

Introduction: surplus violence

As a rule, dictatorships guarantee safe streets and the terror of the doorbell. In democracy the streets may be unsafe after dark, but the most likely visitor in the early hours will be the milkman.

Adam Michnik (1998)

This essay is about violence, and the pity of violence. It dwells upon its connections with democracy because unwanted physical interference with the bodies of others, such that they experience pain and mental anguish and, in the extreme case, death – violence, in a word – is the greatest enemy of democracy as we know it. Violence is anathema to its spirit and substance. This follows, almost by definition, because democracy, considered as a set of institutions and as a way of life, is a non-violent means of equally apportioning and publicly monitoring power within and among overlapping communities of people who live according to a wide variety of morals.¹ Under democratic conditions the means of decision-making are neither owned nor wielded privately. While its institutional forms are highly variable, democracy as we know it today minimally requires public respect for others who are equal but different, and such respect extends to their entitlement to organise themselves into opposition to the powers that be. Democracy requires citizens to stay alert, to open their eyes and their mouths – to understand that societies of sheep typically beget governments of wolves. It facilitates criticism of power. In principle, democracy enables everybody to act at a distance from its power centres by means of a functioning civil society that is independent of publicly accountable governmental institutions; together, elected, responsible government and the dispersal of power within civil society provide organised protection from the fear or fact of injury or loss of life.

¹ The pre-Greek origins, modern development and uncertain future of democracy, including its variable and disputed meanings, are analysed in detail in my *A History of Democracy*, in preparation.

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Just how unique contemporary democracies are when defining and handling violence can be glimpsed by comparing them with the fascist régimes of the recent past. Ponder for a moment the Nazi euthanasia programme (1939–41), which led to the deaths, on Hitler's orders, of an estimated 100,000 German adults and children with mental disorders or incurable physical disabilities: backed by the fist of organised terrorism and mass mobilisation in the name of the nation or race, such programmes reveal how fascism was both paranoid and obsessed with unifying the body politic through the controlling, cleansing and healing effects of violence, which was often understood through 'medical' or 'surgical' metaphors.² Similar language is let loose in democratic countries, admittedly. It might even be said that a distinctive quality of democratic institutions is their subtle efforts to draw a veil over their own use of violence. There are also plenty of recorded cases where democratic governments hurl violence against some of their own populations. Such violence is called law and order, the protection of the public interest, or the defence of decency against 'thugs' and 'criminals', or 'counter-terrorism'. Within democracies, medical metaphors sometimes also surface, as when politicians speak of surgical strikes, sanitary cordons, mopping-up operations and fighting the 'cancer' or 'plague' of terrorism.

Mature democracies find such euphemisms embarrassing. They regard them as corrupting and contestable: on the home front, democracy is marked by a strong inner tendency to non-violence and, hence, a deep suspicion that what police and armies and men of violence do in the normal course of their duties is by definition never quite legitimate. During transitions to democracy, public suspicion of men of violence is often expressed with a sudden vengeance, like a geological upheaval: the *ancien régime* is accused of murder; searches for the

² See Sven Reichardt, 'Formen faschistischer Gewalt. Faschistische Kampfbünde in Italien und Deutschen nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg', *Sociologus*, 51 (2001), pp. 55–88; and 'Civil society and violence. Some conceptual reflections from an historical perspective', in John Keane (ed.), *Civil Society: Berlin Perspectives* (London and New York 2004), forthcoming.

disappeared begin; clandestine mass graves are exhumed; citizens are urged to tell their stories of suffering. Mature democracies refine and routinise these suspicions of violence and cultivate a measure of canininess: violence is not seen simply as the unlawful use of force. Ideally conceived, democracies understand themselves as systems of lawful power-sharing, whose actors are attuned to the dangers of violence – and to the mutual benefits of non-violence.

The calculation, peculiar to democracies, that the commitment to non-violence makes everyone feel safer is reinforced by the fact that many citizens and politicians – not all of them, not always a majority, take note – more or less share a peaceful outlook on the world. They tend to display a strong distaste for cruelty, a genuine interest in others' ways of life, or a simple commitment to ordinary courtesy and respect for others, wherever they live and whatever their skin colour, gender, religious or geographic background. This essay emphasises just how delicate and destructible is the *learned* quality of non-violent openness and how, paradoxically, this contingency feeds upon the fact that the daily lives of citizens in a democracy are normally cloth-bound in inherited habits and structured routines that seem banal and repetitious, but in fact, given their delicacy, should never be taken for granted.

