Introduction
Deconstructing Violence
Power, Force, and Social Transformation

by
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“Especially for the ‘civilised’ person, violence is not a pretty subject. It is ugly enough to make the most cheerful thinker pessimistic,” says John Keane (2004: 7). This may indeed be the case, but if anything it increases the urgency of a theoretical, political, and moral deconstruction of violence in the contemporary world. This collection of essays addresses the various forms or modalities of violence and the various means of dealing with or moving beyond it. It also pays particular attention to the complex relationship among sex, gender, and violence. In this introduction I seek to situate the various contributions in the broader context of critical debates on violence. We need to move beyond paralysis or “shock and awe” in the face of overpowering shows of force to construct a transformative understanding of the role of violence in contemporary society.

SCALES OF VIOLENCE

We may begin with a scene on the ground in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004 (Abdul-Ahad, 2004):

They can’t see what they are shooting at but shout Allahu-Akbar all the same, and everyone starts giving numbers of how many Americans they have killed. Then another man shows up, shortish and in his 40’s, and while everyone is ducking or hiding behind columns, he strolls about as if he is in the park. Another fighter loads an RPG for him and the guy turns with the thing on his shoulder as if looking for the direction he should shoot in. Someone shouts: “Push him into the street before he fires it at us!” Another fighter grabs him around his waist and pushes him to the corner where he stands, bullets whizzing around him, takes his time, and—boom!—fires his RPG. He stands there until someone grips his pants and pulls him in.

This is a very different scale of violence from that practiced by the imperial powers that invaded and occupied the country. That particular display of violence had nothing amateurish or artisanal about it; rather, it was The Empire Strikes Back in full throat. The so-called revolution in military affairs had

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allowed for “precision targeting,” but if that failed it could be replaced by overwhelming use of firepower immune from political considerations about civilian “collateral damage.” The above-mentioned “shortish” man in his 40s, a deaf-mute, as it turned out, had a family and lived in a community. At least some of these people thought that he was morally justified in using an RPG (however ineptly) against the American occupiers of his land.

In this vignette, power and morality are starkly highlighted, and before I return to the question of scales of violence in the era of globalization I want to examine these unavoidable questions. Frantz Fanon, in “Concerning Violence,” the dominant section of his classic The Wretched of the Earth (1969), is widely seen (for example, by Hannah Arendt [1969]) as glorifying violence for its own sake. Certainly, his existentialist-influenced anticolonialism did teach him to believe, in the context of the Algerian struggle for independence, that the use of violence by the colonized could have an ontologically empowering effect. But beyond this rather vague abstraction was a historical analysis of the violence of colonization and an understanding (only proven by odd exceptions perhaps) that “decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon” (Fanon, 1969: 131). Today we can understand the new “global terrorism” only in terms of the new ideology of imperialism.

Since the collapse of communism as an alternative social order and the end of the cold war, Western imperialism has gone through a remarkable moral rehabilitation. Global neoliberalism has sounded the death-knell for nationalist regimes in what was once called the Third World, at least in terms of being able to articulate a successful autocratic development model. John Casey, a Cambridge academic, argues in realist mode that Western powers “can now do what they like” in the ex-colonial world and concludes that “those of us who have never disavowed the imperial past nor sought to cloak natural interest with moral sanctimoniousness will not be troubled by this” (quoted in Furedi, 1994: 101). In practice, the years since the end of the cold war and what now seems the rather quaint rule of détente have been marked by unbridled Western (mainly but not exclusively U.S.) intervention, deploying unprecedented levels of violence, against postcolonial governments.

At this point it may seem that I am simply trying to justify some forms of violence as a reaction against others. From an analytical as opposed to a moral perspective, we might indeed argue that violence is “productive” and not just “repressive” in a Foucauldian power-analytic sense. Force has material, social, and cultural effects. Violence “works,” as those on the receiving end and those who exercise it for political advantage know. But does this agnostic stance not leave us bereft of criteria for choosing between the exercise of power as repression and its use to foster social transformation and human freedom? Nancy Fraser argues persuasively that “Foucault has no basis for distinguishing, for example, forms of power that involve domination from those that do not. . . . Clearly, what Foucault needs, and needs desperately, are normative criteria for distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable forms of power” (1989: 32–33). We could, of course, establish a typology of forms of violence and different uses of force on a continuum from relatively benign to repugnantly malign. However, in practice this creates huge problems, for example, with Gandhi’s “pacifism” in its relation to a struggle (not a term abstracted from power or force) for independence and with judicial debates on what constitutes a
“reasonable” level of force in resisting crime. We could also question the term “acceptable” as used here in terms of any robust and universal criteria. Witness, for example, the debates during the Troubles in Northern Ireland around what precisely constituted an “acceptable level of violence” for the state. Surely a properly democratic and legitimate state would have a zero-tolerance policy toward all forms of violence? Perhaps the only sustainable moral stance is to be opposed to all forms of violence? After all, who is to decide who is a “terrorist” and who is a “freedom fighter”?

