

# Symbolic Violence and Global Capitalism

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In the contemporary world violence has become an inescapable part of modern life. Beside its coercive character and brutality, it also troubles us with its two major characteristics which obstruct any clear and theoretical analysis: violence often seems to be random and irrational and its motives seem incomprehensible. Violence is often described as the exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse, and the word usually stands for forceful human destruction of property or injury to persons, usually intentional, and forceful verbal and emotional abuse that harms others. In this essay I would like to tackle the notion of violence in contemporary philosophical discussion, having in mind that violent acts cannot be fully grasped neither by scholarly empirical analysis (e.g. sociological, psychological or political) nor by media coverage of violence. That is to say, there are very few possible theoretical standpoints that can fully address this problem today, going much deeper below the surface which is, almost without exemption, always focused on violence undertaken by some easily identifiable agents (such as terrorism, assaults, riots, ethnic cleansing, murders, wars, etc.). I would argue that, in order to philosophically analyze that problem we have to assume completely opposite approach, i.e. to start to think about violence in terms of its symbolic and systemic character instead of focusing on clearly visible acts. In order to do so, I will concentrate on several authors whose ideas are stimulating and might be challenging or placed against the line of contemporary discussion.

First of all, I will refer to Slavoj Žižek's recent book *Violence* that provides some contentious insights on the subject. In addition, ideas of such authors as Hannah Arendt, Etienne Balibar, Jürgen Habermas, or Walter Benjamin will also be discussed in accordance with the main purpose

of this essay which is to emphasize that violence stem from the system itself; it represents the very "heart of darkness" of contemporary multicultural societies, which ultimately means that every violent act is deeply rooted in all liberal-democratic countries in the world. In other words, we should pay more attention to the catastrophic consequences of the functioning of our economic and political systems as systemic violence than to the violence represented, for example, by Islamic suicide bombers or even riots on the streets in Europe (such as those in suburbs in Paris a few years ago or recent one in Denmark).

The mayor task of philosophical analysis of violence in contemporary world should be developing a *theory of political violence*. Obviously, there are numerous theories on the respective issue, but very few of them reflect properly *today's* global socio-political constellation. For example, authors like Weber or Arendt provided noteworthy insight, but they cannot fully cope with issues we are dealing today in the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century. The main problem with violence is that it doesn't have always a deep-lying cause based on rational articulation, which means it is impossible to understand it only using arguments of classical political theory or moral philosophy: one had to incorporate psychoanalysis and semiotic or symbolic interpretation as well. Wherein should we search for relationship between violence and politics in today's world? Since violence is a complex phenomenon, several things have to be taken into account: first of all, it is always primarily a "structural" problem, an "objective" feature of today's capitalist societies. Second, as I mentioned before, structural (or objective) violence is placed in the very heart of capitalism itself (this is the idea that Slavoj Žižek advocates - relying on the idea which came from Balibar and is even earlier extracted out of Marxism). Third, violence does not necessarily refer to activity or any deeds: passivity can also be violent. The major point here is, as Žižek would put it, that violence presented in media (such as suicidal bombings, humanitarian crisis, terrorist attack, and so on) actually blinds us to the objective violence in the world where we become "perpetrators and not just innocent victims".

As Žižek would argue, we consistently overlook the objective or "symbolic" violence embodied in language and its forms, i.e. democratic state's monopoly on legitimate violence. He asserts that "subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of the non-violent zero-level, as a perturbation of the "normal" peaceful state of things; however, objective violence is precisely the violence sustaining this "normal" state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as [visible] violence – in order to perceive it, one has to perform a kind of parallax shift".

The horror of violent acts and empathy for the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking, for example when we are forced to act urgently, or when confronted with "humanitarian politics" of human rights that serves as the ideology of military interventionism for specific economic-political purposes, which utterly prevents any radical socio-political

transformation (i.e. charity becomes the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation). Having that in mind, there are four possible theoretical tasks one should undertake in order to clearly articulate a *theory of political violence*: 1) to point out that "structural" violence is in the heart of global capitalism, 2) to deconstruct media's coverage of crime, terrorism as well as humanitarian crisis, 3) to unravel true motives of terrorists, 4) to expose racism and racial violence as fear which is deeply rooted in the liberal and tolerant multicultural societies obsessed with political correctness. Therefore, as Žižek has pointed out, subjective violence we see (the one with a clear identifiable agent) is only the tip of an iceberg made up of "systemic" violence.

Regarding systemic violence, it should be emphasized that every state is in a way founded on violence, as many authors have pointed out so far. In the classical definition by Max Weber, the modern state is "that human community within which a defined territory successfully claims for itself the monopoly of legitimate physical violence [or legitimate use of physical force]". Relation between state and violence has particularly been emphasized in classical Marxist theory. Hannah Arendt in her essay on violence accurately affirmed that "violence had not generally been regarded as essential to revolution until recently". In standard Marxist terms, revolutionary violence is a mean of bringing into existence a just society (e.g. a Communist one). Most roots of the theoretical analysis of violence stem from the ideological dimension of Marxism which became the basis for a theory of political violence as such. The very idea that violence may be justified by just ends is today inherently prone to excess, so when Fredric Jameson, for example comments that violence represent a sign of the "authenticity of the revolutionary process", one cannot ignore understated irony in that sentence (or, Arendt who claims that "violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate").

