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ROUNDTABLE

Theorizing Violence

Thinking about Violence

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Colleagues with whom I spoke about this piece had one of two responses: "Why do you want to feed the flames of cliché and prejudice about violence in the Middle East?" and "Surely, there has been no theorization of violence in the Middle East." Regarding the first response, I agree that thinking about violence in the Middle East can be a fraught enterprise. This is because a hysterical mainstream narrative locates the sources of violence in or emanating from the region in Islam(ism) or attributes it to some half-baked but remarkably persistent cultural explanations (tribalism, ancient hatreds, cycles of violence, etc.) which uncomfortably echo the racism of an earlier scholarly era. But enough innovative works have emerged on violence that we can move—at least in our scholarly conversations—beyond this terrain of prejudice and paranoia.

As for the second response, any enumeration of works on violence will find that indeed the study of the Middle East has been rich in theoretically grounded and empirically rich research on violence. For the most part, such conversations have taken place in discrete disciplinary, geographic, and thematic spaces, sometimes seemingly hermetically sealed from one another; at other times, they have not declared themselves to be about violence but do look at violence-making institutions and violent practices. Disagreement on how to define violence, what categories of events, practices, and discourses to include under its sign, and how to conceptualize it is not unique to the scholarship on the Middle East, but this problem of translatability across disciplines, locales, and different forms of violence has meant that few studies bridge these archipelagos of scholarship.

I have long been interested in the political and sociological processes and relations that produce violence, the forms violence takes, the embedding (or dis-embedding) of violence in law and procedure, and the after-effects of violence. The centrality of forms of coercion to the reproduction of institutions of the state and empire has been of particular interest to me, and the convergences between violence—especially military violence—and other forms of domination and rule (economic, symbolic, etc.) has undergirded both my teaching and my research. For me, violence as a field of study encompasses the strategic choices of oppositional movements (guerrilla warfare, violent revolutionary action, anticolonial warfare, etc.) as well as, and perhaps especially, the violence wielded by states and empires (war, policing, incarceration, torture, etc.).

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Today, we have substantial, theoretically engaged bodies of scholarship about many of these forms of violence. An ever-expanding body of scholarly works on regional militaries exists, but these do not necessarily theorize violence, the central vocation of such militaries.[1] Scholarship on colonial and anticolonial violence (in Algeria, Palestine/Israel, Lebanon, and Syria, among others) is sometimes comparative across national boundaries and at other times focused on one specific country.[2] Literature on torture inflicted by the states in the region, and by U.S. security apparatuses and clients since 2001, similarly does not necessarily theorize violence more broadly or connect the discussion to other manifestations of violence.[3] More recent scholarship on violence and memory and/or trauma is concerned with the representational and discursive effects of violence.[4] Feminist scholars have studied violence on multiple scales (from domestic spaces to battlefields and their intersections) and through the lens of gender (and race, class, and geopolitical location), illuminating how gender and sexuality produce and are produced by violence.[5] And, of course, in an always growing cottage industry, scholars—primarily located outside the Middle East and often unfamiliar with its languages—attempt to explain "terrorism." These studies contain a set of normative (and policy) presumptions that transforms violence by nonstate actors into a policy problem to be resolved, and thus particular, exceptional, and unmoored from sociohistorical contexts and explanations. Such scholarship has lamentably become so prevalent that it has managed to monopolize the label of "political violence," thus frequently excluding the far more prevalent and much more devastating violence wielded by states in war and in peace.

In my teaching, I aim to broaden the semantic space accorded to "political violence" without evacuating the term of its analytic coherence. My course on violence sometimes attracts students who are curious about "terrorism," but introduces them to far broader debates about substance and methodology. The course asks them to think about how the disciplines approach violence—the categorization and causation style of U.S. political science; the more capacious readings of sociological works; the more textured, and sometimes metaphysical, approaches of anthropological scholarship—and how revolutionary violence, anticolonial struggles, civil wars, and policing and torture may be related to one another. It requires them to read primary texts critically in light of philosophical and theoretical texts: legal memoranda of the Bush administration in light of Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* in light of Frantz Fanon's "Concerning Violence," David Kilcullen's *The Accidental Guerrilla* in light of Carl Schmitt's *Theory of the Partisan*. They put material related to the Middle East in conversation with works from beyond the region. Allen Feldman's work on violence in Northern Ireland can be brilliantly read alongside Salwa Ismail's work on the politics of security in Egypt or more recent scholarship on hunger strikes in Palestine and Guantánamo; Katherine Verdery's ethnography of the politics of dead bodies in Eastern Europe alongside works on martyrdom in revolutionary movements and in intifadas; Veena Das's work on gendering of violence in India alongside writings on gendering of counterinsurgency in Palestine and Iraq or the autobiography and biography of Leila Khaled; the works on militarism in African contexts alongside works on militarism in Israel. And finally, when it comes to terrorism, they read Trotsky on the inefficacy of terror as a tactic, Emma Goldman on the propaganda of the act, Talal Asad on suicide bombing, and Charles Tilly on the poverty of "terror, terrorism, terrorists" as analytic frames.