Following Ted Hondereich (1976: 48), we could simply argue that the distinctive political concept of violence refers to “a use of force to effect decisions against the desire of others.” Of course, this definition excludes “random” or “gratuitous” interpersonal violence. However, it has the merit of focusing on the prohibited use of force in a context in which the state retains a monopoly over the means of violence. It also chimes with Foucault’s use of the term “power” in its primary etymological sense as the capacity to do certain things. In this sense, and only in this sense, his conception of power is normatively neutral. Against negative/repressive conceptions of power, we are therefore required to focus on the “positive” nature of “power over” individuals and things. If war is the continuation of politics by other means, as Clausewitz had it, then violence may be seen as a particular form of power in political struggle.

Political violence is not often studied as a political phenomenon in its own right (but see Jabri, 1996, and the studies in Munck and de Silva, 2000). “Acts of violence” are usually pathologized and “men of violence” simply deemed beyond the political pale. Where analytical insight is sought it usually takes the form of finding deep or underlying structural causes for violence. Thus, for example, the genesis of the Troubles in Northern Ireland is “explained” in terms of high levels of Catholic unemployment, housing and job discrimination, or some other underlying political discourse. Violence is seen to have its roots in social, economic, political, and cultural disadvantage and discrimination. While these undoubtedly are background explanatory factors, the problem, as Allen Feldman (1991: 19–20) has pointed out, is that “violence is denuded of any intrinsic semantic or causal character. . . . Violence is treated as a psychological artefact and surface effect of the origin.” Yet, in practice, prior contextual motivation is often a secondary issue and is, in any case, quite unstable. Violence is productive in Foucauldian terms not only in its effects but in its construction of political identities. Subject positions are constructed and reconstructed by violent performances in which ideological rationale is less important than human agency.

Another common but usually flawed device for the analysis of violence is the recourse to categorization or typologization in terms of various dimensions. Thus we have Johann Galtung’s (1969) classic “triangle” of violence, with its economic, political, and social apaxes. Certainly this scheme is better than a simple linear continuum of violence, which should be seen, rather, as always multilayered and multidirectional. But the notion that we can analytically distinguish between, for example, “social” and “political” violence does seem somewhat illusory and omits the fundamental element of violence’s discursive construction. This basic “realist” taxonomy shows its limitations most clearly where “criminal” is distinguished from “noncriminal” violence when this distinction is mainly derived from the socially and politically constructed law of the land. It is simply the legal definition by the state that differs. We see
this definitional shift, for example, when a state deems the political violence of an insurgent simply “criminal.” In reality, binary opposition (criminal-noncriminal, domestic-public, urban-rural, etc.) is a rather weak taxonomy and even weaker as a guide for critical analysis and understanding.

I am going to propose an analysis of the complex forms of violence in the postmodern global information society we live in that is based on an understanding of the politics of scale. Human geographers have for some time focused attention on the complex and social production of scale on the assumption that there is nothing ontologically given about traditional social science divisions between home and locality or between the natural and the global scale of human activity (see Marston, 2000). Can we better understand violence in terms of scalar relations, processes, or dynamics?

Power is always spatialized, and, as Foucault demonstrated, it is also always “embodied.” The body is a spatial unit of power and the prime site of personal identity. It is also, as Butler (1993) argues, socially constructed and a cultural focus of gender meanings. Social meaning and social oppression are equally constructed in and through the body. The gendered body is often the first (and the last) scale on which the state exercises its power through violent physical inscription of its discourse. It is a site of political struggle in which the class, gender, racial, or imperial oppressor seeks to gain physical mastery over the subaltern. It is also a site of resistance through hunger strikes, self-immolation, suicide bombing, and the use of weapons. As the site of reproduction, the body is also a principal site in the oppression/liberation of women. Male and female bodies often live in homes or families, another major site of social reproduction and conflict. The home is the primary focus of female activity, while the public domain “outside” is seen as a male domain. While the general interest of men is in keeping women confined to the home, women often see the community as an extension of the home.

Most human societies are based on “communities” as sites of social reproduction but also of work, education, recreation, and devotion. Yet, as Neil Smith (2000: 101) puts it, “Community is . . . the least specifically defined of spatial scales, and the consequent vague yet generally affirmative nurturing meaning attached to ‘community’ makes it one of the most ideologically appropriated metaphors in contemporary public discourse.” There can be conflict in particular sites, such as a workplace, a schoolyard, or the street, but the community itself is seen as benign. Yet community-based struggles can also often be parochial and exclusivist, violently opposing those of different class, race, national, or even neighborhood origins. Arthur Kleinman (2000: 238) makes the broader point that “violence . . . is the vector of cultural processes that work through the salient images, structures, and engagements of everyday life to shape local worlds.” The social world of the community is created, normalized, and legitimized, at least in part, through violence or the threat of its use.