These thoroughly contingent, existential routines of daily life are the 'raw material' of civility, as it is called throughout this essay. The members of a democracy, like all human beings, are animals of erect stature. They find it painful to remain upside down for long and therefore not only have a common understanding of up and down; they prefer uprightness. Thanks to language, they likewise have shared notions of left and right, of immobility or motion. Since they have bodies, arms and legs, they comprehend what it means to move, to squash, to kick, to be hit by something hard. Conceptions of constraint come easily to these beings: they especially dislike it when others prevent them from talking, or breathing, or when they obstruct their motion, or strike or physically hurt them. Such dispositions are in turn enmeshed within, and reinforced by, non-violent webs of more or

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less taken-for-granted commitments: conversations, gestures, washing bodies, patience, laughter, sexual play, cleaning, shopping for consumable items, planning journeys, tending crops and plants, worrying about income, filling out forms, paying bills, preparing food, looking after relatives, watching television, reading newspapers, telling children about the world and putting them to bed.

So the civil societies upon which today's democracies rest have a strong affinity with the will to name and to contain and to root out violence – to 'democratise' violence (as I explain in the pages that follow) wherever it appears and whatever may be its causes. This learned capacity to 'de-nature' violence, to see it as contingent, as politically removable from social and political life, is a key reason why mature democracies have an unblemished record in not waging war upon each other.³ Their citizens are too canny for that: enjoying a measure of liberties within a civil society, they tend to see through claims of sabre-rattlers and warmongers by suspecting that the mutual deployment of organised violence would not only favour some at the expense of others, but almost certainly would drown everyone's liberties in bayous of hubris and blood. The tendency of democracies to democratise violence also explains why democracies are often good at winning wars against their anti-democratic opponents, despite the latter's military and technical superiority. 'We shall win this war', wrote a distinguished journalist as the British faced the grim prospect of fascist occupation, 'because we are still a democracy, because the eye of criticism is still kept imperious over those who might slink into slothful, unoriginal methods'.⁴

³ Michael Doyle, 'Kant, liberal legacies and foreign affairs', in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 12, 3–4 (1983), pp. 205–35, 323–53. Compare Melvin Small and J. David Singer, 'The war-proneness of democratic regimes', in *Jerusalem Journal of International Studies*, 1, 4 (1976), pp. 50–69. The authors claim that between 1816 and 1965 58 per cent of inter-state wars were provoked by democracies – wars being defined as violent conflicts claiming at least 1,000 lives. The claim is unconvincing, if only because democracies are defined (poorly) as regimes in which just 10 per cent of the population are enfranchised.

⁴ Quoted in the interview with Michael Foot, 'Old Labour', *The Independent on Sunday*, London, 20 July 2003, p. 10 (the original dates from 1940).

These antipathies of democracies toward violence are well known, but unfortunately they are not the end of the story. All democracies, as we know them today and as they have existed in the past, are forced to play noughts and crosses with the violence of others, for instance, mercenaries, dictators, armies, guerrillas and networks of terrorists equipped with various weapons of violence that they are prepared to use against democrats, wherever they show their face. Persuaded by business deals and geopolitical calculations, democratic governments – when they can get away with it – secretly succour blood-sucking despots, like Idi Amin and Joseph Mobutu, Saddam Hussein and the Shah of Iran. And faced with the violence of their opponents, democracies find themselves trapped within a conundrum: whether or when or how to develop and deploy their own means of violence in order to repel or eradicate that of others. Exactly because democracies are prone to non-violence they are unusually sensitive to its threatened or actual occurrence elsewhere. Their parties, politicians and leaders come under pressure to sail ships and fly thousands of troops to places on earth where strangers are subjected to hellish acts of cruelty. Democracies find it difficult to hide from these atrocities. If they stand aside and ‘do nothing’ – as every democracy did when the Indonesian military mass-murdered East Timorese citizens – then they are easily accused of double standards, and callous indifference. If, on the other hand, democracies undertake ‘humanitarian intervention’ – India’s move into East Pakistan is an example – then they stand accused of meddling with the affairs of others, of behaving ‘undemocratically’ by heaping violence upon their opponents.

