Review Essay

Violence and Revolutionary Change

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The virtues of violence: Democracy against disintegration in modern France

Kevin Duong

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Violence and political theory

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One of the pressing questions that still haunts political and social theorists may be articulated as follows: in order to achieve revolutionary change, is violence (a) necessary, and (b) conducive to ushering in the revolutionized world? The unanswerability of this two-part question in a definitive manner may well be the reason why it has haunted theorists, intellectuals, revolutionaries, and political figures for centuries. Nevertheless, such un-answerability does not mean that we ought not to proffer answers.

The two books reviewed in this essay attempt to deal with the problem of violence and revolutionary change. And given the impossibility of a definitive theoretical answer to this problem, we get two different arguments, each with its strengths and weaknesses.

In Kevin Duong's (2020) book, 'violence as social regeneration' (p. 1) is highlighted in the thinking of French revolutionaries, mostly throughout the nineteenth century but beginning with the French Revolution. Duong argues that this kind of 'redemptive violence' (pp. 2–3) was prominent in the thinking of many revolutionaries who sought to employ violence in the service of a modern democracy. The transformations from monarchical sovereignty to popular sovereignty that gripped France throughout the nineteenth century meant that a democratic revolution had to resolve the question of the 'social', which became a problem with the execution of the person of the king that had once unified the people as a social body (p. 23). This transformation meant for many political thinkers the disintegration of the French social body into atomized individuals, and redemptive violence was seen as the method through which a 'concrete social body' can be regenerated, which is then able to constitute a modern republican democracy (pp. 7–16, 52).

Duong thus makes the following assertion about violence and then asks: ‘It is the ambiguity, not the logic, of a historical situation that places violence on the table. The situation, first raised by the Revolution was this: From what was the social bond to be forged in the age of democracy? If the elemental unit of democracy was the emancipated individual, then what was society?’ (p. 17).

Revolutionary violence was seen in this context as the set of actions that would create the people as a sovereign people connected with each other, not on the basis of utilitarian need or abstract political citizenship, but on a deeper, more authentic set of moral and social interconnections. Only these kinds of interconnections can create the concrete social body, social harmony and fraternity, and lead to the formation of ‘a republican people’ (p. 32). Violence becomes the answer to an ambiguous context in which uncertainty, purposelessness, and disintegration can only be transformed through a violent collective action, which would create a new society. This is perhaps best illustrated in the book’s analysis of the Paris Commune and the emergence of the people as ‘the people in arms’ (p. 87).

Before I discuss the Commune, I want first to critically engage with how Duong highlights this mode of thinking about violence in the chapter dedicated to the French invasion of Algeria and the onset of its settler colonial project there. Duong underscores, largely through the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville, the emphasis on social regeneration in France as one of the main justifications of the total war of annihilation that was waged against indigenous Algerians (pp. 53–82). The regeneration of the social through the pursuit of modern ‘national glory’, where the ordinary citizen defends the nation and liberty, become a sort of rallying cry in the war of extermination against indigenous Algerians, uniting the French people in a meaningful and concrete social body in the process (pp. 55, 64, 66–68). The formation of a unified republican social body is therefore at stake in the invasion of Algeria.

The point I want to underscore here is not that Duong is mistaken in his reading of Tocqueville and other thinkers, military generals, politicians, and people in France during this period. He makes a convincing case indeed. But for a decolonial theorist, none of these kinds of justifications are new. This certainly was not the first case of extreme violence perpetrated by France – for example, thousands of Africans enslaved by the French in Saint-Domingue and elsewhere can attest to the brutality and extreme violence of imperial France. Second, that the justifications for extreme violence against the racialized other of Europe did not, in fact, accord with the brutal realities of violence but was explained away and concealed, thus ensuring the continuation of imperial violence [which Duong shows was the case with Tocqueville (pp. 71–77) and with the French public (pp. 78–81)]. This is a feature of virtually all imperial European justifications and uses of violence in the (settler) colony and the slave plantation. Third, that these violences were, in fact, exporting internal conflicts from within Europe outwardly and towards Africa, the Middle

East, the Far East, and the ‘New World’ is also commonly known and well theorized in postcolonial and settler colonial studies.

As such, what this episode in French history tells us is not so much that ‘redemptive violence’ sought to address a material conflict deeply rooted in the transition from monarchical to republican sovereignty; this is a conventional historiography that encloses histories within the relatively recent boundaries of the nation-state, and thus subsumes imperial and colonial violence under the analytical category of redemptive violence. It is critical to keep in mind that France was an empire long before it became a nation-state. Thus, what French violence against Algerians in Algeria tells us is that the violence that is embedded in systems of imperial rule appears and reappears under different guises and justifications that do not themselves name that violence as imperial violence, and hence ensure its continuation. This is not to say that there exists a total, definitive, and all-encompassing name for violence – an impossible task. Neither is it to say that there doesn’t exist a conflict or an unresolved problem deep within French society that demands the regeneration of the social. Rather, this means that redemptive violence, when constituted as an ‘internal’ French problem, becomes a mechanism through which the intimate connection of the social and of democracy to the problem of empire and imperial violence is obscured.