The nation-state scale of human activity is the one most closely associated with the “legitimate” exercise of violence. A simple if somewhat reductionist definition of the state has always been “armed bodies of men.” If people were violent by nature, it seemed wise to have the use of violence monopolized by a rational and impersonal body such as the state. The nation-state is empowered and, indeed, bound to use violence of the most extreme form to defend
"the nation," whether that be its boundaries in case of invasion or its "interests" as defined by the political rulers of the day. The nation-state is always gendered: at least in its mythological construction, it is invariably female and its defenders are always men, while women may "keep the home fires burning." The symmetry of violence in the era of the nation-state has since been broken by subnational wars and by the networked violence of Al Qaeda and "information-era guerrillas" like the Zapatistas alike.

Today we probably need to focus much more on the global scale of violent activity than in the past. Both criminal and political violence have always been transnational, but why do we today have the issue of "global terror," and what does it mean? There is an emerging security paradigm that focuses on global social exclusion and the instability caused by social conflict as well as criminal and "terrorist" violence (see Duffield, 2001). While the world is more integrated in economic terms than ever, there is no stable regime of governance, and the dynamic is exclusionary. Quite apart from the more visible insurgencies in parts of the Muslim world, there is the underresearched flourishing of violent international criminal networks. As Castells (1998: 167) writes, "The flexible connection of these criminal activities in international networks constitutes an essential feature of the new global economy, and of the social/political dynamics of the Information Age." An ambitious Economic and Social Research Council (UK) research program on "new security challenges" pointed to the need for new thinking: "As far as the defence establishment has been concerned, the post–Cold War world was revealed to contain a new and unfamiliar range of political challenges, stresses and violent spasms" (ESRC, 2003). The state-centered, national approach to security continued to be the accepted paradigm in the absence of new thinking and policy. In the U.S.A., the dominant world power, there was even an explicit return to the theme of "empire" as a strategy for dealing with global instability and challenges post-9/11. The phenomenon of the "postmodern war" (see Gray, 1997; Kaldor, 1999)—decentralized rather than centralized, about identity politics rather than geopolitical, subnational rather than between nation-states—requires new understandings of the operation of complex globalized violence instead of a simple reassertion of naked power. For now, the dominant paradigm is to seek security in the Western "homelands" while accepting the normalization of endemic violence and instability for less fortunate regions of the world.

From the body to the global and back again, contemporary violence can be seen as a repertoire of actions set in the context of a complex politics of scale. To seek a simple "explanation" for violence at either the individual or the global level would be futile and might distract us from the study of its manifestations and its consequences. Violence, from this perspective, cannot be seen as an unfortunate aberration in an otherwise civilized world from which we should avert our gaze (see also the post-poststructuralist analysis of violence in Moore, 1994). Much of human history and social transformation has been based on force. From everyday violence to the ultimate violence of human annihilation, violence is part of the world around us. While the nation-state era has found ways to deal with it (however imperfectly), the era of globalization has not yet found stability in the midst of chaos in the world order.
GENDERED VIOLENCE

“In contemporary [1980s] Belfast,” wrote Allen Feldman (1991: 69), “the stiff and the act of stiffing are related to a set of indexical terms that infer states of destroyed or altered embodiment. In paramilitary vernacular, the targeted male victim, prior to being stiffed, is ‘a cunt.’ To ‘knock his cunt in’ is a targeting phrase that refers to the infliction of fatal violence, or a beating.” Be that as it may, there is no need to justify consideration of the gendered and sexualized nature of violence. Another, even pre-Troubles Belfastism was the act of “giving the message,” which served to denote heterosexual intercourse and grievous bodily harm at the same time. We could, of course, be more succinct and take as our working hypothesis the statement by Barbara Ehrenreich (1987: xvi) that “it is not only that men make wars, but that wars make men” or Jeff Hearn’s (1998: 36) assertion that “it is men who dominate the business of violence and who specialise in violence.”

Men—from the Spartans to George Bush and friends—have indeed dominated the business of war, and men are the overwhelmingly dominant partner in all forms of domestic violence. Most societies are patriarchies of one sort or another, and the contemporary state at war is very much an armed patriarchy. There is a continuum between the individual male’s practice of domestic violence and the coercive power of the military state. The only difference is that when states go to war they invariably do so on the grounds that they are protecting “women and children.” The link between men and violence is quite evident, but this does not mean that we can view it as timeless and somehow natural.

We need to accept, following S. Glenn Gray’s (1959) classic The Warriors, that many soldiers find the sounds of war compelling, the speed of bullets erotic, and explosions beautiful. To recognize that this is no aberration we need only turn to the early-twentieth-century Italian futurist movement of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and friends, with its glorification of the new technology of the automobile and the beauty of its speed and power, its exaltation of violence and conflict, and its political support for colonialism and fascism. Many men find fulfillment—a sense of achievement, a certain completeness—in war. They revel in its camaraderie, its teamwork, its bonding. Gender, as a social construction of relations between people, is of course central to all these material and discursive practices. The gendered division of labor—a central feature of all modern societies—is, not surprisingly, manifest in the cultural construction of men as warriors and women as carers.

