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# REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE: A CRITIQUE

PETER HITCHCOCK

In *State and Revolution* (the very title of which announces the space of violence), Lenin is typically unequivocal in his assessment of what needs to be done in Russia in 1917: "The replacement of the bourgeois by the proletarian state is impossible without a violent revolution" (1969, 20). Lenin is well aware of the violence necessary to the maintenance of any state; he understands the difference between its subjective and objective elements, its abstract and concrete manifestations, its ideological and institutional formations. There is no written reform that permits a class structured in dominance to willingly submit to its own dissolution as a class, especially if, in the form of a state, it exercises a monopoly on violence (Weber 1997, 154). It is true, hegemonic formations have been shuffled aside by non-violent means, and our understanding of key figures like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. is driven by that realization. No one should doubt the power of belief in peaceful change to alter the contours of human history. Yet studying such history also reveals something axiomatic in Lenin's perception of revolutionary violence in 1917: socio-economic transformation at the level of class is by definition violent to its core. You cannot subtract violence from class domination peacefully if, as a class and for a class, you intend to sublate that domination. You may reform a class; you may advance proposals that make it a little less violent in its domination; you might even get it to share power a little more and redistribute a little more of its wealth. But you will never eradicate the logic of its hegemony and its characteristics as a class by reform or eminently reasonable negotiation. The history of class reform has moments of peaceful exchange and transition; the history of class transformation, however, has only been one of extreme and devastating violence. Such is Lenin's insight but also, precisely, a reason for his vilification.

Obviously, from the late eighteenth century through most of the twentieth century, outbreaks of revolutionary violence at the level of class (the focus of the discussion here) were intense moments of transformational possibility and the subject of theorization by a plethora of radical thinkers (Marx, Engels,

Sorel, Trotsky, Lukacs, Benjamin, Fanon, Sartre, Mao, and Arendt, to name but a few). There is no space here to detail either the history or the philosophy of revolutionary violence, but I am interested in its symptoms, its axioms, in the *arché* of its logic of transformation, the better to come to terms with the absence or not of its present manifestations. For many today, the very idea of proletarian revolution structured and overdetermined by the violent overthrow of the bourgeois state and capitalism as its lived relation seems absurd and anachronistic, a banalized red nostalgia for what might have been but what cannot possibly be in a period where billionaires (Gates, Soros, Buffet, etc.) prove capitalism can keep its house in order and where they, by charity or derivative, by monopoly and acquisition, provide the incontrovertible truth that capitalist caesars can correctly handle any and all contradictions among the people across the planet. To pose revolutionary violence as even relevant when capitalist ubiquity is a sure sign of the success of its peaceful evolution would seem to be not only utopian but faintly psychotic, a compulsion resolutely detached from the social relations that compose the world system as such. Indeed, we might venture that to conceptualize revolutionary violence is already to commit the violence of hermetic abstraction, a fatal contradiction in thinking passionately, incapable of advancing the cause of our resolute species being. Lenin is dead. There is no proletarian agon. Like the aristocracies before them, capitalists have won. Get used to it.

In addition, and significantly, violence describes a somewhat thorny intellectual arena. In general, academics do not advocate violence. We describe it, we might foreground its most egregious manifestations, seen and unseen, in daily life, in structures of power, in processes of thought themselves, in, of course, language. We live in times and in institutions when and where any promulgation of violence constitutes a terrorist act (I will comment more on terror below), an abrogation of the law, a threat not just to life and limb, but also to the order and rights that frame our social well-being. Non-violence is the very sign of our intelligence, of our contemplative condition, of our ability to think through the moral and ethical consequences of violence real and imagined. Rather than advocate violence; our disobedience is primarily civil, as befits our status and perhaps the status quo. In this way, we are always already subject *to* and subjects *for* violence. As Etienne Balibar puts it (2002, 32), we have been dis-membered in order that we might better re-member our function for the body politic and the state ideological apparatus called the university.