The decolonial emphasis I am underscoring can be succinctly seen in Duong’s claim that ‘Patrick Wolfe may be right that empires are driven to total war by settlerism’s implacable “logic of elimination”, but what allowed Tocqueville to make peace with that war was his passion for modern glory. It was a passion, Tocqueville had argued, without which the forces of social disintegration in France could not be checked’ (p. 57). From a decolonial perspective, Duong may be right that Tocqueville’s passion for modern glory led him to make peace with a war of extermination, but it was imperialism’s and settler colonialism’s logic of wealth generation and elimination that lay underneath Tocqueville’s passion.

Let me go back to my earlier assertion that the book makes its strongest and most convincing argument when examining the Paris Commune, because this decolonial intervention may be relevant for that period as well. Duong concludes from his analysis of the emergence of the ‘people in arms’, who presented an alternative to the ‘people of the ballot’, as follows: ‘In short, insurrectionary violence was not a means to the end of a social republic – or at least not only that. It was the activity by which the democratic subject of the social republic was created’ (p. 121). In Sorelian terms, which Duong analyzes in his last chapter, redemptive violence can never become strategic, utilitarian, posited as a means towards an end by the communards. When violence is instrumentalized, it will cease to be redemptive and transformative of the subject (p. 156). The paradoxes, difficulties, successes, and failures of the communards are thus presented within the complex debates of means and ends, reform vs. transformation, the social vs. the political, and so on. It is not my contention that these debates should not inform our

understanding of violence and revolutionary change, but that they are missing the critical element of imperial and (settler) colonial violence.

The Paris Commune was eventually ended with a massacre that was '[I]ed by Patrice de MacMahon, a man trained to exterminate in the Armée d'Afrique' (p. 83). Imperial violence was again always there underneath the feet of the communards; it was the collapse of the Second Empire (which should not be conflated with the collapse of imperial violence) that set the stage for the emergence of the Commune, but not even the communards, with all of their attentiveness to suffering, domination, and exploitation, and with their understanding that the rise of the Second Empire meant the destruction of the republic, were able to name this violence as imperial in the sense of the destructive violences that it unleashed upon the 'other' of Europe (with the exception of some general and rather empty allusions to the 'equality of man' and so on). And in the end, they became its victims at the hands of those trained in the Armée d'Afrique, like the thousands of Africans that came before and after them.

For Duong, the significance of his analysis is to highlight that in our contemporary world, the problem of the social and modern democracy has not receded (pp. 163–164). 'Democratic social bonds' are indeed desirable, and we ought to propose 'democratic and egalitarian' alternatives to totalitarian and fascist ideologies that purport to build and sustain a concrete social body today (p. 168). These are all critical and much needed interventions into the political theory of democracy. But again, I want to push these questions further through a decolonial lens. What is this process of democratization? Can it be divorced from the imperial context in which it was birthed and developed? If empire, colonization, settler colonization, slavery, and all of the great violences of the European colonial era (one that is far from over and has taken neocolonial forms, such as financial forms of colonization) made possible the process of democratization and the disintegration of the social, then how can we frame this as a problem of nation-states, and not of empires? Simply put, my question is this: what happens to our theorizations of means-ends, violence vs. non-violence, social vs. political, democracy vs. totalitarianism, and so on, when we consider all of these questions through the prism of the great violences of empire, (settler) colonization, and slavery? How can we rethink the analytical significance and role of redemptive violence when it is, as I have argued, properly subsumed under imperial and colonial violence?

In their book, Frazer and Hutchings (2020) highlight colonial and gendered violence in order to problematize any and all justifications of violence. In the first five chapters, they examine theorizations of violence in the works of some of the most prominent European theorists such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Georges Sorel, Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, and many others. In the last three chapters of the book, Frazer and Hutchings engage with anti-colonial and feminist theories and philosophies on violence focusing mostly on the works of

Frantz Fanon, Mohandas Gandhi, Jane Addams, Sarah Ruddick, and Elaine Scarry. It is largely in these latter schools of thought, centring the question of gender and violence, that Frazer and Hutchings locate the outcome of their analysis, which is 'a normative default position in which political violence is inherently unjustifiable' (p. 9).

In their analysis of Fanon and Gandhi, Frazer and Hutchings highlight 'the interplay between conceptualisations of politics and violence and discourses of gender and of war' (p. 134). They argue that both Fanon and Gandhi make clear distinctions between the colonial world they want to overturn and the revolutionized decolonized world they want to create. Both invoke gender in different ways in order to make intelligible that distinction: 'Both thinkers use gender as a pedagogic tool, to explain the nature and power of anticolonial non-violence [Gandhi] and violence [Fanon]' (p. 150). For Frazer and Hutchings, the feminine in each thinker comes to stand for that which is virtuous, pure, in need of defense and protection, and thus 'provokes recognition of a masculine duty to support and protect feminised subjects, who, even if they are also fighting (violently or non-violently), are not the same' (p. 151). Ultimately, 'in articulating what revolutionary action ought to be, they both rely on gendered discourses of war to exemplify the right way to fight their particular anticolonial struggles' (p. 151).