While men fill the ranks of armies, it is women who most often oppose militarism and mobilize for peace. For some analysts and activists it is motherhood itself that should be the basis of any antimilitarist movement. Thus Sara Ruddick (1989: Chap. 7) explores “maternal non-violence” as a “truth in the making” and argues that the life-affirming/preserving features of motherhood can and do fit in with peace-making activities. This line of reasoning stresses gender differences (rather than the struggle for equality) and argues that a women’s peace movement—and, by extension, a movement against all forms of violence—can be built around a preservative mother’s love. A cursory examination of the history of war shows that women have indeed often been central to mobilization for peace, and certainly bringing life into the world is the opposite of taking life through violence. The equations of masculine/
violent and feminine/peaceful are not, however, simple or transparent. For one thing, they are part of a broader set of powerful but disempowering binary oppositions. They are linked with power and knowledge hierarchies that equate “male” with “rational” and “scientific” and “female” with “irrational” and “intuitive.” Neither male nor female can be seen as a universal category. Not all men are violent, and not all women are peace-loving. More important, gender categories are crosscut—to an extent that may relativize if not invalidate them—by class, ethnic, national, regional, and other social divisions and antagonisms (Cockburn, 1998; Yuval-Davis, 1997). It would be essentialist and reductionist to equate violence with men and peace with women, not least because it assumes an idealized notion of womanhood and ignores the power differentials that structure the world.

We may consider two images of gender and war from the recent war in Iraq. The first is of U.S. Private Jessica Lynch, who fell into “enemy” hands. In fact, she was being well-looked after in an Iraqi hospital, but the world media focused on her prioritized rescue by her comrades—big armed men who snatched her from the enemy and took her “home,” where presumably they thought she really belonged. The other was U.S. Private Lynne England, exhibited by the world media leading an Iraqi prisoner on a dog leash at the Abu Graibh “facility,” as well as in various acts of sexual humiliation of male prisoners. Though in part this was simply a routinized U.S. “softening-up” interrogation technique, the gender element was central and widely perceived as such. Were women, then, as bad as men during wars? Good soldier Lynch versus bad soldier England? The subversion of gender stereotypes was disruptive of U.S. warring discourse.

What is perhaps most extraordinary in considering the gendering of violence and conflict is that conflict management as a theory is still overwhelmingly gender-blind. One comprehensive 225-page-long overview of contemporary conflict resolution (see Miall, Ramsbotham, and Woodhouse, 1999) has just one page on the “gendered critique of conflict resolution” that notes the drawbacks of leaving women (and women’s interests) out of peace processes. The “gender question” is often mentioned as an afterthought along with the “culture question,” namely, that “non-Western” cultures may view conflict and conflict resolution differently from “ours.” It is interesting to ask why this field is so far behind in its “engendering” compared, for example, with development studies. In the latter field, gender mainstreaming has been proceeding apace since the 1980s, to the extent that official World Bank discourse is today “gender-friendly” and its programs are all “gender-proofed.”

While conflict theory has paid some empirical attention to women as victims and mediators, gender as a social category is largely absent. Reimann (2001: 23–24) writes that “gender in its three-fold dimension (individual gender identity, symbolism of gender and structure of gender) is neither an analytical category nor an integral part of different approaches to conflict management.” Most of its categories are gender-blind and thus by default male, given that the main actors in conflict and conflict management are almost entirely male. When a “bottom-up” approach is taken, gender is most often subsumed under a vague category of “civil society” that is also seen as genderless. Even when women do enter into an analysis of conflict, it is usually only as empirical interest groups; the categories of analysis remain firmly rationalist, masculinist, and therefore limited at best.
To build a gendered understanding of violence and a peaceful practice is by no means easy. There is now a considerable literature on women and war (see Ridd and Callaway, 1986; Jacobs, Jacobson, and Marchbank, 2000), but much of it seems to focus on the integration of women into the analysis of conflict. Thus we can show that women have always been involved in war, women are not powerless, women can become politicized and break through gender stereotypes. This is welcome compared, for example, with another tradition that simply portrays women as victims of war, conflict, and violence, but a gendered approach to war and violence must do more. Gender must be seen in its full formative role in terms of social, political, economic, and cultural relations and also in terms of its transformative potential when gender categorizations are disrupted.

Spike Peterson (2003: 14) has argued that the main transformative insight of a gender analysis is that “the (symbolic, discursive, cultural) privileging of masculinity—not necessarily men—is key to naturalising the corporeal, material and economic power relations that constitute structural hierarchies.” Gender ideologies—of difference, hierarchy, and subordination—serve not only to devalorize the subaltern but also to naturalize that inferiority. Global power regimes from classical colonialism to today’s hyperimperialism harness gender to subordinate peoples and ethnicities. The colonist “penetrates” the colonized territory, sees its population as “feminine,” and revels in the masculinity of conquest. By subverting gender categories we are undermining the architecture of global power based on racial, national, and class subordination.

