

A high-contrast, black and white portrait of Che Guevara, looking slightly upwards and to the left. He is wearing his iconic black beret with a white star. The image has a grainy, high-contrast quality, typical of a photocopy or a stylized graphic.

The Violent Nature of Revolution

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1 Introduction

The Derg revolution in Ethiopia during the year of 1977 was a bloody one – in the so-called red-white terror, all urban opposition to the revolutionists was violently destroyed until Mengistu Haile Mariam held unquestioned power (cf. Donham 1999: 134-135). In fact, the red-white terror and the massacre that ensued became known as *“the most horrifying carnage in the history of the country”* (ibid: 135). A witness of the period describes the experience as follows (ibid: 134): *“All the houses were watching each other, spying on each other, sniffing each other out. This is civil war; this is what it’s like. I sit down by the window, and immediately they say, ‘Somewhere else, sir, please. You’re visible from the street. It would be easy to pick you off. A car passes, then stops. The sounds of gunfire. Who was it? These? Those? And who, today, are ‘these,’ and who are the ‘those’ who are against ‘these’ just because they are ‘these’? The car drives off, accompanied by the barking of dogs. They bark all night.”*

The terror was modelled on the example of the Russian revolution and served the classic functions of violence in a revolutionary state, namely to produce political demobilisation, enabling the regime to organise itself (ibid: 136).

Terror – and the violence that creates it – often comes with a revolution, and for authors such as Frantz Fanon, the anti-colonial revolution ultimately requires violence, or to use his own words (2007: 1): *“[...] whatever the name used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is always a violent event.”*

In the definition of the term ‘revolution’ proposed by Thomassen, violence is described as often being an aspect of the social transformation wrought in the revolutionary process, even if it is not always part of the process (2012: 684).

As the above examples prove that violence is an important aspect of rebellions, the following thesis will have a deeper look at the definition and significance of violence in contemporary anthropological theory and practice. First, a theoretical framework for an anthropology of violence will be established, before select aspects thereof will be discussed. In the conclusion of the text, these paradigms will again be applied to rebellions.

2 Violence in Anthropological Theory

As implied by the previous quote by Fanon, violence in the context of revolutions is often a device for effecting a social transformation. And Fanon’s text and language continue to insist on the necessity of violence in the process of decolonisation (2007: 3): *“You do not disorganize a society, however primitive it may be, with such an agenda if you are not determined from the very start to smash every obstacle encountered.”*

For Fanon, there is a circle of violence in a colonised state, where the violence originates from the *“government agent”*, and this violence that suppresses the freedom of the colonized has to be returned to the colonizer in order to overcome the colonial situation (ibid: 4, 19).

Fanon describes how this suppressed violence can find an outlet in dance manias and find temporary relief, but the only true resolution for him is a violent colonial revolution – and he concludes that the colonized who are in favour of a nonviolent compro-



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mise with the colonial powers are in fact “losers” (ibid: 19-21, 24-25).

However, in contemporary anthropological theory, the occurrence of violence and strategies for the mitigation of violence are more than simply tools used to bring forth social change. For instance, when Gilsenan writes about violence and conflict in the north of Lebanon, he paints a much more differentiated picture of the causes and effects wrought by violent events (cf. 2002).

Gilsenan’s first observation is that the 20th century was the “*most murderous century of which we have record*”, with two world wars and industrialized warfare, systematic colonial violence, and militia or terror organizations (2002: 99). And I could personally experience that this violence is not a thing of the past during my stay in Boston in March 2013, where the rather random and unexpected bombings certainly changed the daily routines in the city – at least for a short while. Never before or after I saw the streets of the Greater Boston Area as empty as when the police and the army were chasing the two suspects. And the pervasive narrative of a heroic America versus evil terrorism portrayed by the media under the slogan “*Boston strong*” also changed the image of the city in the minds of many US citizens.

This performative aspect of violence is also emphasized by Gilsenan who finds an interesting discrepancy between the repeated and almost ritual narrations of violent events that stood in a stark contrast to the actual reality, where the actors were in fact bargaining for a peaceful compensation through their narrations and were avoiding direct physical violence and conflict (ibid: 111).

