

“I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts”: A Semantic Analysis of the Use of Violence within Global Civil Society

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There are few concepts treated with as much ambivalence as violence. On the one hand, it is universally understood as a destructive force. Human beings, when unable or unwilling to apply other methods, resort to inflicting harm on others to impose their will. Such acts and their consequences are manifestations of violence. For many, violence is a blunt fact of life, and this can be cynically accepted or passionately disclaimed. On the other hand, a passing glance at our history consistently demonstrates a gleeful fascination with violence; we relish fictional tales of bloodshed and often hold those who enact violence in high esteem when we consider their intentions to be good. Humans have a complex, even contradictory, relationship with violence, and our understanding of it is likely to remain fragmented if it stays confined to the realm of absolutes.

Violence is also essential to one of the first concepts drilled into the mind of every political science student: the state. It is often explained as an institution that exercises a monopoly over the use of force within a defined territory, legitimized through a contractual relationship between the state and its citizens. In contrast to this well-defined concept, definitions of Global Civil Society (GCS) vary wildly with little cohesion. For example, it is widely debated whether it denotes an observable constant or a new and potentially transformative movement. Yet, in all cases, there is a clear preference toward apparent non-violent actors. Violent actors are often seen as too adversarial and antagonistic to be legitimately included within GCS. The shallow consideration of violence has far-reaching consequences for those studying GCS, as well as real GCS actors. I will argue that our collective definition of violence obscures the full measure of its effects, acts as a fallacious marker of legitimacy within politics, and leaves us unable to conceive of violence as anything other than an immutable fact of human existence.

To challenge current understandings of violence, I propose a dialectical approach. Dialectics is, as James A. Tyner writes,

counter to more conventional and pervasive epistemologies—of which empiricism is exemplary—that disaggregate the world into discrete and unrelated entities. So conceived, a disaggregated epistemology limits analysis to the surface appearance of objects. Dialectics, conversely, open space for a deeper and more profound analysis. Reality, from a dialectical vantage point, consists not simply of disparate “things” but also processes and relations. In other words, reality is more than the epiphenomena that can be counted, classified, and mapped; it is more than the observation that strikes us immediately and directly, which masks the underlying structures and social relations. Dialectics therefore restructure our thinking and our ontological reality by replacing the commonsense notion of “thing” with notions of “process,” “relation,” and “change.”¹

Here I use dialectics to show how violence results from and exists through social relationships, and to illuminate the variety of forms violence takes within the current global system. Rather than considering violence to be static and immutable, I will show that it is as complex as other hierarchies and manifestations of power.

This paper is split into four sections. The first three focus on analyzing and demonstrating the limitations and dangerous consequences of traditional conceptions of violence. The fourth produces a reconciliation between these competing definitions and relates them to climate action. I will draw on the example set by the neo-Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, as well as philosophical works by Hannah Arendt and Karl Marx, to demonstrate how our societal definition of violence is inadequate. I will explain how a better understanding of violence might empower certain movements for emancipation and justice within the frameworks of ecology and anti-capitalism.

1. *Violence, an Overview*

Despite being introduced as a concept almost a century ago and numerous attempts to provide a definitive explanation, scholars still intensely disagree on the definition of 'Global Civil Society'. My goal is not to provide a definitive answer to that debate. Instead, I will demonstrate that no matter which perspective is favoured, the outcome is still subject to the biases and limitations originating from our collective understanding of violence. For example, the 2012 GCS yearbook by Kaldor, Anheier, and Glasius is part of a project to chronicle the development of GCS activity over time. As an ostensibly empirical approach, the yearbook uses a fairly inclusive definition of GCS: "the sphere of ideas, values, institutions, organizations, networks, and individuals located *between* the family, the state, and the market, and operating *beyond* the confines of national societies, politics, and economies."² This is certainly a broad definition, since almost every non-state, non-market, international activity can be considered a part of GCS. Nonetheless, when examining the events listed in the yearbook, there is clearly a bias in its analysis. The maps shown throughout the chapter that help to visualize the extent of GCS activity only show instances of non-state actors seeking political reform and state retaliation against them. While these examples are inspiring and help to paint a picture of a global people struggling to be heard, this limited portrayal and what was defined previously as GCS do not align. The narrow focus of the maps implies a normative aim that is at odds with the authors' broad conception of GCS. That is, the authors surreptitiously favour civil society actors that are non-violent. Studies and actors that uncritically adopt this bias accept the terms that dominant social forces have set for engaging in civil society. This approach grants those forces license to define what is and is not violent, and therefore what is and is not legitimate. Consequently, the state retains its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.

