome. Every time I fail to contribute to a charity that I know provides poor children education, food or literacy or healing, I perform an act of violence. But surely there is a qualitative difference between not contributing to a charity because I forgot and injuring someone directly by knifing her.

If I set out to injure, say, Rati, I am culpable and therefore morally responsible. Will I be culpable if I fail to save Rati from harm? Certainly failure to avert harm is morally condemnable. If I watch someone assaulting Rati and do not intervene, I am, rightly speaking a coward. Does cowardice imply that I am *responsible* for Rati's injuries? Negligence and cowardice are morally significant in so far as they are undesirable attributes of the human condition, but surely intentionality is even more significant to morality. Intention is central to violence.

The belief that intention defines violence presumes voluntary action in so far as I had a choice between doing and not doing harm. I, or you, the state or non-state actor, chose to do harm, and this makes each of us morally responsible. Consider, for instance, the distinction between two sorts of acts. A car driver causes an accident and injures people, not intentionally but because he had a cardiac attack while at the wheel. Compare this incident with the case of a car driver who under the influence of alcohol runs over people sleeping

on the pavements of Delhi. Who is morally culpable and responsible, and who should compensate the victims of violence, the person who had no choice or someone who had a choice and chose badly? Intention is central to violence and is a defining feature of violence. More significantly, intention carries the factor of moral responsibility. It is the factor of choice that distinguishes the concept of violence from descriptions of an act as violent, because it allows us to make judgements.

What does the discussion above tell us? An act that involves a considerable degree of force or energy can certainly be described as violent, but it need not establish a social relation between persons. Second, a social relationship can be established through the use of force and the infliction of harm. But if the use of force is not intentional, the person who has inflicted harm unintentionally may not be considered morally responsible. Third, the intentional use of force to cause harm is central to the concept of violence. Intention makes the person who performs a violent act morally responsible. This is a basic code of justice. While driving if I take a right turn without indicating that I am doing so and cause an accident, I am responsible and must compensate the victim. But if a car hits me while my car is stationary at a traffic light, I cannot be blamed. The other driver has caused an accident. In both cases, harm was caused, but the allotment of moral responsibility takes different roads.

Let me wrap up the argument above. Central to the concept of violence is intention. This naturally excludes natural disasters that cause massive harm from the conceptual category of violence. A storm that wrecks everything in its path leads to immense harm. People are uprooted, dislocated, and killed, property destroyed and the environment devastated. Storms or 'acts of God' cause harm, but can we place this incident within the conceptual category of violence? Properly we cannot, because in this case, we can neither discover a purposeful agent nor an identifiable victim whom our agent intends to harm. Harm has been caused, and *descriptively* the storm that caused harm can certainly be termed violent.

Conceptually, matters are different because violence does not belong to happenstance, or something that is an unintended by-product of processes independent of human volition, or something that is, because it cannot be otherwise. Intention implies that an agent, whether a non-state actor, or the state or both, choose to inflict violence on others. If they chose to inflict violence, they must bear responsibility for these acts, be punished and/or be forced to compensate for harm. It is this dimension of violence that has gone missing in theories of structural violence.

And now for some conceptual muddles

Structural or systemic violence is a flexible concept that seeks to explain everything from babies dying of diarrhoea in poverty-stricken areas of India, to acts of terror committed by agents at war with a particular religion or an ideology. Refusing to accept intention as central to the concept, votaries of this avatar seek to immerse every social evil in the vocabulary of violence. Take Gupta's suggestion that persons who benefit from the system participate, unwittingly no doubt, in violence against those who do not benefit. There is room for puzzlement. People can be and are insensitive to the poor who inhabit the same society, and who are metaphorically speaking their neighbours. They can rightfully be categorized as indifferent, callous, selfish and blameworthy, but violent? The mind boggles. The problem should be clear by now. Because the concept of violence has been subjected to indiscriminate expansion, it has become a stand-in concept, or an easy synonym for other concepts that can arguably capture processes that cause harm, to more effect.

In any case, what, we can rightfully wonder, is the specific advantage of using violence as a stand-in category for other concepts that also relate to ill-being? We have a range of concepts at hand, such as oppression, discrimination, social injustice and exploitation that both capture and describe specific forms of ill-being. All these concepts

inform us that certain wrongs have been done to human beings, and that these should not have been done.

Note, however, that the processes that lead to wrongdoing, or to harm, are fairly distinctive, even if they overlap. Consider discrimination. The concept of discrimination tells us that a group of people have been denied benefits such as the right to life and liberty, freedom of expression and association; the right to form trade unions; and the right to health care, education, employment or income that are readily available to other members of society, for reasons that are purely arbitrary, belonging to the 'wrong' ethnic group for instance. If I am denied the right to freedom of expression, movement and assembly merely because I live in a region that is marked by insurgency, I am *discriminated* against. Discrimination takes place when we are denied what others in our society are entitled to, for no justified reason. The imposition of draconian acts such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which grant immunity to army personnel during the course of their duty in the Kashmir Valley and in the North-East of India, amounts to rank discrimination. The inhabitants of these regions suffer from infirmities that other Indians do not for no fault of their own, they are, therefore, discriminated against.

If the owner of a textile unit makes his workers labour for long hours without adequate remuneration, this particular form of injustice is properly called exploitation. If I am denied an equal share in the benefits that my society has to offer, and if I have to bear a disproportionate share of the burdens of this society, I am the victim of social injustice.

