

Political Violence and Democracy

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Summary

This article inquires into the difference between political violence and ordinary criminal violence. It argues that political violence is any violence that becomes legitimate through the simple fact that it happened. It then looks into the relationship between political violence and the state's monopoly of legitimate violence. Finally it argues that democracies have extended further than any other states their monopoly of legitimate violence and suggests that this is related to the close connection that historically has existed between democracies and colonialism.

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What is political violence? In what way is it different from criminal violence? How can a murder and rape committed by a perverted predator be distinguished from murder and rape committed in the context of a political conflict? How and why is political violence different from a bar brawl, from a riot at a football match, or from the looting and general chaos that often happens in the aftermath of large natural disasters like earthquakes, tornadoes or floods? Or is there no difference? Is political violence just an illusion or is there something particular about it that grounds its distinction from other forms of violence, from ordinary criminality, from acts of madness and from other types of social disorder?

One possible (and rather evident) answer to these questions is to say that political violence, is violence that is committed in the context of a political conflict, or that can be related, either through its cause or through its motive, to political issues. The difficulty with this very straightforward answer is that depending on one's political leaning just about every form of disorder will tend to be seen (at least potentially) as *political* violence. There is an early book of Eric Hobsbawm on social banditry that clearly reveals that the border between criminality and political activism can be at times extremely thin ¹⁾, and on both sides of this distinction, it is often hard to know just where criminality ends and where politics begins. Furthermore, every political regime, democratic or otherwise, tends to brand at least some of its political opponents as criminals. Whether Islamic terrorists in the West, rights activists in China, unlucky presidential candidates in Sri Lanka, members of opposition parties in Iran, or popular prime ministers in Indonesia none of these political actors are recognized as such by the powers that repress them.

Their activities are declared criminal, and they are punished as criminals rather than denounced as political opponents. Between the tendency of political powers to declare criminal numerous types of political activity, and the desire of activists to excuse many forms of social disorder by calling them political, it becomes extremely difficult to recognize where we should draw the distinction between political dissent and criminal violence, unless of course one wishes to claim that the distinction is only to be understood as an expression of one's political commitment. Alternatively, and more cynically, one could argue that there is no such distinction and that politics is little more than legalized banditry.

Is this then the best we can do? Are we really reduced to choose between blind activism and cynical pessimism? Or can we make sense otherwise than as an illusion, of the impression we all share, that there is a difference here; that political violence is not the same thing as criminal violence, even if political actors, whatever side they may be from, are not immune (why would they be?) from criminal temptations. It what follow I wish to propose a criterion to distinguish political violence from other forms of violence, both from criminal violence and from legal coercion. This criteria is not normative, in the sense that it does not say that political violence is better (or worse) than criminal violence. However, as we will see it has a lot to do about norms, especially about norms of violence, about what makes violence legitimate or illegitimate. Furthermore as I will argue later on, violence itself has a lot to do about norms, that is to say about what is good and what is bad.

The criteria

In its simplest form the criteria I propose says that *political violence is any violence that becomes legitimate through the simple fact that it happened*. What it says then, is that what determines if a violent act is an instance of political violence or not, does not have anything to do with either, the cause, the motive or the nature of the violent action itself. It does not matter if it was an isolated murder, an attack against a police station, a bombing that only caused material damage or a riot in which thousands died. A violent act only constitutes political violence (or qualify as political violence) if it can gain legitimacy through the simple fact that it took place. This does not exclude that it may also gain legitimacy through other means, for example, by being sanctioned by the state or local moral authorities, but that it gains legitimacy through the fact that it was committed constitutes the only necessary and sufficient condition for a violent action to be considered political violence. If a violent act cannot gain any legitimacy, simply through having been committed, it remains a criminal act no matter who committed it, in what circumstances or for what reason. This criterion is not normative; it is descriptive and it is objective. It is completely independent of the beliefs and intentions of the actors concerning the nature or goals of their actions; what it tries to do is to capture the mechanism through which certain actions will be received within a given community as acts of political violence, because being a political violence is a social, shared

definition and not an isolated private one.

Two examples may help to illustrate this point. Beginning in the late 1970s and lasting for close to 20 years there were in the United States a series of bombings that killed 3 persons and wounded more than 20 others. They carried out by an American mathematician and anarchist, Ted Kaczynski, who came to be known as the Unabomber²⁾. Kaczynski operated alone. He sent his bombs through mail or hand delivered them. He also wrote a manifesto, *Industrial Society and its Future* which he transmitted to major newspapers, saying that he would abandon his bombing campaign if it were published. After discussion as to whether or not it was moral to do so, the Unabomber Manifesto as it came to be known, was published by both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, on September 19, 1995. There were no further bombing and Kaczynski was arrested in March 1996, he had been recognized through the style of his writing. Kaczynski was typically a political activist. His causes were the defense of the environment and a call for responsible technological development. These are causes for which many people feel sympathy and which most would call political. However his violence only was, and ever remained criminal violence only for the very simple reason that nobody identified with it. Some American anarchists did express sympathy for Kaczynski's 'ideals' after the publication of his manifesto, but all denounced his methods as criminal.³⁾ No one took his side. Nobody wrote that this violence was regrettable, but understandable in view of the damage being done to the environment. No one said that the repression he suffered was politically motivated, the result of a conspiracy by large corporations whose interests he threatened, etc. Kaczynski acted alone and found no sympathizers or supporters. Political violence is public rather than private violence.

