

# Theories of Violence

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It is almost impossible to provide a satisfactory definition of violence for all times and circumstances. Violence has many forms and varies according to contexts and circumstances. Its boundaries are fluid, and it is closely connected to cognate phenomena like power and force. Power may be defined in terms of potentiality to use violence, whereas force is the implementation of power and might not become violent. Force may take various forms and does not need to be violent in its immediate effects. It may be used as a threat to compel adversaries to obey. But its actualisation may also sometimes include violence. In other words, violence may be defined as the most radical form of force.

There is a tacit agreement that destruction is the most defining feature of violence. It may be caused by pure natural forces, though some forms of natural violence may be traced back to human causes. At first sight, violence may be judged on the immediate effects of actions. Destruction, though, may last for a longer time. A master-slave relation, for example, may last decades without involving any physical destruction –but because of the lack of mutual recognition, the master-slave relation involves or even requires permanent gradual psychological and emotional destruction. Violence may take the form of physical, psychological and emotional destruction and be directed against natural resources, animals and human beings. In human relations, it may occur in all spheres of social life, in everyday life in interpersonal relations, in family life, in schools, at universities, in industrial relations between social classes and in international relations. It may have a range of motivations from psychological to cultural, political and economic.

Written human history is almost a history of conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder; in short, it is a history of force and violence. Wars, in their various forms as civil or international conflicts, are the most obvious forms of violence. Compared with long, warlike and bloody ages, peaceful periods in written human history are almost negligible episodes. This is an obvious fact that no one would hardly deny. Marx, for example, who describes human history as a history of the expropriation of producers from their means of production, suggests that human history is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire. Similar observations in the liberal tradition are not rare. Kant, for example, suggests that the domination of evil in the world is as old as history. According to Kant it is even as old as that oldest of all fictions, religion. If the apocalyptic warning, that we live in the final age with the last day and the destruction of the world at hand, had ever any justification, then it is in our age. Contemporarily, humanity possesses biological, chemical and nuclear means of mass destruction, whose accidental or intentional use is very likely to cause international escalation. The worst likely event could lead to the extinguishing of biological life for ages to come. The mere existence of this type of artillery demands an answer to the question of what makes human beings produce such weapons of mass destruction, what turns them into aggressive and murderous beasts, if they are venerable and wish therefore to establish some kind of reliable natural circumstances and peaceful social relations around themselves. This is the grand question which any serious theory of violence has to address.

In Western theories of violence a demarcation line may be drawn between liberal and conservative theories on the one hand and Marxist and anarchist theories on the other. Generally, these traditions do not differ from one another so much in their assessment that the contradiction of interests in human relations in a given society or in international relations is the major cause of potential and actual violence. But they differ crucially from one another with regard to the question of how this contradiction should be handled.

Classical liberal theories (perhaps excepting Jean-Jacques Rousseau) are above all concerned about the monopolisation of the right to use violence rather than abolishing its causes. It is suggested that in bourgeois society everybody as an individual or member of a social class is a carrier of potential forces of violence. Social contract theories in their various forms are interested in developing a contractual framework by means of which all individuals (Hobbes) or citizens (Locke and Kant) would assign their potential force to a central institution called the state. In liberal historical approaches to society and the state (Hume, Smith) the division of labour, the establishment of private property, and the division of society into social classes are often considered the real source of force and violence that have eventually evolved into its monopolisation by the state. The potential force of the state is directed towards society. In other words, there is a master-slave relation between the state and society. In classical and contemporary liberal theories, this relationship is taken for granted. Some classical liberal thinkers are, however, interested in reducing and controlling this potential power by dividing it into legislative, executive and judicial powers (Locke, Montesquieu). There are other liberal and conservative thinkers, however, who regard the state as absolute master over society.

Marxism stands very much in the tradition of the liberal historical approach. But its historical analysis of the origins of force and violence in social relations and natural violence caused by humans is more comprehensive and precise and draws from this analysis entirely different conclusions. As opposed to liberal traditions, Marxism wants to eradicate the causes of all sorts of power and force in human relations. Karl Marx's and Engels's writings and works about capitalism and earlier social formations are therefore devoted to the analysis of the causes of power and force in human relations. The most explicit analysis of violence in Marxist tradition is in Engels's *Anti-Dühring*. Engels explores a socio-historical approach and argues primarily against what we call biological or natural explanations of the sources of force and violence in human relations. (Biological and natural explanations of the sources of force and violence in human relations are nowadays used by fascist theories of violence.) He traces back the emergence of force and violence in human relations to the establishment of private property relations. He suggests that the establishment of private property was by common consent rather than by force. He asserts that the means of force must have been developed before it could be made use of. For any theory which accepts that force was the origin of private property must, in the last resort, refer to some biological predisposition in human nature to use force and, in turn, must accept the positivist statement that the use of force is as natural and perpetual as everything else in human relations. Psychological explanations of violence might subscribe to this naturalist position. But they might also accept the Kantian dictum that education may humanise violent human nature. But they may encounter the question why human nature, after so many ages of expanding and deepening education, worsens.

Differing from passivism, which rejects any form of the use of violence, mainstream liberalism and Marxism justify the use of violence. But they provide entirely different sets of normative arguments and they differ crucially in their aims. Liberalism, though it accepts that the contradiction of interests is the major cause of violence, denies justifying the use of violence in what we call civil society. But if social relations should nonetheless become violent (in the case of a strikes and occupation of factories, for example) the state is entitled to intervene to protect private property and use violence if necessary. This is the point where mainstream liberalism meets conservative theories. Both liberalism and conservatism accept that the institution of private property is and everything is to be used to protect it.

Marxism, on the contrary, wants to establish a society with common ownership called communism, free from the contradictions of interest caused by private property relations. Differing from anarchism, which wants to establish a society based on small-scale private ownership and believes that the establishment of this market based society free from contradictions of interests is possible without any transition period, Marxism envisages a transitory society called socialism. Marxism suggests that it is more likely that the use of violence will be necessary to take over the political power and prepare the ground for the establishment of communism, which is supposed to be an ethical rather than a commercial society. (Anarchist conception of society is however a commercial society.) Vladimir Lenin asserts that to establish communism, though not wanted, much blood will be spilled; but that this is still better than the oceans of blood which are spilled consciously and permanently under imperialism; this is a concise formulation of the Marxist approach. In this assessment Marxism differs from Anarchism. They do not oppose one another in believing that violence will be necessary to take over political power but in their aim and whether a transitory society and the state are necessary.

Contemporary debates have developed more accurate terms and contributed to the structural classification of positions. But they lack the comprehensive view which is so characteristic of classical debates. In classical debates interpersonal, regional and overall structural relations are taken into account. More contemporary debates, however, inspired probably by Foucault, neglect more or less explicitly to deal with the question of the nature of capitalist society. They concentrate merely on interpersonal and regional relations instead.