This contradiction is even more apparent in the Gramscian analysis of Hagai Katz. His article on GCS is ostensibly dialectical, but it persists with the static view of the world put forth by dominant powers. In attempting to determine the extent to which GCS is counterhegemonic, Katz agrees that international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are constrained by "the global political economy, driven by governments, IGOs, trade agreements, and other elements of the hegemonic world order."³ He does not, however, consider the epistemic dimensions of this conflict. For instance, to what extent does our definition of violence exclude certain actors from being considered INGOs at all? And is their exclusion conducive to the counter-hegemonic potential of GCS?

In both these analyses of GCS, there is an obvious omission of terrorist and militant groups. Though the

specific logic for their exclusion is never presented, one can infer that it is because such groups are seen as antithetical to the aims of non-violent actors; that they disrupt the peace that other actors use to engage in political reform. On the surface, this reasoning makes sense. Terrorist acts are inherently violent and adversarial, and most NGOs work to disassociate themselves from these concepts. One problem with this thinking, whether scholars or actors choose to accept it, is that violent groups are as much a part of GCS as any other non-state entity. Without sharing the same explicit goals and values, they ultimately occupy the same political space that lies outside the state, the market, and the family. Drawing a clear line between citizens who engage in peaceful protest and those who enact violence through terrorism risks oversimplifying the challenges faced by GCS actors. Currently, such violent groups are only studied within the context of security and counterterrorism. This limited perspective shapes how politicians and the public view and interact with terrorism and the people they associate with the acts.

2. *A Dialectics of Violence*

Our collective definition of violence is poorly suited to place individual instances of direct violence (e.g. a terrorist attack) within a broader context of systemic forms of violence. There is a popular understanding of structural violence which has contributed greatly to studies of racism, sexism, and other forms of institutionalized inequality, but it nonetheless continues to treat violence as existing prior to social relations rather than being itself a social relation. As James Tyner and Joshua Inwood write in their dialectical analysis on violence: "Violence [in the popular understanding] is given its own material reality: it simply exists. [...] just as progressive scholars have deconstructed, for example, the ontological status of 'race' and 'sex' it is necessary to do likewise for the concept of violence."⁴ These authors share my concern that the social sciences have neglected to seriously engage with violence in a manner similar to other socially important concepts. They cite Johan Galtung's work on violence as an example of how our treatment of the structural forms of violence actually makes it more difficult to approach it as a tangible problem, since it is impossible to discern any measure of culpability within structural violence.⁵ To counter this, Tyner and Inwood engage in a process of abstraction, fundamental to dialectical analysis, to reveal the faults in this line of thinking. They propose that, at its most abstract, violence can be defined as "any action that affects the material conditions of another, thereby reducing one's potentiality."⁶ From this position, the notion that guilt cannot be derived from structural violence collapses, since certain social relations, like a governing body cutting back welfare services, directly impact ordinary individuals in a violent manner. Such

political and economic processes are no longer seen as impersonal, incorporeal movements of a system beyond an actor's control; they become social relations that can then be studied with much greater depth.

This relates to another key problem within GCS studies: the omission of economic relations from its sphere. This is not to say that its research does not account for market forces; rather these forces, like our broader comprehension of violence, are understood apart from rather than in relation to GCS. As a result, the consequences of unfettered capitalist accumulation are deemed unfortunate circumstances and side effects of the system, instead of the product of autonomous individual and organizational decisions. In her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein uses the example of Bolivia in the 1980s to demonstrate how global neoliberal market initiatives can inflict immense amounts of violence, all the while being hailed as peaceful and transformative. To produce a readily adoptable economic doctrine for participating states to join the global market, the United States targeted the Bolivian government. The U.S. government convinced the left-leaning president Victor Paz to reverse his entire economic platform and adopt a program of shock therapy designed to curb hyperinflation. Reducing inflation by 10 percent within two years, the program delivered its promise at great cost to Bolivia's general population as unemployment rose and wages plummeted. The U.S. did note that the average national income had fallen slightly from \$845 to \$789 two years later, but intentionally ignored that these averages do not account for income inequalities. A small elite grew immensely wealthy while the financially declining populations were statistically hidden. The project was internationally hailed, in part because Paz was democratically elected. This praise continued despite running on a platform in contradiction to his later policies, which required a great deal of authoritarian violence to be implemented. Klein writes that "Bolivia provided a blueprint for a new, more palatable kind of authoritarianism, a civilian coup d'état, one carried out by politicians and economists in business suits rather than soldiers in military uniforms—all unfolding within the official shell of a democratic regime."⁷ Bolivia's experiences with neoliberal globalization are a cautionary reminder of how structural violence from economic initiatives eludes the usual definitions of violence and becomes an unexamined consequence of the system. Rather than an invasion, we see an earthquake.

