Communities of Violence

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Violence is a word seemingly meant for theorizing, being as abstract and thus as capacious as any category can be. And indeed the history of its use has only confirmed the all-encompassing character of violence, which can now name almost any kind of action or affect: physical, psychological, and even ideological. And yet this term is also deployed to name the most distinctive and visceral forms of cruelty and suffering, such that it is difficult to treat it merely as another abstract category. Shifting uncomfortably between the particularity of pain and the generality of an intellectual category, violence has until recently been ill served by scholarship. The necessities of justice, for example, have meant that violence is rarely the subject of law in its own right, but used only as a euphemism for some degree of murder or charge of battery. And since historians are especially seduced by legal terminology, perhaps because they have traditionally described and justified power, their efforts to mimic the law by finding some party responsible for something have tended not to deal productively with violence.

Philosophers and anthropologists are much more likely to take violence seriously, not least because they recognize that however adjectival its usage may be, the word's very ubiquity and so indispensability requires attention. Is it possible that violence remains an indispensable word precisely because it works to "theorize" its subject, if not to discover the "theory" within it? Until recently, the study of violence, especially in South Asia, my own field of research, was dominated by a scholarship for which it was in some sense unreal and simply represented a displacement of conflict. If liberal scholars blamed the "rational" political machinations supposedly behind "irrational" popular, and especially religious, violence, then communist ones attributed it to class conflict. Such violence, in other words, could either be a reflective or a reflexive phenomenon and nothing more. Apart from being legalistic in focusing on history as an account of criminal responsibility, there is something curiously theological about these forms of explanation, which try to find an "unmoved mover" lurking behind all violence.

However real the existence of political machination or class conflict, recent scholarship has pointed to an irreducible element in the ontology of violence. Arjun Appadurai, for instance, has argued that the excessive nature of so much popular violence in India during the 1990s pushes it beyond any "rational" or instrumental purpose, of the kind we are so familiar with from legal discourse. He describes the disembowelment of Muslim victims in communal "riots" as having an epistemological meaning, as if their murderers were in search of that mysterious and threatening "essence" of the alien religion in an otherwise familiar and indistinguishable body.[1] But as an act of finding or making meaning, violence needn't always be visible. Veena Das, therefore, looks at the way in which the most egregious example of violence in South Asia's modern history, that accompanying the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, is entirely absorbed into another kind of narrative by the Hindu and Sikh women who survived it. Rather than speaking of such violence in the way that historians of Partition do, these women choose

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to see it as providing opportunities for the more intimate betrayals within families, giving the lie to visions of community solidarity during the conflict.[2]

Seen as irreducible in its meaningfulness as well as intimate in its nature, violence in the work of scholars like Das and Appadurai departs from received narratives about instrumentality and "otherness." This latter term, which was so popular in studies of violence in the 1980s, needs finally to be laid to rest given the tenor of recent work like that of Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi on the 2002 riots in Gujarat. He makes it clear that members of the "other" community during these riots were only victimized after being forcibly "converted" and thus absorbed into the brotherhood of their killers.[3] Indeed it is even possible to claim that where Muslim victims were concerned, forms of violence that included "conversion" as much every other kind of theatrical horror, like carving open the bellies of pregnant women to spear the fetus inside, were in some sense imitations of the behavior attributed to Muslim conquerors in the past. And in this way Hindu perpetrators not only acted as if they were Muslims, but in doing so made the stories of their past brutality true by "repeating" them in the present, as a kind of response that created rather than dispelled the intimacy between these enemy communities.

My own work on the new forms of militancy represented by al-Qaʿida has drawn upon these ways of thinking about violence.[4] For given the varied provenance and global peregrinations of its militants, it became clear to me that al-Qaʿida's violence was internal to the world of its enemy. The global society in which we all live does not as yet possess political institutions proper to itself; international politics are dominated by states whose sovereignty, at least in the West, is increasingly thought to be threatened not by other countries but rather by nonstate actors and by processes like terrorism, illegal immigration, and drug smuggling. It is in this intimate arena without an outside that militancy found meaning, deploying there a set of practices that lacked the instrumentality of traditional political institutions. These actions were speculative in nature, refusing to chalk out any old-fashioned blueprint for the future, though there did exist general goals such as ousting Western forces from Muslim lands or establishing a global caliphate. In this way al-Qaʿida differed from older Islamist groups, which had been organized on the Cold War pattern of ideological parties. The new militants were organized into networks and not hierarchies, which is why their revolutionary impetus worked itself out in individual rather than collective ways.

Precisely because it possessed no political space of its own, al-Qaʿida's rhetoric and practices had always depended upon those of its enemies. The movement's strength, in other words, came from the West itself rather than from any alien and outside force. Bin Ladin and his acolytes, for example, constantly argued that their attacks were only mirror images of Western ones, and in doing so not only disclaimed any responsibility for them but also deprived these acts of any ontological weight by rendering them purely negative. Indeed the only thing they claimed for themselves was the act of martyrdom, which is to say another form of negativity. The resources for al-Qaʿida's struggle were not only familiar and therefore contagious, whatever the exotic trappings involved, but also conceptually inexhaustible. Given its negligible numbers and military capabilities, al-Qaʿida could only operate as a factor internal to the West, and in so doing it put an end to the traditional image of warfare between two distinct parties, an image that the United States and its allies nevertheless continued to deploy in the War on Terror. Unlike President Bush's references to al-Qaʿida as an alien and unfathomable threat, however,

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Bin Ladin tellingly referred to the United States in the most intimate and familiar ways.

But if militant acts were not instrumental in the old-fashioned sense we attribute to politics, then were they, perhaps, "epistemological" in the way that Appadurai claims? Certainly the diverse forms of violence deployed by al-Qaʿida—which privileged dying and sharing blood with the enemy—rejected the externality of conflict and made of it a kind of thinking about intimacy and the possibility of a global politics. In my two books on militancy and politics, I argue that al-Qaʿida sought to occupy a global arena that had remained politically vacant since the Cold War's division of the planet into rival hemispheres and its nuclear brinkmanship of "mutually assured destruction." The new global arena that came into view following the Soviet collapse possessed a sociological reality but no longer a political one. So entities like the human race, which before the Cold War had only been abstractions, suddenly assumed a sinister if still only negative reality with the possibility of nuclear apocalypse, or indeed the actuality of planetary population control.

Modeled on the human race as a new kind of actuality that was supposedly under threat of extinction, the Muslim umma, too, emerged during this period as a reality lacking political form. And so it came to represent the only political aspiration for a species that had suddenly become depoliticized after the Cold War, one that could now only take a sociological form as the simultaneous agent and victim of environmental threats such as climate change, themselves conceived of in economic rather than political terms. Like a human race under threat from the environmental catastrophe that replaced the Cold War's nuclear apocalypse, in other words, the Muslim community both existed and yet could not be said to exist. So it is no accident that Bin Ladin referred very frequently to the Muslim umma at risk of Western violence in the same breath as he bemoaned the threat that global warming posed for the human race. And the equivocal existence of both umma and species serves to foreground the fact that the globe possesses neither political actors nor any institutions of its own.

NOTES

[1]Arjun Appadurai, "Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization," *Public Culture* 10 (1998): 225–47.

[2]Veena Das, "The Act of Witnessing: Violence, Gender and Subjectivity," in Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2007), 59–78.

[3]Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[4]Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005); and *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity: Militant Islam and Global Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

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