What the gendered approach to violence also points us toward, finally, is a greater emphasis on the symbolic, subjective, and psychosexual elements of violence (see Harvey and Gow, 1994; Das, Kleinman, and Ramphell, 2000). Thus, in his study of spectacle, psychosexuality, and radical Christianity during Argentina’s “dirty war” in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Frank Graziano (1992) points to the messianic mythology of its military perpetrators, for whom torture and execution were “holy acts.” In the military narrative of the “dirty war,” the detained and disappeared (desaparecidos) had literally sinned against God and thus fully merited the horrific treatment they received. Thus God’s will was done and the souls of the sinners were “saved” through torture and death. The excessive (in terms of its objectives) violence was strategic; the spectacle of violence was political theater, and the symbolic dimension of “cleansing” went far beyond “necessary” levels of repression.

Violence is intimately linked to religious discourses. Christian fundamentalism inspires the warring tendencies of the Bush White House, Islamic fundamentalism inspires a jihad and suicide bombing, and Catholicism has often inspired the sacrifice and blood-letting of political struggle. Religious affiliation can become the main marker of political faultlines in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, the Middle East, and nearly everywhere else. It is important to understand that these religious differences may mask underlying conflicts over wealth, land, or access to jobs but may also be autonomous and have effects in their own right. A gendered analysis, in moving beyond seemingly “rational” or “material” approaches to conflict and violence, opens the door to a more nuanced and holistic analysis attuned to the symbolic, discursive, and philosophical dimensions of conflict.
BEYOND VIOLENCE?

According to Sigmund Freud, “The exercise of violence cannot be avoided when conflicting interests are at stake” (quoted in Keane, 2004: 89). Indeed, much coverage of wars in Africa, the Balkans, or Latin America simply assumes that (some) humans are innately prone to violence. This approach goes a long way toward explaining the fatalism with which violence elsewhere is viewed from a comfortable Western standpoint. Violence and cruelty may well be part of the human condition, but their acceptance as inevitable is hardly reconcilable with a democratic politics of transformation. Whereas in World War I only one-twentieth of all casualties were civilians, during World War II the proportion rose to two-thirds, and today it is estimated that ninetenths of the victims are civilians (Keane, 2004: 16). This shift cannot be explained in terms of an abstract and timeless human nature.

Wars—as one particular form of organized violence—are socially constructed; they do not just “happen.” Likewise, peace is socially and politically constructed; it cannot be summoned up simply by appealing to the “better side” of innately violent humans. But in contemplating a move beyond violence, the first aspect we need to consider is the more routine dealing or coping with violence. Practically at random, we can take a case study of violence in the everyday life of a community from Belfast: “Death, injury, physical and verbal abuse, internment, interrogation and torture, early-morning raids, gun battles, riots, assassinations and constant screening, are some of the more extreme developments to impinge on the everyday activity of the people of Anro over the last five years [1973–1978]. Ironically, these same extreme conditions have become part of the everyday life in that environment” (Burton, 1978: 19). Ironically or not, this is the way most people cope with violence—by adjusting to it, “soaking it up,” and seeking ways to make sense of it. Constant unpredictability in our lives is always subjected to normalization. Burton continues: “People have become accustomed to seeing armed British soldiers peering in at them as they have their tea, accustomed to walking over spread-eagled marksmen as they shop for their cornflakes, or casually watching from their front door the latest riot, only seeking safety as the lead bullets take over from rubber.” Thus, we see how people seek mechanisms at a cognitive and moral level to make sense of the unthinkable and unknowable. If violence continues for a long enough, it becomes routinized and thus “normalized.”

In reference to the ongoing violencia or civil war in Colombia, Daniel Pécaut (1999: 142) writes of “the banality or ordinariness of violence, which tends to obscure the existence of situations of terror.” Violence becomes “trivial,” in a way, when there is no coherent intellectual or political explanation for it. When neither political projects nor belief systems underlie the use of violence, it assumes a prosaic, “ordinary” character. For Torres-Rivas (1999: 193), writing about Central America, “the banalisation of fear, a consequence of that permanent cohabitation with death, was not an end in itself, but a means.” When political order can be imposed only through fear, the citizen must be made to feel terrorized, disoriented, and fatalistic. When normalization of the abnormal occurs, violence has begun to achieve its objectives.
To move beyond violence and terror rather than seek to live with them, we require an active peace strategy—always bearing in mind that peace is something more than the absence of war. Traditionally, peace projects have been conducted “from above” and “from outside” in terms of conflict management and conflict resolution. This is a third-party approach based on the notion of the “honest broker,” common from the marriage-breakdown level to that of nuclear standoffs between nation-states. It can take the form of a “hard” realism, in which powerful outside agencies level the playing field and enforce settlement, or a “soft” realism stressing confidence building and power sharing. This is a strategy based on an ill-defined notion of reconciliation and does not usually address the underlying causes of the conflict. The United Nations system is premised on this worldview, and it was hegemonic until the end of the cold war and the rise of the “war on terror.”