Especially when atrocities are hurled in their direction, democracies are prone to contradict themselves. Their structures of open power not only enable their violent opponents to work like worms through the body politic. Their openness enables the rise of parties and leaders who seek revenge, who pledge solemnly to root out violence – and in so doing are tempted to behave (here much can be learned from Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*) like the monomaniacal Captain Ahab who hunts a feared and hated object to all four corners

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of the earth, only to suffer crushing defeat. Fortunately – thanks to public demonstrations and communications media and judiciaries with teeth – democracies tend to place limits upon the ‘nauseous self-righteousness’ (Reinhold Niebuhr) of posturing leaders who tell lies, exaggerate threats, look for surrogate victims and take the side of ‘good’ against ‘evil’. Their grandiose strategies for dealing violently with the violent come to be seen as questionable in the courts of public opinion. Their actions are media covered and not covert, and for that reason these leaders often become publicly controversial. Their behaviour breeds disquiet, and for a good reason. Many within today’s mature democracies know or sense the rule first glimpsed by the ancient assemblies and democracies of Babylonia and Phoenicia and Greece: that the roads through the lands of violence are typically littered with brazen lying, hubris and corpses, all of which prove emotionally difficult for the inhabitants of democracy, who are exposed not only to embittered charges about their own double standards, or outright ‘rotteness’, but also to the possibility that democracy will be used to defeat democracy, for instance by invoking emergency powers that eventually transform it into some or other form of military dictatorship.

Some years ago, in *Reflections on Violence* (1996), I complained about the paucity of political reflection upon the contemporary causes, effects and ethics of violence. Violence was there understood as any uninvited but intentional or half-intentional act of physically violating the body of a person who previously had lived ‘in peace’. At the time, attempts to spark discussion about the meaning or significance of violence and politics were bogged down in swamps of semantic confusion or political indifference or strong academic preferences for discussing theories of justice, communitarianism or the history of half-dead political languages. There were plenty of case studies of hot wars, cold wars, civil wars and other violent conflicts, certainly. But broad-based political reflection on the forms and causes and effects of violence – Hannah Arendt’s exemplary *On Violence* and Judith

Shklar's preoccupation with cruelty were the striking exceptions⁵ – seemed no longer to be of much intellectual interest.

And so *Reflections on Violence* set out to break this glum silence, initially by exposing its roots within a confused quagmire of unspoken prejudices and significant assumptions. It pointed out, for instance, that violence often so shocks our senses that it induces forgetfulness, or mumbling embarrassment or silence. Especially for the 'civilised' person, violence is not a pretty subject. It is ugly enough to make even the most cheerful thinker pessimistic, and since optimists write badly (as Valéry said) and pessimists tend not to write at all, the silence about violence of some parts of the profession of political theory was understandable. *Reflections on Violence* examined other reasons why at the time the political imagination about violence seemed frozen. It pointed out that outbreaks of violence blinker the imagination, in that they induce pragmatism – a sense that the problems at hand must be solved urgently using such means as arrest, court trial and incarceration, criminology, clinical analysis, or police or military intervention. That flat-headed pragmatism often feeds other beliefs, including the presumption that 'human nature' is prone to violence, and that that is why – inevitably – an armed body like the state should monopolise its means, without further questions.

There are signs that this latter belief (or vague impression) that violence is a 'natural' or deeply rooted element of the human condition is today on the rise. For reasons that have to do with the evanescence of post-Cold War euphoria, and especially (as explained in the pages that follow) because of the dangerous 'triangle of violence' that is now settling on the whole world, violence and threats of violence are felt by many to be an ineluctable feature of our world as it is. Violence seems to be back and here to stay, in a big and disturbing way. The first-ever global report on violence (published in 2002) tells something of the

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York and London 1969); Judith Shklar, 'Putting cruelty first', in *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA and London 1984), pp. 7–44.

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bad news: more than 1.6 million people suffer violent deaths every year. Each day, on average, over 1,400 people are murdered; roughly 35 people are killed every hour as a result of armed conflict; one quarter of the world's women have suffered sexual violence by an 'intimate partner'.⁶ Such figures are grist to the mills of journalists working in the field of communications media, especially television. Indulging various motives, they help to cultivate the impression that our world is becoming ever more violent, sometimes to the point where violence is represented as 'natural' – as an eerie constant of the human condition. Proponents of violence have taken their cue and, seizing the script, have risen to the occasion: as if to prove that humans are dastardly creatures, works of violence have become works of art. The explosions, fear, injury and death are carefully staged, for a world audience. And so we are living in times when, just as night follows day, reports of violence flood in from all four corners of the earth. So too does talk of 'getting tough' with violence and calls for 'war' against its menacing forms. The old conviction, once expressed in the theory of 'democratic zones of peace', which supposed that advanced societies like the United States and Britain are no longer seriously troubled by violence, and that theories of violence are perforce losing their *raison d'être*, is on the ground, wounded and shaking.