3. *An Eye for an Eye*

Once one begins to see the most basic infringements on human autonomy as violence, it becomes difficult for those seeking social change to determine appropriate forms of revolutionary upheaval. This is a contentious debate within the Marxist tradition, as many scholars ar-

gue for a vision of revolutionary subjectivity that legitimizes its use of violence by its very existence. According to Hannah Arendt, Marxism has always been aware of the role of violence, but previously understood its role as incidental, rather than fundamental, to the revolution, "which [Marx] likened to the labour pangs that precede, but of course do not cause, the event of organic birth."⁸ Marx himself was deeply suspicious of supposedly universal liberal values, as these so often resulted in a system that favoured the bourgeoisie at the expense of the greater population. He determined that an authentic revolution needed to separate itself from the very idea of existing within bourgeois society.

A sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete re-winning of man.⁹

For Marx, the revolution has no particular character or place, it does not seek to preserve anything that came before; it is a universal and destructive force. Yet Arendt's point holds true. Nothing in Marx's words definitively advocates for the use of violence, particularly violence against others. In fact, one could interpret Marx's view of violence as a largely internalized process, where revolution requires the individual to remove themselves completely from their subjectivity within capitalism. As Christopher Finlay shows, later thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Slavoj Žižek would understand violence as necessary for workers to achieve a new revolutionary consciousness. While this is done with the goal of empowering the disenfranchised, Finlay argues that these theorists fail to consider its every dimension: "[They] give space to a form of *la politique du pire* which sees any violence perpetrated between capitalism or colonialism and its subjects as advantageous since it will provoke a desire for revolution."¹⁰ This is a dangerous space to occupy for any movement seeking social change. History has demonstrated that without a definitive ordering principle, violence can have dire consequences. There are potent lessons to be gleaned from communist revolts like Russia, Cambodia, and China; these may have begun authentically but quickly devolved into brutal violence.

To relate this problem to GCS, the seemingly innocent task of seeking societal change can become volatile because of its contentious relation to violence. An understanding of revolutionary violence in which the ends wholly justify the means can help account for why certain groups with initially sympathetic goals choose to pursue more violent methods. While some may choose violence out of perceived necessity or a desire to exact revenge, the decision exhibits a deeper desire within every actor to assert themselves as authentic and autonomous—and

to establish some measure of control over their own circumstances. In this way, even the most heinous acts can be understood as attempts at self-realization and sovereignty. This perspective could provide studies of GCS with new frameworks to engage with actors excluded based on their use of violence, as well as theorize whether a limiting principle can be formulated for engaging in violence within GCS.

4. Living on a Thin Line—What Are We Supposed to Do Now?

On one end we have the problem of how GCS defines itself and how these definitions obscure a bias towards non-violence, all the while accepting many instances of violence within the system as structural externalities. On the other is the problem of how GCS actors go about achieving societal change, and whether this can occur without total capitulation to the system or devolution into wanton, despotic violence. In both of these areas of contention the popular framework of violence is overly simplistic. Consequently, actors with these frameworks tend towards extremes that drastically limit their autonomy within global politics.

Some might argue that, especially in the global West, this is all a non-problem. It is often assumed that violence is useless and counterproductive within liberal democracies, that non-violence is their default state, and any disruption of this is inherently undemocratic and wrong. An extension of this argument insists that even if violence exists within our system, and even if it is inflicted on those seeking change peacefully, violence corrupts those who engage in it. Therefore, pacifism is the morally superior and more effective option. These arguments have their merit but also considerable counterpoints. For one, pacifism as a completely voluntary commitment to non-violence against the state is nonsensical. Traditional pacifism implies that actors can inflict harm on others but actively choose to restrain themselves on moral grounds. However, when a bully threatens a younger child with violence to get their lunch money and that child submits, is the child usually considered a pacifist? Within modern states, liberal democracies included, adherence to non-violence is not a completely voluntary act, but one vehemently enforced by the state under threat of punishment. This is not pacifism but capitulation, and we have all given up our lunch money. The privileges of many allow them to enjoy this enforced non-violence while others—whether in the form of marginalized groups in the same country or citizens of another country—have to live with the reality that the political system is brutal and relentless. Within this context, to call one's movement non-violent aligns one with the system's definition of violence. This classification implicitly supports the narrative that the structural, and sometimes direct,

violence perpetuating the system is an unfortunate but unavoidable part of the world.