There is a growing sense even among its supporters that this traditional model of conflict resolution has reached its limits. Many thinkers now advocate a “cosmopolitan” approach to security in the era of globalization and the “new wars.” Thus Mary Kaldor (1999: 149) argues that “the task of the agents of legitimate organised violence, under the umbrella of transnational institutions, is not external defence as was the case for national or bloc models of security, but Cosmopolitan law enforcement.” Leaving aside the seeming contradiction between advocating a global cosmopolitanism and maintaining a belief in “legitimate organised violence,” there is the question of who decides which “humanitarian war” is legitimate and which is not—who is a legitimate part of “global civil society” and who is “uncivil” and therefore subject to the righteous use of violence. Behind the progressive rhetoric of “global civil society” may lie another variant of the “liberal peace” set in Western terms and probably complementary to the imperial plans of the dominant powers.

There is now growing interest in the concept of conflict “transformation” as an alternative to conflict “resolution” (see Rupesinghe, 1995; Berghoff Research Centre, 2003). Protracted social conflicts invariably have complex causes that are not necessarily resolvable at the negotiating table. The underlying assumption of the conflict-transformation approach, as advocated by Vayrynen (1991: 4), is that “the bulk of conflict theory regards the issues, actors and interests as given and on that basis makes efforts to find a solution, to mitigate or eliminate contradictions between them. Yet the issues, actors and interests change over time as a consequence of the social, economic and political dynamics of societies.” This understanding is consistent with the notion that political actors are not pre-made when they enter violent conflict but construct their identities through action, including the practice of violence. If these actors and their interests are not pre-given, then presumably they can be transformed.

The context of any violent conflict may change dramatically, as is evident from the impact of the end of the cold war on many Third World civil wars. Conflicts may become internationalized, and this may not only change the context of a conflict but transform the issues at stake. Thus the conflict between Irish nationalism and pro-British unionism began to take on a different and more complex character in the context of membership in the European Community. The agenda of a conflict may change, for example, when the land question is superseded by industrialization. Actor transformation may also occur, with new political parties and leaderships emerging in the course of a
conflict. Thus, conflict transformation needs to concern itself with “the social, psychological and political changes that are necessary to address root causes of conflict” (Miall, Ramsbotham, and Woodhouse, 1999: 159).

It is clear by now that even the most “successful” peace process cannot end violence. Indeed, as is the case in Central America, the end of political hostilities and the incorporation of insurgent armies into the political process has often been followed by an increased incidence of “ordinary” violence (see Arnson, 1999). Just as peace is not just the absence of war, so, with David Keen (2003: 1), who writes on postwar Guatemala, “we should not assume a sharp break between war and peace, recognising instead that conflict in peacetime is in many ways a modification of conflict in wartime.” In other words, the continuities between war and peace may be as important as the differences. The building of peaceful democratic societies is a political process, not something that breaks out the day after a peace treaty is signed. This raises the question of what definition of violence we might use. As we have seen, violence is socially constructed, and it usually has the purpose of producing physical or symbolic harm to persons, property, communities, or social groups. Johan Galtung (1969) has, famously, produced a much broader definition of violence to include everything from poverty to sexism and from the debt burden to minority-language discrimination. Ultimately, violence becomes anything that conspires against the satisfaction of human needs.

In normative terms, we might wish to speak of the “violence” of social exclusion or structural unemployment, but for a discussion of how we can move beyond violence this definition is simply unworkable. Galtung’s extended definition of violence may also impede practical peace processes by seeking the impossible. A minimalist definition of violence might be something like Keane’s (2004: 35), in which violence is understood “as the more or less intended direct but unwanted physical interference, by groups and/or individuals, with the bodies of others.” With this understanding of what violence is, we can go on (as Keane does) to locate “surplus” or what others have called “gratuitous” violence—violence that is not productive in terms of its political purpose.

The violence in Colombia in the 1950s followed the social and cultural norms of a peasant war. Violence was usually directed, and it was often “exemplary” or even symbolic. Current practices of violence, especially where the drug trade is involved, are different in nature. Excessive firepower is deployed, mass killings are the norm, and indescribable torture is routine. There is speculation that certain extremely violent U.S. films, such as Pulp Fiction, may have influenced this theatrical escalation of violence. This is probably “surplus” violence. Other examples can be taken from the insurgent wars in Algeria and Ireland, where certain norms of engagement were sometimes respected and sometimes not. Why would the indiscriminate killing of civilians be acceptable (even desirable) on some occasions but not on others? We can answer this question only in terms of the politics of violence and by rejecting notions of individual pathology as an explanation of violence. Keane’s (2004: 167) very first “rule for democratising violence” is “always try to understand the motives and context of the violent.”