In emphasising the *contingent* and *erasable* character of violence, this essay reminds readers that the belief that violence is 'natural' – a deep-seated predisposition in every individual, or generative of either the body politic or of the species as a whole – is both historically specific and profoundly anti-democratic. So this essay meets head-on the most sophisticated recent effort to speak of violence as a universal feature of the human condition: René Girard's *La violence et le sacré* (1972).⁷ Girard sets aside the several ways in which

⁶ *World Report on Violence and Health* (Geneva 2002); and www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention

⁷ Translated as René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (London 1988), especially ch. 1; see also his contributions to René Girard *et al.*, *Violences d'aujourd'hui, violence de toujours* (Lausanne 2000), pp. 13–26.

democracies democratise violence. When democracies flourish, they call into question face-value thinking about violence. The meaning of the term itself comes to be seen as contestable, as well as pliable enough to be extended onto actions that are then described and/or condemned as 'violent' – which means that they violate the norms of democratic civility. Democracies also tend to institutionalise procedures – periodic elections, police in uniform and subject to disciplinary procedures, laws against the violation of the body, chat lines, official inquiries, freedom of public assembly, press freedom, civilian control of the armed forces – for making sure not only that the violated get a fair public hearing, and fair compensation, but that those in charge of the means of violence are publicly known, publicly accountable to others – and peacefully removable from office. When they function well, democracies even enable their critics to name, and to shame, institutions – like courts of law and prisons – that inflict violence on their victims using sweeter names like 'interpretation' and 'justice'.⁸ The historically unique, never-perfect bundle of non-violent power-sharing techniques that today is called democracy is written out of Girard's account of violence. He admits that violence (the term is left undefined, but seems to be synonymous with blood) does not always have an immediately felt presence in human affairs. It dons symbolic (especially religious) masks, and in its disguised form it may well appear to disappear, or to appear benign. There are times, says Girard, when violence surfaces in terrifying form, wantonly sowing the poisonous seeds of chaos and destruction. At other times, violence steps forward as a peace-maker offering the sweet fruits of justice and reconciliation. At all times, however, violence is a constant

⁸ See the stimulating comments by Robert M. Cover, 'Violence and the word', *Yale Law Journal*, 95 (1986), pp. 1601–29, and the criticism of the 'agencies of force' of actually existing democracies in Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (London 1968), p. 128: 'They use force to make you do what the deciders have decided you must do . . . They punish. They have cells and prisons to lock you up in. They pass out sentences. They won't let you go when you want to. You have to stay put until they give the word. If your mother is dying, you can't go to her bedside to say goodbye or to her graveside to see her lowered into the earth.'

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companion of human affairs. That is why communities can be protected from their *own* violence only by choosing surrogate victims outside themselves. Modern 'civilised' societies may appear to put an end to the practice of 'interminable revenge', but they too are based on judicial systems that offload violence onto the convicted. A common thread runs through every known procedure designed to keep violence in bounds: the thread of violence itself. 'The more men strive to curb their violent impulses', concludes Girard, 'the more these impulses seem to prosper. The very weapons used to combat violence are turned against their users. Violence is like a raging fire that feeds on the very objects intended to smother its flames.'

Violence and Democracy takes aim at this kind of reasoning, partly because it has a long pedigree in early modern political thought, and as well because today the influence of such reasoning is regaining ground. 'Wars are like deaths, which, while they can be postponed, will come when they will come and cannot be finally avoided', concludes an epic inquiry into the future of territorial states. The author seeks authority in the words of the Polish-born writer, Joseph Conrad: 'the life-history of the earth must in the last instance be a history of a really relentless warfare. Neither his fellows, nor his gods, nor his passions will leave a man alone.'⁹ Along similar lines, Marx's thesis (outlined in *Das Kapital*) that 'in actual history conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in brief violence, notoriously play the great part' and his dictum that 'violence is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one' swam like a fish in early modern waters. It is exemplary of a smug conviction whose genesis is tied to the rise of the West and the birth of modern territorial states and empires: the conviction that some or other form of violence is ineluctably a feature of human affairs, that violence has a mind of its own, that violence reveals the 'real' nature of human beings and their historical strivings.

⁹ Quoted in Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles. War, Peace and the Course of History* (London and New York 2002), p. 819.