I wish to analyze the conceptual underpinnings of revolutionary violence in order to understand its critical role in social transformation, specifically in class transformation. By doing so, I hope to shed some light on the renewed discourse of revolution in the present, not only to begin to articulate the meaning of revolution in the events of North Africa and West Asia, but also the substance of hegemonic inertia, the space, as it were, of crisis creep, and its corresponding violence of ambling into oblivion. Revolutionary violence, I will argue, is the great non-said of change in the current conjuncture, the

unspoken disavowal, the *Denkverbot* of radical change. It is not a voting option: it is the point in a crisis that chooses you. It reveals your class affiliation and your historical mission. It does not make you a killer or a murderer; it overdetermines your relationship to history and the extent to which it might be written from the future as classless, as the place where the real of our history as a species can in fact begin.

Hannah Arendt's separation of power from violence remains a useful distinction but does not describe, necessarily, the logic of revolution (Arendt 1970). It is not enough to say that violence is utterly incapable of creating power, not because the philosophical distinction does not hold, but that it holds too well and that in a revolutionary moment such philosophy is itself at stake. Reflexivity in the conceptualization of violence is itself embedded in the philosophical discourses of the hour, of which Arendt's distinction is a determinate symptom. Marx, who advocated violence on a number of occasions, never ceased to disabuse readers of the idea that the relationship of capital and labor was a gentlemen's agreement. Chapter twenty-eight of *Capital*, volume one, details the violent ways in which labor is disciplined to accept lower and lower wages not just as a condition of employment, but as a natural law indicative of the worker's demonstrable inferiority. "Bloody legislation," as he calls it, like hanging, mutilation (branding, slicing off ears, etc.) provides labor from the fifteenth century on with a constant reminder that violence creates power over them and that their substance as labor is violently contained (Marx 1992, 896). The violence of value extraction is not a pretty business, and to rise up against it and the class who lives by it will have a terrible beauty all of its own. Marx notes: "No great movement has ever been inaugurated without bloodshed" (1992, 896; 1879). But this is a comment on the cause of violence, not its imbrication with the logic of revolution itself and it is to that valence I will insistently return.

First, revolutions are not all violent, but the reason that most of them are is obvious: those in power, even when that power is failing, often invoke some capacity for violence to defend it. Arendt is right to note this capacity has been enhanced by technology: most states operate and monopolize advanced killing machines to maintain themselves externally and internally. In the U.S., for instance, internal defense is the primary role of the National Guard over whom the President assumes direct and full control during any national emergency. It should be noted that, as a fighting force, this military option far exceeds any comparable force dedicated to the internal maintenance of the state; in short, if the violent overthrow of the U.S. externally is nullified by the nuclear option, internal insurrection, nationally, is rendered moot by overwhelming odds. True, what primarily renders revolutionary violence in the U.S. remote is that the state is stable, it provides for its citizenry in any number of ways, but just in case, there are 470,000 troops and seventy billion dollars of hardware to remind you.

These would not constitute incidental circumstances for Marx: they are the real foundations on which revolutionary praxis must be posed. It

is simply not true that Marx (and indeed Lenin) *only* advocated violence regarding bourgeois states. That is to say, the question of violence always begins with a critique of the productive forces and the social relations in which those forces are lived. If, for instance, workers see an opportunity to expand their self-control through democratic reforms of the state, this itself would be an acknowledgment of material conditions and, in that respect, would further the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism or egalitarian modes of state intervention. In 1848 and 1871, however, Marx and Engels saw that chance closed off by reactionary forces whose repression could not be assuaged by political compromise (the European revolutions of 1848 featured bourgeois attempts to displace entrenched aristocracies; the 1871 revolution, of course, is notable for the Paris Commune). State aggression compelled and justified violent encounters, although the aftermath did not necessarily endorse the decisions made. Here we must question a primary contradiction, a dialectical impasse in our understanding of the problem. If revolutionary violence is context specific and admits the possibility of peaceful transition, does this not negate the initial axiom concerning violence in revolutionary change? If violence is optional, does this not irrevocably alter the nature and substance of what constitutes revolution tout court? Such a contradiction may itself represent a rhetoric of violence, but it also signals the complex substance of its dialectical tension, one where axioms themselves are historically suspended.