We also need to address the causes of violence and not just its symptoms. But if the motives are political—and, except for the most random interpersonal violence, they usually are—then a political understanding of “surplus”
or “gratuitous” violence can be established. In practice, many insurgent movements have themselves dealt with practitioners of gratuitous violence that “bring the movement into disrepute.” When insurgents seek to abide by the Geneva Convention, it may be rejected as “legitimizing” terrorism, but it is also a way of subjecting violent conflict to some juridical or ethical norms. Consistent with the strategy of conflict transformation, this emphasis on “surplus” violence is part of a politics in transition to democratic dialogue.

I return, finally, to the theme that violence (like power) is not simply repressive but productive of social and political effects (see the analysis in Tilly, 2002). It can also, of course, be effective in the pursuit of political objectives. We must recall that violence operates as a social activity at different spatial scales. Violence may “jump scales,” for example, when a local armed group takes the international stage. Peace building must also be understood in terms of the complex politics of scale. There is peace building “from below” (see, e.g., McDonald, 1997), but this is probably inseparable from understanding a given conflict (in this case Colombia’s) as an international conflict (see Mason, 2003). The uneven advance of history operates not only in terms of social processes but also in terms of geographical scale. A truly global understanding of violence today requires such a wide lens.

**THIS ISSUE**

The articles collected in this issue, in various complementary ways, make a valuable contribution to our understanding of political violence in contemporary Latin America. Cath Collins takes up, from a broad comparative perspective, the issue of posttransitional justice. Discussing the efforts to establish the truth and deliver justice after the military dictatorships of the 1980s, she argues that justice tended to be limited. One of the interesting case studies she develops is in relation to the arrest of General Augusto Pinochet in London in 1998 on a Spanish judge’s warrant for crimes against humanity. The effect in Chile was highly symbolic and had a catalytic effect on holding Pinochet and his henchmen accountable for their crimes. In the era of globalization, there is a complex dynamic between human rights at the international and at the national level. For Collins, transnational initiatives, while occasionally successful, have not and should not cut across national struggles for accountability on the part of the perpetrators of violence.

In their account of the “resocializing” of suffering in Guatemala, Peter Benson, Edward Fischer, and Kedron Thomas take up the popular notion that things have improved since formal redemocratization. Overt forms of political violence seem to have subsided, massacres are not occurring, and “disappearances” are less common, but peace seems elusive. Political assassinations continue, and only 1 percent of violent crimes are successfully prosecuted. By calling the present a “postwar” era, the authorities seek to present this routinized violence as better than the civil war that preceded it. One of the cases these contributors take up is the resurgence of popular lynchings of wrongdoers at a local level. They view this “resocializing” of violence as a legacy of state terror, which created a climate in which extreme forms of violence became the norm, and argue for an approach to daily violence and insecurity that addresses its root causes in structural inequality and discrimination.
In her study of gender and violence in El Salvador, Mo Hume draws out the connection between nation building and hegemonic masculinity. Again, in a “postwar” situation daily violence continues to affect people’s lives. Hume argues that it was through war that gender identities based on male hegemony and the exclusion of women were consolidated. Violence is legitimized through its intimate connection with male gender identity. It would be surprising indeed if that violence had been turned off the day the peace accords were signed by the state and the insurgent organizations. Exposure for decades to extreme forms of political violence and brutality has had a traumatic effect. The continuing high levels of violence and crime have prevented many communities from recovering the trust necessary for the full recovery of civil society. We probably need to think much more about postwar reconstruction from a gendered civil-society perspective.

In “Another History of Violence,” Ulrich Oslender takes up the long-running political violence in Colombia, focusing on what he calls “geographies of terror.” His contribution addresses the so-called forced displacement of local communities in the Pacific coast region, which in fact represents a systematic terror campaign unleashed by armed groups against the region’s black populations. Oslender seeks to describe the rural domain in which these populations live and often resist these regimes of terror. By focusing on the geographical or spatial dimension of terror, we gain a valuable new perspective to complement the existing political and social critiques. Terror can destroy existing forms of territorialization and transform our very sense of place. Routine social practices are subverted by political violence, and our lives are dominated by veritable “landscapes of fear.”

The focus of the issue then moves away from country studies to take up more specific themes. Carlos Vilas tackles the recent spate of lynchings in the context of political violence in the Andean region. Two particular mass lynchings of mayors in the Aymará region are the subject of his analysis. Much emphasis has been placed on supposedly traditional cultural factors and a new indigenous nationalism, but Vilas rightly concentrates on a complex political and institutional process that has led to conflicts within these communities and between them and the state. The events described also highlight the fragility of the democratization process and the weakness of the neoliberal state. The intervention of a legitimate state was needed to prevent such episodes of “popular justice,” but the state declined to intervene for fear of provoking a “bloodbath.”

Rosana Guber contrasts Argentina’s “clean war” to recover the Malvinas in 1982 with the “dirty war” that the generals waged against their own population. In the 1990s, a number of accounts began to circulate concerning the execution of Argentine prisoners of war by the British forces—which would have been a violation of the Geneva Convention. These accounts contradicted previous understandings that had stressed the good treatment of prisoners by the British. The Argentine officers on the ground denied that these extrajudicial killings had taken place. Guber uses these incidents and their repercussions as the basis for a dense exploration of the way memory and forgetting operate around political violence. That the war crimes were being denounced from within the victorious camp was paradoxical, and so was the fact that Argentina’s military denied these events in precisely the same language they
used in denying the disappearances and systemic torture of the “dirty war” at home.

