Theorizing Self-Destructive Violence

BANU BARGU
Department of Politics, New School for Social Research, New York, N.Y.;
e-mail: bargub@newschool.edu
doi:10.1017/S0020743813000950

The first image that the question of violence in the Middle East conjures up, especially in the West, is that of the suicide bomber. This association, etched into the political imaginary particularly over the course of the last two decades, is due neither to the number of victims suicide bombing creates (more conventional weapons of war can claim as many or more victims), nor to the identity of its victims (conventional weapons are also often directed at civilians). Rather, the potency of the image of the suicide bomber is connected to the simultaneously self-destructive and other-directed form that this act of violence takes. If the Orientalist impulse that has raised the image of the suicide bomber to iconic status is deeply problematic, it nonetheless constitutes an involuted acknowledgement of a reality: the significant rise in self-destructive violence (and not just in the Middle East). I have in mind practices such as hunger striking, self-immolation, and fatal self-mutilation, which constitute an emergent repertoire of struggle that has come to mark a certain current of radical politics around the globe. Those modalities of self-destructive violence that are not directed at others are overshadowed by suicide bombing.

While these forms of violence are hardly specific to the Middle East, their recent visibility has largely been the result of the significant role they have played in the politics of the region. The self-immolation on 17 December 2010 of Muhammad al-Buʿazizi, a twenty-six-year-old itinerant fruit vendor from Sidi Bouzid, carried out in response to the confiscation of his fruit cart and electronic scale by local police officers demanding a bribe, triggered the mass protests in Tunisia that quickly swept away the recalcitrant authoritarian Bin ʿAli regime. Within a few days, similar self-immolations were reported from Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Not every death by fire proved to have the same effectiveness as that of al-Buʿazizi; however, the popular uprisings they helped incite became the starting point of an unprecedented revolutionary transformation of the entire region. Similarly, we should note the role played by the mass hunger strike of Palestinian political prisoners, which began in February 2012 and lasted over two months, in limiting the practice of administrative detention and solitary confinement in Israeli prisons. Finally, it is worth underscoring the centrality of the hunger strike conducted by Kurdish political prisoners in Turkey, initiated on the symbolic date of 12 September 2012—the anniversary of the 1980 coup d'état—and which soon grew to involve some ten thousand prisoners, in setting into motion the ongoing peace process in that country.

Of course, what remains untold by the effective examples of self-destructive protest are the countless incidents that never make the news, that are censored or simply recorded by authorities as suicides, or that, even when disseminated through the media, find little resonance and thus prove unable to generate a public response or incite further action. One such example is the death fast of leftist political prisoners in Turkey, carried out against the introduction of high security prisons for over six years from October 2000

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743813000950 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to January 2007, which ended with 122 deaths and relatively minor political gains. Nonetheless, these instances of self-destructive violence from different contexts voice a critical political commentary on the present state of affairs and register a fundamental refusal of the conditions of life in which the individuals who perform these actions find themselves locked.

How, then, do we go about studying self-destructive violence, especially those acts that remain less visible, and theorizing its political effects and implications? The study of violence in general is difficult enough; it invites us to go beyond language, to capture the unspeakable and to translate it into concepts and arguments. Our first impulse is to take refuge in numbers. How many individuals participated, how many deaths were recorded, how many survived? Producing body counts allows us to distance ourselves from the reality of corpses and suffering bodies by transforming them into statistics. But this soon proves superficial and insufficient. While the analysis of numbers might be helpful in identifying certain tendencies that we may not be able to gather from the facts of each case, they say little about the contexts in which violence is performed, or the historical, political, social, and cultural determinants of violent acts. They reveal even less about the agents who perform acts of violence or support them.

Studying violence asks us to pay attention to the objective conditions of violence, which we need to reconstruct patiently by proceeding both diachronically and synchronically. On the one hand, we must attend to the ways in which the past has shaped the present; on the other hand, we must analyze the current political landscape, its underlying structures of inequality, the institutions and agents that occupy it, and their unequal relations of power. The study of violence must also lead us to interrogate its subjective conditions: to descend beneath the statistics into the "hidden abode" of meaning, to find the names and faces behind the numbers, and to excavate and contextualize their stories. The last of these is particularly important for the study of self-destructive violence. This is because understanding the self-destructive nature of such violence requires analyzing not only the power relations that provide its conditions of possibility but also the subjective perceptions of those relations that render it a real, if bleak and limited, choice of political agency.

Detailed ethnographic and archival research is crucial in providing access to both the objective and subjective reality of violence. Acquiring a vivid sense of the complexities of the contexts in which violent actions are performed and the multiplicity of meanings imputed on these actions by the agents who perform them is crucially dependent on qualitative, in-depth research, conducted in situ. This is especially important in order to move beyond the representations and arguments regarding violence articulated in mainstream politics; to explore the margins of the political in spatial, legal, and ideological terms; to learn from that which is not qualified as a source of knowledge. Fieldwork allows us to gather together a motley crew of predominantly local resources: newspapers, journals, pamphlets, images, letters, jokes, jargon, practices, routines, all of which grant us access to the meaning-world of the agents who starve and immolate themselves. More important, such research puts us into contact with what is often disqualified or invisible: those agents who lack the epistemic privilege that would qualify their experiences as a source of knowledge, their utterances as politically audible voices, their desires as legitimate interests, their grievances as injustices that condemn not simply the excesses of a political order but also its sense of normalcy.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743813000950 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Such sources teach us more about violence than we can ever learn from numbers. Ethnographic work allows us to document the objectives, intentions, misgivings, dilemmas, and contradictions of actors who perform violence, and to analyze their reactions, calculations, discourses, justifications, and stratagems. In short, it allows us to learn from the lived experience of violence, expressed in the words of the various actors involved in it. It allows us to catapult the experience of violence into the field of theory, even if it provides no easy solution to the problem of grasping violence. However, while ethnographic research is an indispensable resource from which we can hear otherwise inaccessible voices, we must be wary of simply reproducing the self-representations of others. We should take neither the dominant narratives of power nor the narratives subjugated by them at their word. It is therefore crucial to mobilize a critical-theoretical apparatus while bringing the knowledges gathered in situ to bear on the question of violence. This means putting ethnographic research in conversation with political theory, and treating each voice from the field as a live text that speaks back to the texts of the influential thinkers of politics, launches a critique of their assumptions, acts out their arguments, accentuates their contradictions, and repudiates their positions. It entails, for example, thinking Thomas Hobbes's insistence on self-preservation through the action of Muhammad al-Buʿazizi, Walter Benjamin's allusion to divine violence through the Palestinian hunger strike, or the collective life in Turkey's prison wards through the fleeting images of communism in Karl Marx. It means using theory to shed light on lived experience while allowing lived experience to speak back to theory, leaving neither intact, removed, untouched by the other.[1]

Theorizing violence is a way of making it speakable; it is a way of taming it. However, theorizing violence also introduces violence into the field of theory. It places injuries and wounds next to words, images next to concepts, affects next to arguments. In so doing, it breathes life into the interpretation of philosophy as a battleground (*Kampfplatz*).[2] Theorizing self-destructive violence unsettles the very ground of the philosophical battle, not only by bringing starving, immolating, and exploding bodies into its domain but by destroying the very purity of theory.

NOTES

[1]For a prominent example of this kind of work (though with a different geographical focus), see Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991). On self-destructive political practices in Turkey's prisons, see Banu Bargu, *Starve & Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

[2]Louis Althusser, "Lenin and Philosophy," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 64.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743813000950 Published online by Cambridge University Press