Whenever a state leader proclaims that no options are off the table, this tends to mean violence will follow (paradoxically, the one option removed in such statements is peace). Revolution, however, is of a different order from state strategy and indeed normative notions of geopolitical interest. It is the process or processes by which individual intent and state purpose in general are overreached; the point at which a given social formation can no longer suture its class demands to those classes whose consent is integral to the reproduction of its state form. A legitimation crisis opens the possibility of transformation and peaceful transition, as noted, is not altogether excluded from this prospect. What the axiom suggests is that transformation includes the eradication of a structural logic in the state form, including change according to its laws. If, for instance, change includes the abolition of property and the class interests of the state preclude that possibility, it is difficult to see how that change could be affected by reform; it would, ipso facto, be illegal. How could the proletariat continue to accept a special interest that precisely defines the terms of their continuing oppression? A peaceful transition can ensure some significant measure of redistribution, but if the structural logic of property remains, then a certain violence remains to be abolished. The circle is squared, not broken.

When it comes to the relationship of revolutionary violence to the creation of communism, we must distinguish both what we mean by revolution and what we mean by violence. Think for instance, by contrast, of the extraordinary events in what is being called the Arab Spring (if the

reference is to the Prague Spring of Czechoslovakia in 1968, we would do well to consider the ominous parallels). Transnational media would have us believe that the initial catalyst of this change, the self-immolation of a street vendor, Tarek al-Tayyib Muhammad Bouazizi, in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, was not primarily about the economic plight of Arab youth but was a symbol of opposition to political malfeasance. Just change the leader, and the economic rules will take care of themselves. Ben Ali's ouster in Tunisia, Mubarak's excision in Egypt, and Qadaffi's execution in Libya, as well as the ongoing uprising in Syria, testify to an appreciable and justified desire to throw off the mantle of decades of dictatorship and corruption. Many of the participants refer to what has happened as a "revolution," but perhaps we are too close to these processes to assess objectively the nature of the transformation in play. Each moment of such processes, indeed, is interrogative, and asks what does a revolution mean? Certainly the dictators are gone but the logic of dictatorship and corruption seems to hover in the wings awaiting some interpellation stage or state center. The participants in the uprisings know that the revolution must be more than a change of leadership, but to build an alternative state structure while the forces of reaction work to limit such change is a massive challenge to revolutionary fervor. In Egypt, the initial suspension of the constitution and a declaration of martial law sounded suspiciously like a military coup. The original support for the military was more a recognition of their overwhelming strength, not incredulity about the fact that the military hierarchy have been and still are the direct benefactors of Mubarak-inspired authoritarianism (coincidentally, eighty percent of the Egyptian senior officer class were trained in the U.S.). Not only does the military own most of Egypt's productive industries, but it is also a major player in tourism, owning resorts, for instance, at Sharm el Sheikh, the environs where the former President may now reside. Fortunately, there are progressive elements among the younger officers in the military and this may yet forestall a more widespread and violent confrontation between the revolutionaries and the ruling class interests of the Egyptian state. If this limits transformation to democratic reform, it would be a massive achievement in itself given the regressive elements in play. Of course, if another member of the officer class, like Nasser, Sadat, or Mubarak, before him eventually gets "voted" into office, what constitutes revolution will be subject to yet further redefinition. Since the Egyptian revolution is very much in media res, with continuing demonstrations and an election process that has seen the emergence of the previously banned Muslim Brotherhood as preliminary victors, summary declarations on its substance should be resisted. Nevertheless, the class alliances and state maneuvers in play clearly do not exclude revolutionary violence from their matrix.

And what revolution gets tolerated is clearly germane here. Challenges to authoritarianism in Bahrain, for instance, are answered by the forceful intervention of Saudi Arabian troops (using, like the Egyptian military, U.S. materiel). The Saudi Arabian royal family, not known for its staunch defense

of democracy, is free to express itself as it may for all of the obvious reasons. We did not see the UN pushing for a no-fly zone when unarmed Bahraini civilians were shot dead. And in Egypt? The military has fired on civilians on many occasions since the uprising began. The violence in Tahrir Square reminds me of a classic defense of state violence from the 1980s: "No government in the world would have tolerated having the main square of its capital occupied for eight weeks by tens of thousands of demonstrators" (Henry Kissinger commenting just after the massacre of students and workers in Beijing on June 4, 1989). The Egyptian military has detained and tortured hundreds of demonstrators, and some have disappeared altogether (actions previously reserved for Mubarak's notorious security agency, the SSI). Of course, whether the CIA continues to maintain a Black Site in Egypt is also beyond discussion. We can cheer the people power on display, yet bemoan the socio-political conditions that limit its effect.