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Violence has always been the locus of my research, though I have gone from thinking about the representational politics of violence—its memory and commemoration—among Palestinian refugees, through the global balancing of sovereign violence against biopolitical and liberal impulses of hegemonic empires, to my nascent project on the political economy of logistics apparatuses for the violence-work of militaries.[6] Throughout, a number of questions have persisted: What are the rhetorical and practical manifestations of violence? How does coercion shore up the authority of the powerful, or can it actually work to weaken those in power? Does the symbolic or expressive facet of violence matter in shaping contexts and relations? How effective is violence as a tactic of struggle? And of course the bedrock question of political and historical sociology: what is the relationship between violence, economics, and power?[7]

My scholarly inspirations include Fanon, because his immensely stimulating and provocative arguments have the urgency of being written in the fever of struggle but with a cool awareness of the structural and social conditions leading to violence and of the long-term consequences of it; Foucault, because of his sweeping reading of European history and the transformation of instruments of control, though some Foucauldians' biopolitical analysis effaces the calamitous persistence of sovereign power ("power over life and death"); and Gramsci, because of his nuanced dispatches about strategies of struggle, the moments propitious to wars of maneuver and position, and the fine balance between ideational effervescence and hard-nosed praxis forged in crisis. I have been less sanguine about the uses of Schmitt, because his work justifies the decisionist violence of the sovereign, legitimates the power of empire, and attacks the possibility of a popular democracy, all from a seductive position which trenchantly and persuasively critiques liberalism; those of Agamben, who fascinatingly analyzes "bare life" vacated even of sacrificial value, but whose vision of bare life in the archetypical "camp" imagines humans as stripped of their ability to be political subjects—this vision, though affectively powerful, is often totalizing and does not leave room for light, air, movement, or the possibility of dissent; and the surge in studies of nonviolence (especially in Palestine) whose starting premise is a normative rejection of violent tactics with little consideration of the social and political conjunctures and organizational configurations that lead to violence.

Given the prevalence of violence in manifest forms in the Middle East during the last twenty years (wars, intifadas, revolutions, civil wars, suicide bombings, aerial bombings, assassinations by commandos and drones, guerrilla warfare, counterinsurgencies, torture, policing, public executions), I hope that scholarship on violence will traverse disciplinary boundaries and recognize the thematic coherences and theoretical and historical interrelations between violence in different places. I also would be excited to see a more nuanced and historically grounded discussion of how violence becomes (rather than should or should not be) the prevalent strategy of movements.[8] More sociological studies of how "coercion and capital" converge in new, transnationally significant ways would crucially expand the discussion of wartime violence beyond a regional conversation. The same applies to the privatization of warfare, or the emergence of entirely new infrastructures and commercial ventures predicated on the accumulation by dispossession that accompanies wars and postwar reconstruction (in Lebanon, Iraq, the Gulf, and elsewhere). New methods of studying technologies of violence can introduce exciting new angles not yet examined in the region; for example, science and technology studies

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can give us the tools to understand modern weaponry, the arc of whose production, distribution, and use can illuminate the networks of capital, power, and violence that traverse the globe.[9] In the last instance, the most exciting studies of violence are those that marry a macrolevel analysis of sociohistorical transformations with a microlevel elucidation of the effect of violence on the victims and perpetrators. Such scholarship illuminates the complex factors, actors, contexts, and events that lead to violence without losing sight of the devastating consequences of violence in destroying social relations, scorching landscapes, decimating cities, and sundering lives.

NOTES

Author's note: I am grateful to Lara Deeb, Toby Craig Jones, and Darryl Li for carefully and critically reading this piece, commenting on it, and arguing with me about it.

[1]See, among many others, Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society* (New York: Random House, 1968); Hazem Kandil, *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt* (London: Verso, 2012); Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Steven Heydemann, ed., *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000).

[2]See, inter alia, Wendy Pearlman, *Violence, Nonviolence, and the Palestinian National Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Sylvie Thénault, *Violence ordinaire dans l'Algérie coloniale: Camps, internements, assignations à résidence* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2012).

[3]Among many others, see Darius Rejali, *Torture and Modernity: Self, Society, and State in Modern Iran* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994); and Raphaëlle Branche, *La Torture et l'Armée: Pendant la Guerre d'Algérie, 1954–1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001). Darryl Li points out a major gap in research on torture in postcolonial Arab regimes.

[4]See, for example, Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Lucia Volk, *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon* (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 2010); and Ussama Makdisi and Paul Silverstein, *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 2006).

[5]Julie Peteet, "Male Gender and Rituals of Resistance in the Palestinian Intifada," *American Ethnologist* 21 (1994): 31–49; Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Militarization and Violence against Women in Conflict Zones in the Middle East: A Palestinian Case-Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Frances Hasso, "Discursive and Political Deployments by/of the 2002 Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers/Martyrs," *Feminist Review* 81 (2005): 23–51.

[6]Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013).

[7]Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. 1, *A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); *The Sources of Social Power,* vol. 2, *The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. 3, *Global Empires and Revolution, 1890–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990–1992* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993).

[8]In the vein of Pearlman, *Violence, Nonviolence*.

[9]On this point, I am grateful to Toby Craig Jones, who has been an innovative and critically astute interlocutor on all things war-related.

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