Therefore Gilsenan concludes that anthropologists investigating the influence of violence in social life have to be even more wary of generalisations than they usually already are, since self-deception and anomie can be as fundamental as truth and social coherence when people perform and deal with violence and conflict in their lives (ibid: 112).

3 Forms of Violence

While the term of violence has already been extensively used, a definition has not yet been given. This is no accident, as the term is elusive and difficult to define. Often, the following definition of Keane is used as a basis (1996: 66-67): *"In its standard meaning, violence refers to the unwanted use of physical force that results in harm, degradation, or death."* However, we will soon see that there is more to violence than just physical force, and that violence is not always directed towards individual humans.

To solve this conundrum while bearing Gilsenan's cautioning voice in mind – to seek definite and particular examples in our discussion of violence –, the following section will try to analyse a variety of the forms in which violence occurs in society. These examples may not always be directly connected to revolutions, but in order to give a complete overview and enable a discussion of the relevance of violence for revolutions, the following section will broadly identify the most important forms in which anthropologists have observed violence to date.

3.1. Structural Violence

Structural violence is a very different form of violence than the forms of violence discussed so far – structural violence is a term that aims to explain why certain human groups are more likely to become the victims of violence than others (cf. Farmer 1996: 261).

This abstract functional definition of structural violence can perhaps be illustrated with the fieldwork of Nancy Scheper-Hughes in Bom Jesus, Brazil (cf. 1993: 216-267). There, it was often the case that people disappear, or are killed by paramilitary forces – but Scheper-Hughes observes that this violence is mostly directed to marginal populations and that there is little expressed outrage against this violence (ibid: 225). Scheper-Hughes posits that two factors are responsible for this passivity: ideology and practice. She describes how bureaucratic practice and government ideology work hand in hand to terrify those subjected to violence into submission by creating a 'human panopticon' through being in a state of emergency (ibid: 229).

Another example is put forward by Paul Farmer, when he recounts the fate of Acéphie whose poverty brings her to have sex with an army officer and who consequently gets infected with AIDS (1996: 261-267). Farmer observes that both gender and race play an important role in determining who becomes the victim of what kind of violence, he finds that the decisive factor is poverty (1996: 280): *"As the twentieth century draws to a close, the world's poor are the chief victims of structural violence – a violence which has thus far defied the analysis of many seeking to understand the nature and distribution of extreme suffering."*

As a last example for the effects of poverty, consider the following and most striking story quoted by Scheper-Hughes (1993: 230):

"You gringos," a Salvadorian peasant told an American visitor, "are always worried about violence done with machine guns and machetes. But there is another kind of violence that you should be aware of, too. I used to work on a hacienda. My job was to take care of the dueno's dogs. I gave them meat and bowls of milk, food that I couldn't give my own family. When the dogs were sick, I took them to the veterinarian. When my children were sick, the dueno gave me his sympathy, but no medicine as they died".

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In other words, here the structural divide between the rich and the poor person decides that the dueno's dogs are treated better than the peasant's children. In addition to poverty and the aforementioned categories of race and gender, there are multiple institutionalised structures that can lead to violence against certain subgroups of a society – from ageism over classism to nationalism.

Since structural violence helps to understand why certain populations are more at risk to become victims of violence, the term and the discourse of structural violence remains relevant for revolutions, where violence is certainly exacerbated, but often still finds victims along the structural lines that define the victims in peaceful times.

3.2. State Violence

While the writings of Frantz Fanon describe different facets of colonial and anti-colonial violence, there is a related form of violence that has not yet been discussed: state violence. In a departure from the earlier samples, Coronil & Skurski approach violence as a constitutive dimension of modern states and societies (2006: 3). They state that states – in the process of expelling violence from the civil order – create the political discourse of violence, which becomes evident in the identification of violence with its most extreme manifestations like war, which are distinct from civil order and everyday violence (ibid.).