To the opposite terrorists groups like the Red Brigade or Prima Linea who operated in Italy in the 1970s, who planted bombs, killed industrialists, policemen, and politicians, shot rightwing newspaper reporters or simply journalists who were unsympathetic to their cause in the knee, were clearly recognized by everyone as being engaged in political violence. Even if the state and the representatives of the law called them criminals and even if those who had some sympathy for their objectives denounced their methods as criminal, even if these terrorist groups also robbed banks to support their activities, there was not doubt in anyone's mind that this was political violence, rather than mere criminality. Why was this violence different and not simply criminal? Because it was commonly assumed that it was in some way legitimate, and it was seen as truly legitimate by at least some people. Even though this violence may have been considered by many who felt sympathy for its authors as a political mistake, or as short sighted and doomed to failure, they also thought that it was in some way understandable or excusable. Many judged that, in spite of the fact that they would never have done it themselves, they understood how and why someone could be brought to commit such acts of violence. Small as they were these terrorists groups had supporters who helped them, hid them, fed them, provided them with false documents and with the information necessary to carry out their violent operations. A similar analysis applies to IRA terrorism in Northern Ireland.

The difference between political violence and criminal violence is neither in the nature of the causes, in the intention of the agents, nor in the type of actions committed, but in the action's success at being recognized as legitimate violence through the simple fact that it has been committed. What does this mean and how does it work? Violence becomes legitimate when agents other than those who committed the violent action, recognize to some extent that action as their own, recognize that it is, at least partially, justified. This 'justification' does not need to be total or complete. As mentioned earlier, observers may well believe that they could not have done it themselves, and even recoil from the horror and the extent of the violence, but they nonetheless think that it is understandable that it happened, that it was to be expected, that 'they' (the victims) had it coming to them, that 'they' were looking for it, that it is unfortunate, but not really surprising. When people think or speak in such a way, what they are really saying is that the violence which was committed was some extent legitimate; that it is not simply a crime, that it is good in some way.

Political violence is a violence that simultaneously divides and unifies. It divides by identifying enemies and by indicating legitimate targets, whether Jews, communists, foreigners, Chinese immigrants, supporters of the opposition, enemies of Allah, infidels, etc. And it unifies exactly through the same means: by identifying enemies and indicating legitimate targets it defines who we are, in opposition to who they are, they who are the targets of our legitimate violence. Political violence is a violence that defines legitimate violence, and any act of violence will do that if it becomes legitimate through the simple fact that it took place. That violent action then gives itself as an example to be imitated, as a model to be copied, as an ideal. Such is political violence; therefore as an action there is in itself nothing special that separates it from criminal violence. The only ground of the distinction is the fact that some see it as legitimate. It is therefore not because certain acts of violence are political, as opposed to basely criminal, that they are legitimate, but, because they are considered legitimate that they are viewed as acts of political violence.

Democracy

How can this be possible it will be argued, in a democracy which is (by definition?) ruled by a legitimate government, and where the state holds the monopoly of legitimate violence? Isn't political violence in such a state illegitimate by definition? The legitimacy which makes violence political in opposition to merely criminal, as we have seen, is not a simple "yes/no" affair. It comes in degrees and can be measured over two different dimensions at least. First, its scope or basis, an act of political violence is not political in the eyes of everyone. For some it is merely, surely, distinctively criminal and nothing else. Others attribute to the act of violence a political dimension; they recognize that it has some legitimacy. Who are they? How many are they? The answers to such questions determine the scope of the political basis of the violence. The second dimension may be called 'intensity'. Some individuals feel some sympathy for those who committed the violence, and may favor partial political amnesty for the perpetrators, but nothing else. Others do

not want to have anything to do with the violence itself, but are ready to help or hide terrorist, and others for their part are ready to join them. The legitimacy of political violence comes in degrees and an act of violence is political to the extent that it is legitimate.