For this reason, I find the problem of climate change, though existentially terrifying, immensely illuminating within the context of GCS. Should the worst effects come to pass, it will have a drastic impact on the physical world as we know it. However, despite the immense complexities of the environment, we can determine a significant degree of culpability for its degradation. It is well known that unregulated industrial-economic growth, through its nihilistic instrumentalization of nature, is inherently unsustainable and responsible for the extent of current ecological destruction. We also know exactly which states, companies, and individuals contribute most to this ongoing environmental damage. While it is obviously preferable to develop a peaceful global coalition to combat this rapidly approaching catastrophe, it would be irresponsible not to consider the all-too-likely scenario that our world leaders will be unable to act in the necessarily decisive and inclusive manner. The survival of natural life and the planet may rest on the common people—which in this case means all of GCS—to enforce change upon states and market actors, likely at the risk of violent retaliation. Without a modern conception of violence that can account for such a dilemma and provide an avenue for civil action, the GCS will find itself paralyzed within its own framework and will struggle to forge peaceful cooperation long after it is possible.

Such a representation of violence is certainly difficult, but far from impossible, to find within global society today. The modern Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, spearheaded by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) has challenged traditional notions of emancipatory struggle. After a brief armed uprising, the Zapatistas managed to peacefully turn Chiapas into one of the most democratic and inclusive regions in Mexico while maintaining a provocative militaristic image.¹¹ Their strong and principled commitment to a set of ideals is key to their success and cleverly subverts understandings from previous attempts at revolution. Arendt's work on the distinction between power and violence provides a wealth of insight into the remarkable success of the Zapatistas and how their doctrine can be expanded to fit the modern challenges faced by GCS.

On January 1, 1994, NAFTA went into effect, marking an important step in the success of neoliberal globalization. That same day, three thousand poorly equipped, mostly Mayan revolutionaries seized control of towns throughout the Chiapas region, occupying town halls, releasing Indigenous prisoners, and destroying land ownership records.¹² The revolutionaries intended to declare their opposition to the trade agreement, which they proclaimed was a death sentence for Indigenous Mexicans. Government forces attempted to retake the territory that was lost, but after just twelve days and three hundred total casualties, they relented and called a

ceasefire. Most expected the EZLN to follow the route of every other guerrilla force and openly challenge the government for control of the state. But to everyone's surprise, once the battle was won, the EZLN ceased all military activity. A National Democratic Convention for Chiapas was called by the EZLN that August and their leader, Subcomandante Marcos, eloquently conveyed his wonderfully paradoxical and subversive understanding of violence. Realizing the irony of having an armed guerrilla force presiding over a democratic convention, Marcos had every soldier's rifle tied with a white ribbon. He then stated, "Those ribbons signify the purpose of our weapons; they are not arms to be used in confrontation with civil society. Those ribbons on the guns represent, like everything else here, a paradox: weapons that aspire to uselessness."¹³ This simple symbol perfectly encapsulates the potency of Marcos's and the Zapatista's form of revolutionary politics. At no point in their struggle did the EZLN aim to replace the Mexican government. Even if it were to have overthrown it, its mandate strictly prevents it from assuming power itself.¹⁴ Instead, the EZLN is expected to remain completely subordinate to the needs of the citizenry, undermining more traditional understandings of decolonization and revolutionary violence.¹⁵

For Arendt, the many contradictions that emerge when abstractly examining violence led her to distinguish violence and power as two opposing forces. After an exhaustive survey of the manifestations of power and violence throughout human history, Arendt observes that "violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power."¹⁶ Here she asserts that armed uprisings cannot hope to realize any long-lasting success if they base their entire claim to power on violence. Power only exists through legitimacy. Power is thus at odds with violence: the latter may be justifiable but it cannot produce legitimacy.¹⁷ This helps to explain the failure of past revolutions, since they consistently misconstrue violence and power as synonymous, whereas Arendt would hold that they are, in fact, opposites. The EZLN appear to have understood this relationship perfectly, as demonstrated in their conscious effort to separate their institutions of violence and power:

[Revolution] is not about the taking of power or the imposition (by peaceful or violent means) of a new social system, but about something which precedes all this. It is about the construction of the antechamber of the new world, a space where each of the different political forces, with equal responsibilities and rights can struggle.¹⁸

Twenty-five years later, the Zapatista uprising remains unique and impressive on a global scale. It maintained autonomy within the Mexican political system and sov-

ereignty over its territory, and it now plans to more than double the lands that it controls.¹⁹ Their implemented governing structures are more inclusive (all are required to have completely equal gender representation) and more democratic than anywhere else in Mexico. Furthermore, the state of Chiapas achieved a level of self-sufficiency and quality of life that would have been decimated by NAFTA's policies. Though they are little known and occupy a relatively insignificant portion of the world, the Zapatista movement, in my view, is one of the most significant revolutions since the end of the Cold War. More than the quantifiable results of their efforts, their importance is from their radical and subversive re-imagining of armed struggle and what it means to fight for the right to live freely.