In traditional theory, the modern state acts as the mediator of conflict with the role of eliminating illegitimate violence and controlling its legal application to the point of being sole legitimized agent of violence (cf. Coronil & Skurski 2006: 10). In this context, state violence becomes normalized as the *"necessary hand of modernity"* (ibid: 11).

In his 1985 text on war making, Tilly goes a step further and claims that *"war makes states"* (170). Tilly observes that there is a united continuum from banditry over piracy and policing to war making by making the comparison between the racketeering in organized crime and the protection afforded by a state (1985: 170-172). The only difference between the two is according to Tilly that states actually monopolize violence wherever possible (ibid.).

Furthermore, we can observe that violence is by no means only the last instance to resolve differences on the international level through war, but that violence is also an arbiter of everyday interaction found in human conditions such as poverty and coercion (cf. Coronil & Skurski 2006: 26).

With reference to revolutions in a modern state, the term *"riot"* is a telling denomination of the moral evaluation of violent protest – a riot signifies the breakdown of reason and the failure of modern civilization (cf. Coronil & Skurski 2006: 20-21). However, from the perspective of revolutionists, such riots are a sign that a state has lost its legitimacy with a group of people and may therefore be a precursor to revolutions. Therefore, violence can be understood as a sign of the limits of states and the dominant social order hinting at the presence of alternative social visions – who may become reality through revolution (ibid: 27).

3.3. Symbolic Violence

In contrast to physical violence, the term “*symbolic violence*,” as coined by Pierre Bourdieu, is concerned with a mainly psychological form of violence.

Bourdieu uses the term to explain how a hegemony can be created and reproduced in society by a minority of a ruling class (1989: 16). He uses the example of the almost universal male dominion over women in Western society to explain his position and the effects of symbolic power (2005: 63).

The fact that the subordination under a ‘natural’ world order is not recognized as an act of violence is what makes symbolic violence so sublime: The social structures that constitute the very fabric of society are constructed by human perception which is in turn shaped through a discourse expressing the state of relations of symbolic power (cf. Bourdieu 1989: 20). And when there are conflicts between different social agents over the definition of a specific term, then we can observe symbolic violence – as seen in the case of feminism, where an alternate definition of gender-relations are proposed that do not reproduce the male dominion over the females. As with other forms of violence, the state is also vying for a monopoly over symbolic violence (ibid: 22).

While a revolution may not always feature a violent physical conflict, a revolution will certainly have a symbolic conflict: At least two alternative social orders will be pitted against each other in a bid to become the dominant social ideology.

3.4. Violence of Abstraction

As if symbolic power would not be abstract enough, some authors have used the term “*violence of abstraction*” (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). They use this form of violence to describe the thriving of beliefs in witchcraft and the constant occurrence of witch hunts in modernized African societies. Like with symbolic violence, the foundation for the violence in abstraction lies within social inequality: people produce imagined explanations for wealth, since wealth can be created invisibly in a capitalistic society (ibid: 289).

In a preoccupation with the occult, the imagination is that of an abstract violence “(1) *in which the majority are kept poor by the mystical machinations of the few*; (2) *in which employment has dwindled because of the creation of a virtual labor force from the living dead*; (3) *in which profit depends on compressing space and time, on cannibalizing bodies, and on making production into the spectral province of people of the night*; (4) *in which the old are accused of aborting the natural process of social reproduction by preventing the next generation from securing the bases of its material and social existence—and youth, reciprocally, are demonized.*” (ibid: 293).

With this definition, the violence of abstraction is not very different from symbolic violence – both concepts explain the production of community, locality and identity and therefore the creation of social and power relations (ibid: 295). It is still a useful concept, for it demonstrates how abstract forms of violence and power influence human lives in both western and non-western settings.

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3.5. Performative Violence

Jeffrey S. Juris reflects on the performative aspect of violence in his description of black bloc violence during the G8 summit in Genoa. He asserts that the activists use a 'performative violence', to capture media attention and in order to make a political statement they expressly target symbols of capitalism and embody their political vision in physical violence (2005: 414, 420-421).