It does follow however from the proposed definition of political violence that any act of political violence constitutes a challenge to the state's monopoly of legitimate violence. Terrorists groups, armed guerrillas or rebel armies defy the state's monopoly of legitimate violence and the legitimacy of its monopoly. They claim that their own violence also, or their own violence only, is legitimate. And to the extent that their violence is political rather than purely criminal, that is to say to the extent that their violence is echoed in the social body, they have a claim in this challenge. Isn't it also the case, it will be said, that sometimes it is the state which exerts political violence against some of its citizens, or some of the residents on its territory? Yes, and when that happens, it is always a sign that the state's monopoly of legitimate violence has been partially lost, or is being threatened. State violence and state terrorism constitute efforts to regain the monopoly of legitimate violence, and often, more realistically, an effort not to be completely swept away by the general debacle of law and order. Political violence therefore always takes place in a situation where the state has lost or is losing the monopoly of legitimate violence. However, not every forms of violence which challenges the state's monopoly of legitimate violence, also constitutes political violence. When, for example a father, his brothers and other members of a family kill his daughter or her lover because she is dating someone who is unacceptable and is viewed as dishonoring the family, this violent act challenges the state's monopoly of legitimate violence, for the family is claiming that there are certain acts of legitimate violence over which the state has no jurisdiction. Yet it does not (directly) challenge the state's legitimacy, only the extent to which it can claim monopoly over legitimate violence. This violence is not political. It does not receive whatever legitimacy it may receive from the simple fact that it has been committed, but because it is prescribed or recommended by certain traditional rules or social conventions.

This example also helps to bring out what it really means to hold the monopoly of legitimate violence. It is not only to have supreme power, in the sense of being able to put an end to any violent challenge, or in the sense of having the greatest violence at one's disposal. To hold the monopoly of legitimate violence is essentially to be able to dictate the difference between good and bad violence, between violence that is legitimate and justified, and violence that is illegitimate and unjustified, a crime. Of course no state has ever been able to do that perfectly, and the holders of political power have always co-opted or enshrined customary rules or religious prescriptions that define which transgressions deserve violent retributions or against which groups, i.e. bourgeois, infidels, blacks, etc., violence is legitimate or permitted. They have always embraced, at least at first, such traditional rules as a necessary means of maintaining their hold on power. However historically modern democracies, more than any other states, have tried to extend their monopoly legitimate violence and to determine independently of traditional rules what constitutes the legitimate use of violence. On the one hand, modern democratic governments control the

autonomous use of violence in social interaction to a much greater extent historically than any other state. For example, when I was a child (which is not so long ago) it was considered normal that parents could resort to violence to 'raise' their children, to teach them proper manners and behavior. It was also normal for school teachers to resort to physical punishments. Today, in Canada at least, both these forms of violence are illegal. What used to be under the authority of the family and of the school and to some extent of customary rules as to what constitutes legitimate violence has now passed to the authority of the state. (I do not want to be interpreted as insinuating that this is bad, or necessarily good, my intention is simply to point out that this is a meaningful social transformation.) On the other hand, in democratic states public discussions allow challenging customary and religious rules concerning legitimate violence and the state's monopoly of legitimate violence protects challengers. In such states traditional views concerning the use of violence therefore tend to be progressively transformed as a result of public discussion.

The monopoly of legitimate violence

How does the monopoly of legitimate violence come to be established? Historically the answer to that question is quite straightforward. Everywhere, it is through violence, through violent political conflicts that a monopoly of legitimate violence came to be established. However in order to maintain such a monopoly, as was argued earlier, it is not enough to command the greatest power and violence. One must also be able to dictate to all the difference between good and bad violence. How can this process be accomplished? The means to do this, I believe, is the same as that through which violence becomes political. A political violence is a violence that becomes legitimate through the simple fact that it was committed. That is to say it is a violence in which people, agents other than those who committed the violence, recognize themselves and their own violence, a violence which they are ready to 'own' to some extent. Political violence functions as surrogate violence, as a violence that liberates agents from their own violence without having to commit any act of violence. As when someone says: "I would not have burned that gypsies' camp, but they had it coming to them. They leave their garbage anywhere; all their children are thieves and beggars. They make noise at night and they bring diseases." One gains the monopoly of legitimate when he succeeds in giving his own violence as surrogate for the violence of all. When that happens something else happens. That violence ceases to be perceived as violence, when violence becomes legitimate in the eyes of all, it is not violence anymore, it is not even political violence; it becomes legitimate coercion.

Of course this 'all' can never be a 'true all', a real universal, by definition there are some, who do not consider the violence of the state as legitimate, in particular the victims, the targets of that violence. This creates a difficulty for the holder of the monopoly of legitimate violence and usually states have had two strategies to try to remedy this problem. The first one is to try to get the victim to agree to violence he or she suffers, to recognize that it is legitimate. This is what we do with

criminals; we try to get them to recognize the fairness of the punishment which they suffer at the hands of the legitimate authorities. The second one is to export the state's violence. It is to exert violence outside the domain, of the territory defined by the state's monopoly of legitimate violence. That is to a large extent what wars and colonies have been about and it is also why states need hard borders that make a strong difference between those who belong inside and those who do not. This is just as true of democracies and it is perhaps not an accident that democracies have also been the major and most successful colonial states in recent history.

Notes

- 1) E. Hobsbawm *Primitive Rebels : Studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th centuries* (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1963).
- 2) The name comes from the fact that the bombings targeted Universities and Airlines companies and Unabomber became the FBI's code name for that file.
- 3) This cannot only be dismissed as prudence on the part of these anarchists. The point is that nobody helped the Unabomber.