Conclusion

Given the nature of the ecological crisis we face today as a species, I believe there is value to be drawn from the example of the Zapatista uprising. Its nuanced understanding of violence enabled the EZLN to act decisively and responsibly where many others continue to remain paralyzed by the confines of the system. This is by no means a call for every GCS actor to mimic the actions of the Zapatista. Instead, I aim only to demonstrate that the options available to enact change in response to a structural threat are much broader than we might first surmise—this is the "something which precedes all this" to which Marcos was referring. Should the worst come to pass, and those responsible for this crisis fail to make the needed changes, we should turn to the likes of Subcomandante Marcos, not Lenin or Mao, for guidance.

The definition of violence, like many things we take for granted, is deeply influenced by the surrounding world. Understanding these influences, and how best to respond to them, is crucial if we are to claim some part in defining it for ourselves. Defenders of the status quo often point out that we currently live in the most peaceful era in human history, citing how far fewer wars are fought between states than ever before. This may be empirically true (though the empirical definition of war here probably deserves some scrutiny), but it was also true for Europe in the latter half of the 19th century. This was an unheard-of period of peace across the European continent, with no major war breaking out until WWI. What caused this sudden age of jovial cooperation? Why, colonialism, of course. Since every great European power was busy massacring, enslaving, and exploiting the peoples of Africa, Asia, and South America, none of them found the need or the desire to attack each other, at least for a finite period. To what extent might our own age of peace be similar? Are we truly aware of the violence that is carried out daily to maintain the current system? These questions fundamentally challenge our current assumptions about global politics

and GCS. It is abundantly clear that in order to answer them, in order to remain adaptable in these times of rapid change, and in order to ensure that ordinary people do not become hostages to the system they live in, violence must cease to be treated as an unchanging fact of human existence. While I have made a broad attempt to outline the problem within GCS, violence exists in many forms and across many fields of study. Scholars throughout the social sciences should endeavour to question

their assumptions about violence and other concepts like it. Political actors, similarly, should always question the present state of the world, remaining vigilant as things are often not all that they appear. Freedom and the illusion of freedom are all too easily confused, especially when we allow the dominant powers to define for us exactly what “free” is. Radical skepticism in these matters is not only prudent but necessary for freedom.

Notes

1. James A. Tyner, *Violence in Capitalism: Devaluing Life in an Age of Responsibility* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 12.
2. Mary Kaldor, Helmut Anheier, and Marlies Glasius, *Global Civil Society 2012: Ten Years of Critical Reflection* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2.
3. Hagai Katz, "Gramsci, Hegemony, and Global Civil Society Networks," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 17, no. 4 (2006): 345.
4. James A. Tyner and Joshua Inwood, "Violence as Fetish," *Progress in Human Geography* 38, no. 6 (2014): 774.
5. Tyner and Inwood, "Violence as Fetish," 778. Galtung on structural violence: "Whereas in the first case these consequences can be traced back to concrete persons or actors, in the second case this is no longer meaningful. There may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently unequal life chances"; Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 170–1.
6. Tyner and Inwood, 779.
7. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2014), 154.
8. Hannah Arendt, "On Violence," *Journal of International Affairs* 23, no. 1 (1969): 4.
9. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Chicago: Aristeus, 2012), 256.
10. Christopher J. Finlay, "Violence and Revolutionary Subjectivity," *European Journal of Political Theory* 5, no. 4 (2006): 390.
11. Chris Gilbreth and Gerardo Otero, "Democratization in Mexico: The Zapatista Uprising and Civil Society," *Latin American Perspectives* 28, no. 4 (2001): 24.
12. *Chiapas Times*, "Cuando La Guerra Entró a San Cristóbal," January 3, 1994.
13. Subcomandante Marcos, *Shadows of Tender Fury: The Letters and Comunicués of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation*, trans. Frank Bardacke and López Leslie (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), 242.
14. Brad Evans, "Revolution without Violence," *Peace Review* 21, no. 1 (2009): 88.
15. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 342.
16. Arendt, "On Violence," 20.
17. Arendt, 19.
18. Subcomandante Marcos, *¡Ya Basta! Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising: Writings of Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos*, (Oakland: AK Press, 2004), 164.
19. Kurt Hackbarth and Colin Mooers, "The Zapatista Revolution Is Not Over," *The Nation*, September 9, 2019.