While the goal of the activists is to make the structural violence in capitalism apparent through their acts of violence, it is the media that shape the narratives on the events, and it is for the media the violence is staged (ibid: 428).

Even when we consider the example of the Boston Bombings or other acts of terrorism, cannot be refuted that acts of violence are enacted for performative purposes in order to reach an audience with a certain message, or in order to point to a specific social issue.

4 Violence in Practice

The wide range of different forms of violence proposed in the previous section begs the question on who the agents of violence are. The following chapter will illustrate that not every effector of violence has to be a Colonel Kurtz with a blackened heart, but will aim to shed light into the actual social situations and relations where violent behaviour occurs (cf. Conrad 1902).

4.1. Violence in Rituals & Constituting Socio-Cultural Order

When Max Gluckman writes on the rituals of rebellion, he describes an institutionalized setting where usually suppressed violence is enacted (1963: 112): *"women have to assert licence and dominance as against their formal subordination to men, princes have to behave to the king as if they covet the throne, and subjects openly state their resentment of authority."*

Gluckman observes that such instituted protest can strengthen the unity of the social system as a whole, as these ritualized rebellions are directed towards particular distributions of power, and not towards the structure of the system itself (ibid.). In practice, it may be a particular king who is hated and rejected, but not the kingship itself (ibid: 129). In fact, through the institutionalized rebellion and violence, the social system is rather strengthened than weakened because it unifies against external forces and the association with inherited tradition (ibid: 130).

These rituals become a necessity in order to counterbalance the socially disruptive forces at work during the beginning of the rainy season – when food becomes abundant after a period of hunger, when the tempo of social life changes, and whence the whole society moves into a state of plenty (ibid: 132).

Maurice Bloch is another author who describes violence in religious rituals, although he uses the term *"rebounding violence"* (1992: 4). With this term, Bloch tries to capture the fact that every ritual as characterized by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner with the different ritual phases of separation, liminality and reintegration also contains a distinct element of violence, in order to demonstrate the conquering subordination

of vitality (ibid: 6). Bloch understands subordination of vitality as the achievement of transcendence by a person during a ritual to achieve a new personhood, for instance during an initiation rite (ibid: 5).

As with symbolic and abstract violence, ritualized violence stands for a situation where the social structure is reproduced through violence, and not necessarily transformed as popular notions of violence and war would have it. Thus violence signifies not the breakdown of society, but its reproduction. However, Gluckman also shows that this is a fragile balance to behold, that a society with too much unchanneled energy will risk an uncontrolled outbreak of violence undermining social structure.

4.2. Agency of Violence

If violence is enacted by a general public during special rituals, there are other agents that perpetrate acts of violence that would normally not occur in society – and this leads to the question, if these people are evil humans who are violent by nature, or how they come to behave as they do. One of the most prototypical examples of this were the Nazi war criminals. Fortunately, we have the record of Hannah Arendt who offers an insightful analysis of one such subject – Adolf Eichmann.

Adolf Eichmann was one of the main responsible for the “*Endlösung*”, and Arendt bases her research on the court documents of the post-war process against Eichmann in Jerusalem (1964: 9). With that material, she concludes that the remarkable thing about Eichmann was the ‘banality’ that lead to his actions, but that he was mainly motivated by the goal of gaining a higher social status (ibid: 15-16).

The research by Georg Elwert supports this insight on the usage of violence as a means to gain social status: His thesis is that violence is just one means amongst other economic means that is leveraged by the powerful in order to reach their ends (1997: 99). He argues that in civil wars, or in places where warlords rule, rational economic thought dominates the agency of violence and leads to ‘markets of violence’ in the absence of a clear state with a monopoly on violence (ibid: 88). When violence becomes the daily bread in a society, it is not surprising that people hedge violence to make profits – again highlighting that violent agency does not need to spring forth from evil humans, but can have its origin in highly rational thinking.

4.3. Experts on Violence

The contemporary world has not only produced a variety of violent conflicts, but also experts on violence, whose job is either to report on these conflicts, or to mitigate these conflicts with the goal of spreading Western-style democratic governments in the world.