Given the definitional challenges to revolution and violence more generally construed, it is small wonder their combination may be controversial when it comes to class transformation (since class is also overdetermined). These brief examples are predominantly non-violent responses to repression, suggesting at the very least that revolutionary desire need not be expressed as death and destruction (Libya and Syria are also states that are continuing to witness popular uprisings, but their progress and expression have been complicated by distinct geopolitical interests, especially in the former, where oil reserves are keenly contested). In general, all of these uprisings can be described as revolts, or else that their singularity as events has not yet been subject to decision, the point beyond which transformation is articulated. It would be arrogant to claim an authentic spirit for revolution in some cases over others, yet history itself adjudicates whether transformation has been achieved by the hands making it. And fortunately, or tragically, this appears to take time.

Since 1989-1991, it has become commonplace to note that the proletariat is not revolting because it is no longer a proletariat. There are all kinds of workers, industrial, agricultural, manual, service, informal, part-time, guest, state, immaterial, etc. (in addition to the pivotal differentiation of gender, race, sex across and within concepts of labor) but they do not simply share or express a class interest over and above or against those who live predominantly from their labor. This does not mean there are no signs of class resentment, class warfare, or class antagonism globally. On the contrary, what is remarkable is the extent of working-class action, particularly in newly-industrialized states, or by those living the advanced exploitation of compressed modernity, like China (strikes, mass organization, factory occupations, urban autonomy, co-ops, slowdowns, sabotage, etc.). It does underline, nevertheless, that the contradictions between the development of productive forces and the social forces that exercise hegemony over them appear inadequate to class formation as opposition across states, or at least to a form sufficient to pursue its own interests absolutely over all others. The paradox of proletarian class

formation is that it is in the service of its dissolution; indeed, of the dissolution of class *per se*. Within globalization, however, the object of that dissolution, those for whom the extraction of surplus value from labor is its lifeblood, appear correspondingly less diffuse, more assured that history has fortuitously ended with them. Dialectically, this non-confrontation is constitutive of crisis, particularly in the aforementioned space between state and revolution where I began. On the one hand, the circulation of capital and neoliberalism's primitive accumulation by dispossession appear to ameliorate state structure as a prime target of transformational intent (crudely put, capitalism can sacrifice an individual state without catastrophic effect to its global practices, it is a systemic contradiction without being systemically fatal). On the other hand, alternative modes of political economy are clearly not generally expressed as proletarian identity. There are a whole host of identifications promoting solidarity, which is in part a significant realization that a worker is never only a worker and that the means of production and reproduction can be improved without resort to violent opposition. Proletarianization may continue apace; indeed, it has intensified globally as hundreds of millions of peasants and agricultural laborers leave the land for the protections offered by mass urbanization. Yet this phenomenal expansion of proletarian relations in production is largely missing two elements that inspired Lenin's assessment of revolutionary conditions in 1917: a state based on proletarian class interests, and a party representing these interests as a *sine qua non* of political life. We can argue, simultaneously, that it was precisely these elements that contributed to the demonstrable impasse in proletarian advance, while suggesting such components constitute the absent cause of revolution in the present. Could it be that the violent evisceration of state and party as bound to proletarian self interest is the metaleptic reversal of revolutionary violence? Is this what actually paves the way for Perpetual Peace in the Kantian sense?