Today's liberal-democratic attitude is based on the idea that acknowledging any aggressive act means to "politically suspend the ethical". Nevertheless, as I mentioned before, today we cannot use same parameters or same tools in the analysis. For example, today's focus on terrorism as a "global" destructing force demands thinking about the way in which ideological frameworks are deployed in justification of violence. That is to say, now one has to try to reformulate distinction between political power and the mere exercise of social violence, as Arendt has done. Going one more time back to Marxist ideas, it is of crucial importance to rethink its classical concepts in a way Balibar did. His critique of the Hegelian-Marxist notion of "converting" violence exclusively into an instrument of historical Reason, i.e. a force that begets a new social formation, ends up with a conclusion that Marxism is fundamentally unable to think any excess of violence that cannot be fully integrated into the narrative of historical Progress. A step further has been taken in Žižek's recent book on violence where he, following Balibar's notion of excessive, non-functional violence (not grounded in any utilitarian or ideological reasons), develops a stubbornly provocative idea how we should relate to it: instead of "aggressive passivity" when people act all the time in such a way that nothing really changes, the solution is in the "passive-

aggressive behavior". "Withdrawal into passivity" is thus proclaimed to be the only viable solution on how to react to the violence in contemporary world.

This is the reference point of the everlasting utopian idea of revolution. As we know, the revolution without violence is the same kind of a dream of a "revolution without revolution", as Robespierre had put it. Speaking of arguments against "big" political interventions in world today, which aim at a global transformation based on the experience of 20<sup>th</sup> century catastrophes that unleashed horrible crimes and modes of violence, Žižek in another book names three main approaches regarding that problem: 1) Habermasian approach: he sees Enlightenment basically as emancipatory process with no inherent "totalitarianism", i.e. the violence is born due to the fact it has not been finished yet: 2) Adorno-Horkheimer approach (where one should also include Agamben) – the essence of Enlightenment is today's "administered world" (*verwaltete Welt*): 3) Balibar sees modernity as a process which opens up both freedoms and dangers. Violence by the oppressor is, paradoxically, better than charity because it openly confesses itself.

The ultimate reference to the problem of violence can be found in Benjamin's seminal essays "Theses on Philosophy of History" and "Critique of Violence", two crucial texts which Žižek also analyses at the end of his book. Benjamin draws his reflections on violence from Georges Sorel, making an apology for a "divine violence" understood as "the heroic assumption of the solitude of the sovereign decision". Divine violence is precisely not a direct intervention of the omnipotent God to punish humankind for its excesses; it ought to be understood as a cataclysmic, purifying violence of the sovereign ethical deed, quite dissimilar from famous Heidegger's assertion that "only a God can still save us" ("nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten"). "Domain of pure divine violence is the real domain of sovereignty, the domain within which killing is neither an expression of personal pathology (idiosyncratic destructive drive), nor a crime (or its punishment), nor a sacred sacrifice. It is neither aesthetic, nor ethical, nor religious (a sacrifice to dark gods). So, paradoxically, divine violence does partially overlap with the bio-political disposal of *homini sacer*: in both cases, killing is neither a crime nor a sacrifice. Those annihilated by divine violence are fully and completely guilty: they are not sacrificed, since they are not worthy of being sacrificed to and accepted by God - they are annihilated without being made a sacrifice." This is why Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical theory perfectly fits into this new theory of violence, giving us deep insights into the structure of the contemporary political constellation.

How to define a form of subjectivity that will be truly revolutionary violence, confronting the inauthentic, excessive and illegitimate violence of the state? One should focus more on those "useless" and "excessive" outbursts of violence which display hatred of the Otherness, in accordance with the post-political multiculturalist universe of tolerance for difference. The problem is that today's "radical democracy" is not "radical" enough: it basically accepts the liberal-capitalist horizon, and the logic of liberal capitalism is so total it makes any alternative unthinkable. Does it ultimately mean that, for example, Žižek offers an alternative which is genuinely progressive and

transformative, or does he bring about only the empty negativity of "active nihilism"? Does "doing nothing" mean that "resistance is surrender"? Today's Left reacts in a wide variety of ways to the hegemony of global capitalism and its political supplement, liberal democracy. It might accept hegemony but continue to fight for reform within its rules (e.g. Third way) or to do nothing and wait for an outburst of "divine violence". It is not enough to merely reform the existing system; we need to radically transform the world.

Of course, Žižek is not a ground-breaking author regarding that issue: many anti-capitalists assert that "capitalism is violent", believing that private property, trade and profit survive only because state (or police) violence defends them and that capitalist economies unavoidably need war to expand. His notion of "systemic" violence also heavily relies on numerous theories on "structural violence" denoting a form of violence in which social institutions kill people slowly by preventing them from meeting their basic needs, leading further to social conflicts. What is really innovative, and in a way provocative, in his book is the idea of passivity: It is "better to do nothing than to engage in localized acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run smoother (acts like providing the space for the multitude of new subjectivities, etc.) The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to "be active," to "participate," to mask the Nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, "do something," academics participate in meaningless "debates," etc., and the truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw from it. Those in power often prefer even a "critical" participation, a dialogue, to silence – just to engage us in a "dialogue," to make it sure our ominous passivity is broken."

What would then be the most plausible theoretical answer and practical advice regarding this theoretical puzzle in which violence is utterly invisible and does not refer any more to "exertion of physical force in order to injure or abuse", or to intentional and forceful human destruction? We need to rethink it in terms of new biopolitical and biosocial constellation where revolutionary or emancipatory potential might be placed at the same time in the passivity and violent activity. The first step would be, paradoxically, to point out the meaninglessness of violence, to reject all teleological and theological justifications and empirical analysis, and finally to listen in theoretical silence instead of participating in the noise it constantly produces.