Building on this conclusion, Frazer and Hutchings engage with debates within feminism on pacifism and violence. The authors show in their analysis how feminist theory does not produce a univocal answer to the question of violence vs. non-violence, and that indeed some feminist writings, like those of Fanon and Gandhi, 'appear to risk reinventing gendered conceptualisations that should no longer be available as a source of legitimation' (p. 175) for violence or non-violence. Nonetheless, one of the key features of this debate is the highlighting of a continuum of violence that shows the serious deficiencies of instrumentalist conceptualizations of violence and renders neat separations between politics and violence, pre-war, war, and post-war untenable. In illustrating the continuum of gendered violences across these separations, feminist as well as anti-colonial theorizations of violence and war have convincingly revealed the close relationship between violence and politics and between violence and the relations of power that are both justified by, and themselves justify, specific configurations of unequal gender relations (pp. 157–158).

To solidify their critique of instrumentalist conceptions of violence, Frazer and Hutchings differentiate between the 'politics of violence' and 'politics per se'. Drawing on Scarry's seminal work, they argue that the politics of violence does not concern the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' violence, which is a prominent feature in canonical thinkers, but rather concerns the power relationships that are formed, maintained, and configured through the discursive and material relationship between violence and politics (pp. 178–187). Violence is not a neutral or natural means that exists within a political arena as a servant to politics; rather, the

very justification, employment, imagination, and practice of violence is always inherently political, which is precisely what feminist theory and analysis has astutely observed and illustrated: such feminist analysis has shown how both violence and non-violence ‘are produced as possibilities through complex material and discursive processes that are fundamentally gendered.’ (p. 185). Succinctly put, violence is not an instrument of politics, it is a political relationship ‘between perpetrator and victim, between conqueror and conquered’ (p. 187). This is a relationship that is ‘characterised by a particularly stark kind of political asymmetry and conditioned by a range of structural and discursive hierarchies and exclusions’ (p. 189).

Despite the close relation between violence and politics, Frazer and Hutchings hold onto the idea that we can have a space of and for ‘politics per se’. While they recognize that non-violence can indeed perpetuate relations of domination in certain contexts and thus continue their violences, they ask: ‘if non-violence may sometimes be disastrous, how much more disastrous is a world prepared for virtuous violence?’ (pp. 189–190). When political movements (revolutionary or otherwise) are caught in the righteousness of their cause and the virtuous nature of their necessary violence, then only more violence, especially racialized and gendered violence, will result. The main danger of virtuous violence is the manner in which it leads us blindly into more destruction and inequality. Against this, Frazer and Hutchings call for a political imagination that is vigilant against ‘conflating the politics of violence with politics per se’ (p. 190). While they do not theorize in detail what they mean by the latter, one can garner from their writing that it concerns our ability to rethink and reconstitute our social, political, and economic relations in more egalitarian and equitable directions, and to do so without the idea that ‘violence is a justifiable resource for politics’ (p. 190).

Certainly, the strategy and philosophy of using violence to fight a greater violence has not led to the decolonial, gender equal, revolutionized world that many of us desire. I agree that this idea, which remains a powerful one in revolutionary thinking and praxis, must be scrutinized, deconstructed, and critiqued. But it is also critical to highlight that the *absolute* normative position advanced in Frazer and Hutchings has gained the most currency in privileged theoretical spaces. I do not mean that oppressed, exploited, poor, racialized, and gendered subjects do not hold a similar normative position. But when they do, revolutionaries tend to avoid the absolute phrasing of violence as inherently and always unjustifiable. Frazer and Hutchings’ normative position does not speak to context-specific complexities where non-violence is never simply the negation or absence of violence, but the two can indeed co-exist and intermingle.

To put it differently, Frazer and Hutchings make a strong case that violence is not conducive to ushering in the revolutionized world. But can the answer to part (b) of the question I posed in the beginning of this essay be the basis of a definitive answer to part (a): if we accept that violence is not conducive to revolutionary

change, does that mean that violence is also always unnecessary? I cannot imagine standing in front of an enslaved Haitian revolutionary in 1791, an oppressed Paris communard in 1871, or a colonized Algerian revolutionary in 1954 and telling them without qualification and in absolute terms that their revolutionary violence was not necessary, even though I certainly would warn each of them of the outcome and the tragedies ahead.

On the other hand, Duong makes a case for why violence was deemed necessary for the French revolutionaries ('the ambiguity of the historical situation'), but the analysis lacks a more comprehensive overview of the violence in order to pinpoint exactly where it fails to be conducive to ushering in the revolutionized world. If we remain fixated on how the revolutionaries themselves frame their violence, then we are bound to remain within a narrow universe of meaning that might well miss naming the great imperial violences in which the communards acted, thus ensuring the continuation of racialized and gendered imperial violences in the process.

While neither book can offer a definitive answer to this two-part question, as I believe no one can, they certainly provide plenty of food for thought to anyone who is captivated by that question and seeks to tackle it.

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