Again, revolutionary violence does not occur in a vacuum; it is sensitively dependent on the objective conditions of class relations. Bouazizi's self-immolation is akin to Žižek's use of Jack in *Fight Club* to illustrate the degree zero of revolutionary violence: the victim makes himself a victim and establishes that agency can be conceived independently of hegemonic fiat (Žižek uses basically the same argument to understand Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* [2008, 124]). Similarly, when Spivak writes of widow sacrifice, it is read as a pivotal and constitutive moment of non-identity, so that Bhubaneswari offers this praxis in the service of a being to come, and it is this "trace structure," I would argue, that remains to be traced in the actual experience of being proletarian otherwise in the present (Spivak 2010). It would be a mistake to read Bouazizi's individual act as a subjective lapse, as an abhorrent and aberrant pathological tic (although, as Žižek obstinately proves through his Lacanian lens, this is not a verdict on psychoanalysis *per se*). True, there is an equal danger of symbolic over-investment that may paradoxically defuse transformational desire as praxis. Indeed, Žižek usefully alerts us to

the sharp difference between recognizable acts of subjective violence, those instantly read and mediated, and objective violence, symbolic and systemic, that overdetermines normalcy and against which Bouazizi's act can be posed as extraordinary, spectacular, crazy and out of joint. When modes of violence are dialectically engaged, what Bouazizi's praxis foregrounds is not the resignation of *homo sacer*, but the profound role of materially-determined decision when no state and no party would seem to countenance its greater aim.

How does one distinguish such trace structure, trace labor, traces of labor, and the labor of the trace in the current conjuncture? If, for most of us, smashing the state is a somewhat delicate issue, then this is no less true of traces of labor, if by that we mean what is constitutive of proletarian praxis. Is there such a thing as authentic revolutionary violence, in contradistinction to those inauthentic moments when we rage against the machine by downloading an .mp3 or .mpeg4 file of questionable pedigree? Can authenticity indeed envelop small acts or can it only exist in spectacular conflagration where individual death is the minimal difference requisite of freedom for all? Scales of authenticity are themselves measures of material contradiction and class antagonism. Smash a bank window and you can do serious time; but if, as a bank, you rob the populace blind, then have your surrogates in government have the people pay billions for your speculative zeal, not only do you largely escape punishment, but you are congratulated for your authentic self-preservation, for your violence of extraction and exchange. When Jameson notes that history hurts, he must also have been thinking of this sorry narrative. Žižek suggests that it is difficult to be really violent, "to perform an act that violently disturbs the basic parameters of social life" (207). Revolutionary violence is no less arduous, but its precise contours are precipitate in the antinomies of our socio-economic relations. Authenticity at this level, for Žižek, is a unique suspension of temporality. Authentic revolutionary violence is an enacted utopia, not a promissory note or some slippery future anterior, but a revolution in the suspension of the now that is its own ontological proof. This, however, does not escape slipperiness, for we do not have access to that ontology in its moment, unless of course we are precisely its agents, unless we are enacting utopia. Žižek's example, the storming of the Winter Palace is, I suspect, rather easy to judge retrospectively. The point is, however, like Badiou's understanding of event over the eventual, to fathom how such spontaneity, violent and bloody as it may be, might speak to the necessary coordinates of social transformation rather than to basic acts of aggressive destruction. To my mind, the individual in such acts only partly draws this distinction, if at all. It is social contradiction that carves authenticity, even more than consciousness of revolutionary subjectivity. Still, both approaches may end up reproducing veritable tautologies of proletarian impasse: one, by stressing that you know that your revolutionary violence is not wanton destruction but authentic because, well, you are doing it; or, two, there is no revolutionary violence because, well, there is no revolutionary violence, the time is not ripe, the conditions are not optimum, the

contradictions are not severe enough, etc. Of course, heroic revolutionaries might say, “Just get on with it” and worry about the finer points later. Yet the question of authenticity clearly has deep implications for social change. The problem cannot be ethics averse, as if the justification for the violence is that the revolution made me do it. This may be so, but the authenticity of revolutionary violence is principally about the ethically true, to a universalism inscribed in the transformation at stake. As Žižek knows, this is not an alibi: it is the real foundation of any post-revolutionary social formation, but most especially, indeed absolutely, of one that abolishes class for free association.

Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” is germane here, because he not only considers the question of legal right in relation to natural law (both often framed in terms of ideological necessity) but the distinct claims of revolutionary violence as something else again (Benjamin 1986). Whereas Žižek, in full philosophical mode, can make the case for doing nothing as justifiable violence (which is more than philosophical if one considers the work and logic of a strike), Benjamin’s approach is bound to the exigencies of emergency and crisis, in which withdrawal is not excluded but is made much more sensitive to action as actively engaged. On the one hand, he categorically rejects distinctions about violence drawn on the basis of just and unjust ends; on the other, he acknowledges that a state’s limits on the pursuit of individual violence are primarily based on the principle of the defense of law itself, rather than on a discourse that begins in an ethics or right. Indeed, he goes as far as to claim that “all violence as a means is either law-making or law-preserving” (Benjamin 1986, 243). What specifies violence as revolutionary is precisely that it breaks this cycle, not only beginning outside the law but from smashing state power premised on “mythic,” law-making violence. This is a very high bar, however, since much of what we would hold to be revolutionary, even in the case of North Africa that I have invoked, has taken power from states but not the state as such. To that degree, Benjamin’s thesis suggests we might still live in what Marx describes as “pre-history,” where violence, revolutionary in intent, cannot be affirmed as pre-history by the states that have emerged in its wake. The question pivots not on the degree of violence necessarily, but on the level of transformation it affects, the relation of violence to force in Benjamin’s understanding of *Gewalt*, a difference where history is not generally kind.

What limits revolutionary violence? Is it when you have run out of ammunition? When your machete is blunt? When your rope is too frayed to knot? We know that Lenin suggested that you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet, but why so many? Couldn’t the omelet have been smaller? I have not been contemplating eggs, of course, but people, for while proletarian revolution may be principally directed at the abolition of private property, its violence is aimed at those people and their proxies who benefit most from its defense. Such violence is not assured because of the aforementioned compromises within the political process. When Marx, however, considered the bloody counter-revolution that followed the bourgeois insurrections of

1848-49, he decided “there is only one means by which the murderous death agonies of the old society and the bloody birth throes of the new society can be shortened, simplified and concentrated- and that is by revolutionary terror” (1977, 505-506). In his address to the Communist League in 1850, Marx’s defense of revolutionary violence is even more explicit: “Far from opposing the so-called excesses, instances of popular revenge against the hated individuals or public buildings that are associated only with hateful recollections, such instances must not only be tolerated but the leadership of them be taken in hand” (2003, 156). The call is not for indiscriminate killing but for such violence as would ensure the success of the revolution. This terror is not the invention of Marxism, or indeed proletarian insurrection. The prime example, of course, comes from bourgeois revolutions, chiefly the French, whose “grand terreur” would certainly influence the conceptualization of Proletarian Dictatorship. As “le dictateur sanguinaire” Robespierre saw it, “Terror is nothing else than swift, severe, indomitable justice; it flows, then, from virtue” (2004, 62). The virtue of the guillotine would eventually visit Robespierre himself, who was decapitated, face up. Those who advocate revolutionary violence must be willing to be its victim.

But this is not the chief lesson of the role of violence in social transformation even as we must allow that historically the incidence of excess undoes the ethical claims of its necessity. Sorel suggests that violence provides teachable moments in the meaning of revolutionary consciousness, and to that extent the study of violence is integral to an understanding of revolution in the modern period: those that appear to have succeeded, those that failed, and those that are yet to come. The fact that Marx and, to some degree, Lenin, understood revolutionary activity as following both violent and non-violent possibilities underlines the need to assess the material conditions of the revolution itself (I would urge this, in particular, with regard to current events to which I have referred). But since revolutionary violence offers no integument around what is permissible, its intensity, its scale of necessity, its prospect may *secure* the social inertia it otherwise opposes. In other words, one might live with the crisis rather than risk its alternative; one might live with inequality in the shadow of the state apparatus built to secure it; or, one might live with oppression because, in violently opposing it, one does not know how much violence is necessary, or what would legitimate the edge of its extension. There are many paradoxes to proletarian revolutionary subjectivity, but this one is surely its most obtuse. Should not the dissolution of self as classed be sufficient violence? Would not anything more negate the freedom from necessity to which proletarian revolution putatively curves? On this score, revolutionary violence is just, just never enough.

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