Mark Pedelty studied the foreign correspondents in El Salvador and argues that they have a very limited role in the “*creative process of discovery, analysis, and representation production*” and are instead “*mainly conduits for a system of institutions, authoritative sources, practices, and ideologies that frame the events and issues well before they, the mythical watchdogs, have a chance to do anything resembling independent analysis or representation*” (1995: 24). Pedelty shows that the experts reporting on violence are themselves caught in a system of structural violence that leaves them little room for individual agency when establishing the narrative on the subjects of their stories (ibid: 8).



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Clapham focuses on the peace-making efforts under the aegis of the United Nations and he writes that there currently are two main strategies employed in conflict resolution. The first strategy establishes a “*Western-style*” democratic constitution with the conflict parties and then elections are conducted under the surveillance of the United Nations, as was the case in Angola and Mozambique for example (1998: 195). The second strategy, as employed in Somalia and Liberia, creates an interim government with a broad basis that includes all the conflict parties with the goal to quickly reach a peaceful period where a constitution can be negotiated (ibid.).

In Clapham’s fieldwork in Rwanda, he finds that the second strategy used in this situation was less successful because the method relies on a certain level of readiness to enter compromises and therefore the main conflict parties may not support the interim government because they are not interested in such a resolution (ibid: 196).

According to both Pedelty and Clapham, a major problem in societies with violent conflict is social inequality and the violence just a symptom, and that sometimes more intensive violence could end the conflict faster than a slow de-escalation. Again, both cases highlight that conflicts and revolutions do not occur in a social vacuum, but rather in an institutional framework that limits and directs the agency of all the parties involved. To understand revolutions, it is not sufficient to only consider singular aspects such as the outbreaks of violence, but the social framework and power relations underlying the rebelling society have to be considered as well.

4.4. Suicide Bombing

As it has been pointed out earlier, terrorism is a prime example of violent agency and the narratives on violence, at the very least in the Anglophone countries of the world – especially with the incidents of September 11, 2001 (cf. Asad 2008: 54-55). Of course that is not to say, that the phenomenon is restricted to these countries, since the leading instigator of suicide attacks between 1980 and 2001 were the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka (ibid.). However, from my experience during the Boston Bombings, I would state that the global discourse on terrorism is very much shaped by the perceptions of the United States since they made it extremely quickly to the global news outlets. In fact, since I was working in Cambridge at the time of the attack we were in fact first alerted to the events by concerned friends from Europe who saw the information in the news. Granted, the Boston Bombings were not typical suicide attacks, but the media narrative was comparable. For these reasons, it is reasonable to look at suicide bombing from the American context.

Talal Asad approaches this by trying to understand the ‘raison’ of the suicide bombers (cf. 2008: 40). After an analysis of the various motives that might drive suicide bombings, Asad finds that the uniqueness of suicide bombings does not lie in the minds and motives of the actors, but rather that the uniqueness is found in suicide bombings “*contingent circumstances*” (ibid: 64). However, while I agree that the reception of suicide bombings is certainly unique, the act of violent resistance against states is not such a rare thing, as Mahmood Mamdani points out.

Mamdani makes a comparison between the post-apartheid violence of “*neck-lacing*” and the suicide bombing in Israel and Palestine (2003: 5). He argues that people do not commit suicide by bomb because of religious reasons, he reiterates that the attacks are a political statement made to the wider world, as voiced by Yunis, a 27-year old

Palestinian art graduate preparing for a suicide mission (2003: 3): *“My act will carry a message beyond to those responsible and the world at large that the ugliest thing is for a human being to be forced to live without freedom.”*

Again, the research shows that violence is not primarily a thing of irrationality, but rather employed in a rational way as a means to an ends. From this perspective, suicide bombing is not very different from other acts of violence.

5 Conclusion

While it has already been stated in the beginning, not every revolution necessarily instigates physical violence. However, if the definition of violence is extended to include structural and symbolic violence, then it is plausible to state that some form of violence is certainly always present in the social turmoil wrought by a revolution. Going further, the success of a revolution often hinges on its ability to overpower the other actors and establish a local monopoly of violence akin to that of a modern state.