When millions of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in poverty-stricken areas in central and east India suffer from avoidable harm, eke out a bare existence, continue to be subjected to rank indignities and die premature deaths, their situation is best conceptualized as social injustice. When the security forces of the state fire upon them without any justification, and when this leads to injuries and death, this is best conceptualized as violence. When a particular group bears a disproportionate share of the burden of a

society, without participating in the benefits that society has to offer, we properly term this a case of social injustice. Violence occurs when we are physically harmed. Violence and injustice are wrong in different ways. Violence infringes our right to bodily integrity; injustice denies people a fair share in the benefits and instead puts the burdens on their shoulders. Both harm but in distinctive ways.

In this precise context, Vittorio Buffachi makes an interesting argument. He suggests that if we make an equation between violence and injustice, the course of argument is simplistic, misleading and reductionist. If a theory of justice is to eradicate injustice, then we must understand exactly why injustice is bad and wrong. This is where the literature on violence can help us. A comprehensive study of the concept of violence can help us to make sense of the meaning of injustice, as well as engender a more extensive commitment to social justice as the only antidote against violence. What appears nebulous in terms of injustice becomes much clearer in terms of violence. We cannot understand injustice, suggests Buffachi, simply by calling it another name, viz injustice. But when we inverse the roles, start from a theory of violence, and analyse injustice in terms of violence, we realize that injustice is bad and wrong for the same reasons that violence is bad and wrong. The reason is that both victims of injustice and violence are humiliated and feel powerless and vulnerable.⁶ I think Buffachi makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of both injustice and violence. Whereas he makes a distinction between the two concepts, he suggests that the impact of injustice on the victim is similar to impact of violence on the same or other victims. In other words, he explores the concept of injustice through the prism of the concept of violence.

Let me take the argument on the distinctiveness of concepts made by Buffachi further. The fact that two distinct processes breed the same kind of consequences does not warrant the conclusion that these two processes can be collapsed into each other. An inspiring piece of music enchants, watching a skilful cricketer play excites and a beautifully written book produces pleasure and exhilaration. Delight,

excitement, pleasure and exhilaration are companion emotions in so far as they promote a sense of happiness. But by that fact alone, we cannot assume that a game of cricket is akin to an inspiring piece of music or to a piece of wonderfully and elegantly written prose. Similarly, whereas it is true that violence harms and harms abundantly, injustice harms equally abundantly. Just because the consequences that follow both violence and injustice are similar, that is, harm and injury, why should we proceed to substitute one term for another? Buffachi makes the same point from a different vantage point.

Moreover, when theorists bring different kinds of social and political concepts under the umbrella of violence, they simply do not recognize that different strategies are at hand to remedy the wrong inflicted upon human beings. Suppose Rati is a victim of domestic violence, and she appeals to a women's group for help. By now, women's groups more or less know how to deal with domestic violence: drag the erring spouse to court under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005. But if Rati's interests have been harmed because she has been denied her rightful share in parental property, a different sort of process is at work; that of skewed property rights in a patriarchal society that is unjust to women. In this case, feminists will have to invoke the Hindu Succession Amendment Act 2005, to help her fight for her legitimate right.

In the first case, Rati has been subjected to excessive physical force, and this has infringed her negative right not to be harmed. The consequences of this infringement are serious: wounds, fractured bones, torn ligaments, bruises, scars, a shattered psyche and ruined confidence. In the second case of denial of equal property rights, her psyche will certainly be in tatters because she realizes that as a daughter she does not count as an equal with her male siblings. But this is the outcome of gender injustice, not of the use of excessive force that infringes her basic rights.

Certainly, violence as part of political rhetoric plays a powerful role in arousing moral outrage, but we might fail to understand what

is so distinctive about particular ways of causing harm. There is arguably a substantive distinction between being denied social and economic rights, and unmarked graves, encounter deaths, mutilation, rape, stabbings, strangulation, decapitating, burning and drowning. The concept of violence is best reserved for the latter category of cases. Why should we carry out this substitution in any case? In a democracy, injustice is as much a cause for anger, resentment and protest, as violence. If we use the two concepts as synonyms, not only are our political vocabularies reduced and we become alarmingly monolingual, we can no longer distinguish between the ills of the human condition, the causes of these ills or indeed the remedies for these maladies.

Conclusion

Till now the argument has sought to establish that we need to know of what we speak when we speak of violence. The concept of violence needs to be clarified simply because it has been subjected to a great deal of overuse, mainly because it is a high-impact word. In order to be clear what we speak of when we speak of violence, this argument has tried to clarify the concept by putting forth a parsimonious concept of violence. First, violence is a social act in so far as it establishes a relationship of power and domination between two or more persons. An act that deploys considerable force, such as an act of slamming a door shut, can be *described* as violent, but it has not harmed anyone, and thereby has not established a social relation. Second, violence generally, but not always, involves a degree of force. It is possible to intentionally harm other persons through means other than force, administering sophisticated poison to the unhappy target for instance. Third, acts of violence can cause harm, but we must remember that harm can be caused by other factors that do not involve the use of force. Fourth, any definition that allows us to make informed judgements on acts of violence sees intention, and therefore culpability and

responsibility as central to the concept. Fifth, a parsimonious definition helps us understand the distinction between violence and other wrongs such as social injustice or discrimination. Parsimonious conceptions of violence help us to comprehend the distinctiveness of political and more specifically revolutionary violence, which involves determinate agents, intention, use of force, harm and moral responsibility.