Yajaira M. Padilla turns to the interrelationship between gender and violence in the struggle for cultural representation in postwar El Salvador. One of the unintended effects of the neoliberal regime dominant in the country has been a literary boom. The focus of this article is an analysis of the literary representation of female protagonists in postwar Salvadorean narratives, which calls attention to the obstacles confronted by women in the neoliberal era. Violence is an integral part of these narratives, but it is also very revealing in that it destabilizes the conventional public/private divide. It highlights the need for greater awareness of the broader political and cultural struggles that women have engaged in during the postwar era, building, of course, on their pivotal role in the insurgent organizations. Perhaps a new revolution is under way that will question neoliberalism from a critical gender perspective.

Argentina’s early-1970s labor struggles in the context of increasing political violence are the subject of Agustín Santella’s article. While studies of this period have tended to focus on the emerging contest between the Peronist guerrillas and the post-1973 Peronist government, working-class conflicts were central to it. The period is conventionally seen as a “spiral of violence” in which guerrilla terror and state terror were mirror images of each other. Santella makes the basic assumption that workers are not genetically or essentially either peaceful or violent and that all forms of struggle are related to the balance of forces and alternative options. What emerges from his account of the pivotal Villa Constitución strikes is that the workers involved may have been channeling their willingness to engage in armed resistance to the state into these mass struggles. For its part, the state probably used these strikes to prepare itself for the “dirty war” that it would unleash after seizing political power in 1976. The guerrillas had already been more or less dismantled, but the organized power of a working class that was prepared to use physical force still had to be repressed through naked state terror.

Finally, Andy Higginbottom turns to the UK-based Colombia Solidarity Campaign as an example of solidarity action research as liberatory methodology. How can we confront the crimes of the powerful, such as the daily abuses of human rights and the exercise of political violence with impunity in Colombia? From a critical-criminology perspective, Higginbottom argues that while the state may define political contestation as a crime, we can challenge this “from below.” His article helps us to review the critical social science of Latin America in the 1970s, with its emphasis on “praxis” and the transformative power of critique. Violence can be unpacked or deconstructed so that we understand the structural violence of dependent capitalism, the crimes of the powerful, and the quite distinct dynamic of revolutionary violence. These are questions that will not go away and cannot be subsumed under some broad and vague commitment to “global civil society.”

The agenda now opening up for the study of political violence in Latin America is an exciting one. It will also play an important political role in our understanding of and action with regard to the current sharpening of class struggle in the region. New problematics, new approaches, and new methodologies are emerging. Gender, ethnicity, and religion are coming to the fore. The lines between political and “ordinary” violence are increasingly blurred. In an era of globalization, the violence of empire has reached deep into Latin
America—paradigmatically in the case of Colombia, a real front line between imperialism and the global oppressed classes. Colombia is also, of course, a paradigmatic case for the new global criminal enterprises surrounding the drug economy, with its associated criminal/political violence. In a broader sense, there is an emerging concern with the two-way linkage between development and security, one being seen as impossible without the other. Conflict has been pinpointed by global policy makers as the main threat to sustainable development. But while imperialism makes the unruly subaltern people responsible for all political turmoil and violence, as critical social analysts we should direct our attention more toward the structural causes of that unrest and violence in all their complexity. Certainly our objective is security, but it is the human security badly needed by the peoples of Latin America and not the state security demanded by the imperial power.

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In Memoriam
Luz Estela Villarreal Muñoz
Scholar, Teacher, and Activist

The idea for this special issue grew out of a conference held in Liverpool in September 2004 entitled “Post-War Conflict and Violence: Latin America in Comparative Perspective.” The conference brought together a range of papers on different elements of violence and conflict, addressing not only its many manifestations but its diverse political contexts. Some of these are reproduced here; others are new and welcome additions to these debates. One of the speakers, our dear friend and compañera Luz Estela Villarreal Muñoz, has not survived to see this special issue appear. At the time of the conference, Luz was undergoing aggressive treatment for cancer, and she died in April 2006, a week before her forty-sixth birthday. At her funeral, a Colombian friend said that “Luz” was the most appropriate name for a woman who brought light into so many lives.

Luz’s great passion in life was education, and she was a committed and passionate teacher. Many of her former students from Liverpool joined in the celebration of her life, and many more sent condolences from different parts of the world. Her last research project was a collaboration with us at the Globalisation and Social Exclusion Unit, studying different peace-making initiatives from below in Colombia. She worked closely with civil-society actors in Colombia with typical fortitude and good humor despite difficult circumstances.

We dedicate this special issue to Luz. We thank her for sharing her passion and idealism. We salute her courage and that of many like her who are struggling for a world beyond violence.