The more nuanced view on violence outlined in this thesis therefore assists in the analysis of rebellions and revolutionary forces in general. Just as a revolution is a reaction on the circumstances prevalent in a society, violence is one form such a reaction can take, as we have seen with Frantz Fanon. In the contemporary world, states are those actors that are perceived as the most legitimate perusers of physical violence, if not the only ones. However, violence does not only come in physical form: Symbolic violence is exerted, if a specific view of a thing is enforced, and many people suffer from structural violence, such as poverty. Furthermore, violence is not just enacted, but it is much rather performed – performed for an audience in order to broadcast a certain message. We have also seen that violence does not signify the breakdown of society – it is an integral part of society. Gluckmann argues that the performance of violence in rituals can serve the function of stabilizing existing social institutions. Additionally, an analysis on the agents of violence shows them to not be insane, but as normal human beings for whom violence is their reaction to their circumstances.

So far, the term ‘revolution’ has not been discussed in this thesis, since it would require another text of the same length as this one in order to properly define it. Implicitly, it has been assumed that the definition proposed by Thomassen covers most of what revolutions are thought to be (2012: 683–684). According to an abbreviated version of this definition, revolutions are a rapid transformation of a society’s political structures and the values that underpin political legitimacy (ibid.).

While it has already been argued earlier that most revolutions are violent where the significance of knowledge on violence would probably not be disputed, there are other revolutions, such as the industrial revolution, where the role of violence is less clear-cut. To prove that even in such a case knowing about the different forms of violence can further the analysis of the revolution, the following case study is dedicated to a decidedly non-violent and only weakly transformative revolution to the effect that even the status of being a revolution itself may be contested.

I am referring to the *“Cybernation Revolution”* as proposed by the committee for the Triple Revolution in a letter to the president of the United States at the time, Lyndon B. Johnson (Agger *et al.* 1964). The authors, a varied mix of social activists, professors, and technologists, identified three revolutions taking place at the time that they



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thought to be comparable to the industrial revolution, even though they were mainly concerned with the Cybernation Revolution. These were the aforementioned “*Cybernation Revolution*”, the “*Weaponry Revolution*” and the “*Human Rights Revolution*”.

In the Weaponry Revolution, they saw the fact that new forms of weaponry were developed with the ability to obliterate civilization – making war an impracticable method for resolving international conflicts.

The Human Rights Revolution was the observation of a universal demand for full human rights evidenced in the civil rights movements.

And the Cybernation Revolution was understood as the shift to a new era of production where the combination of computers with automated self-regulating machines a system of unlimited productive capacity is developed, where progressively less human labour is necessary.

The Ad-Hoc Committee of the Triple Revolution was mainly concerned about the raising skill level of the machines, where an increasingly higher education is necessary in order to compete with machines, and with the creation of a “*permanently depressed class*” who are excluded from the production-consumption cycle and live in poverty because they cannot get work. They observe that while unemployment in the US stabilizes at around 5.5%, the unemployment rate for teenagers and minorities far exceeds that number.

Regardless of whether one subscribes to the Cybernation Revolution, it should be obvious that the committee is referring to structural inequality and therefore structural violence and discrimination against a certain population. The fact that the people are using the terminology of a revolution for their observation implies, that even in such a case the concepts of violence and revolutions are interconnected.

A more recent example for the power of structural violence to call humans to revolutionary action is the Occupy movement across the globe (cf. Skinner 2011). Within a couple of months, there were over 100 occupations in the United States and over 1500 occupations worldwide, starting with Occupy Wall Street on September 17, 2011. While these movements occasionally lead to violent clashes with the state, this was not the primary goal of the movement, which was again a protest and message against the conditions in which the occupants found themselves in (ibid.). Therefore, here the most important question to understand the actors in this mini-revolution is again the question for their circumstances – the very question also asked when trying to understand the role of violence in societies.

With this, I hope to have made a convincing argument for the inclusion of violence as a necessity and tool for the improving the analyses of revolutions.

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