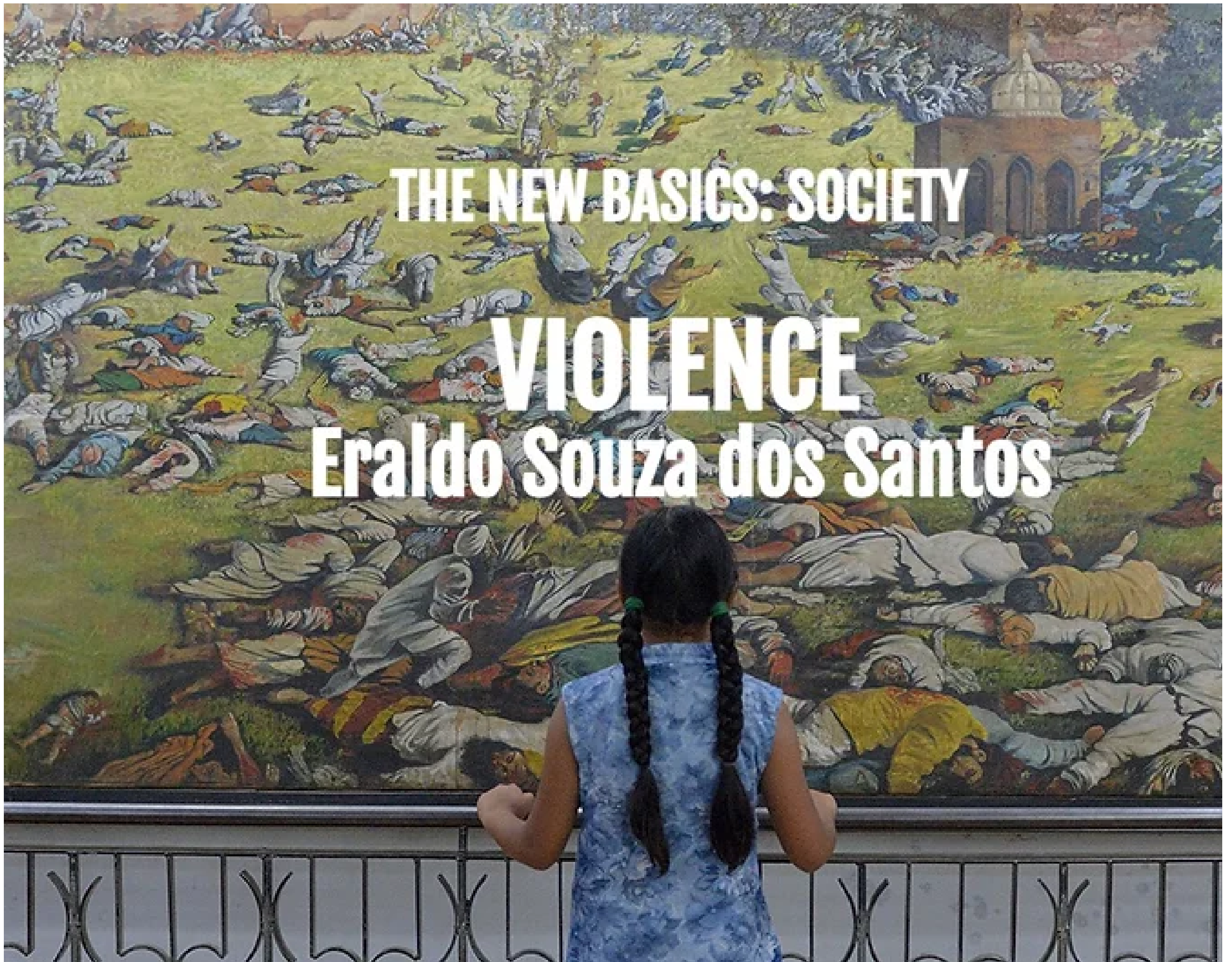
Eraldo Souza dos Santos

"Violence": An Essay by Eraldo Souza dos Santos (Keywords: Politics; Structures; Domination; Racism)



From *The Philosopher,* vol. 110, no. 2 ("The New Basics: Society").
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What do we talk about when we talk about violence? In his *Doctrine of Law* (1797), Immanuel Kant offers in passing an intriguing answer to this question. By differentiating between *violentia* (from *vis*, "force" in Latin) and *Gewalt* ("force," "power," or "violence," in German), Kant aims to shed light on what distinguishes justified and unjustified, legitimate

and nonlegitimate uses of force in a civil(ized) society. You may resort to violence to defend your honour. Or to murder a child you had outside of your marriage. Or at least so argues Kant. In such cases, you are not perpetrating *violentia*, but practicing *Gewalt*: morally and politically justified violence.

Murder of illegitimate offspring aside, the way Kant addresses the question of violence in the *Doctrine of Law* is characteristic of how we conceive of violence in the modern political tradition. For us, talking about violence usually means asking *when violence is justified or legitimate*.

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According to a traditional narrative in modern politics, it is in order to avoid violence that we live in societies. Or more precisely, as Thomas Hobbes writes in *Leviathan* (1651), in order to avoid or reduce the possibility of violent death. In the state of nature that precedes the establishment of civil society, there are, as Hobbes writes, “No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death: and the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” The state or the sovereign would need to retain a monopoly on physical violence in order for life in society to be possible. If individuals were to resort to violence in all situations of conflict, humanity would return to the “war of all against all” that characterizes, according to Hobbes, the state of nature. Centuries later, German sociologist Max Weber famously described in works such as *Economy and Society* (1922) how modern states came historically not only to enjoy such a monopoly on violence but also to legitimize it. As Weber shows, it is not enough for the state to monopolize violence; it needs its members to recognize such a monopoly as *legitimate*. From charismatic rulers to religious and warrior chiefs, state leaders sought to centralize and monopolize the use of violence to create a social order capable of inspiring legitimacy in its subjects.

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Although their accounts differ significantly, Hobbes and Weber show how the state uses violence to prevent everyone else from using it. By doing so, the state can be said to contribute to promoting social peace. All conflicts should now be *political* conflicts, resolved through dialogue and deliberation, mediated by institutions (courts, elections, and so on) that replace the use of force with the use of arguments. The possibility of legal sanction, even of a violent nature (corporal punishment, torture, death penalty), as well as the repression of attempts to alter the structure of the state (rebellions, revolts, coups

d'état) ensures that political life functions as smoothly as possible. Modern politics thereby *naturalizes* the state's monopoly on violence.

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It is commonplace to speak of "political violence," of violence as a means to achieve political ends: warfare, genocide, terrorism, torture, etc. But does politics not exclude violence? After all, one might say that politics begins where violence ends; that where there is violence, there can be no politics. Violence appears to imply the failure of politics because in violent conflicts the use of physical force replaces the symbolic force of the strongest argument. To accept this position, however, is tantamount to saying that there is no politics – that politics is only an unattainable ideal. The alternative conclusion is that all violence is political and all politics is violent.

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The politics of violence divides a community into those who may legitimately resort to violence and those who may not. The state may resort to violence, along with those authorized by the state to do so (the police, the armed forces, mercenaries, vigilante groups, and so on). The case of terrorism is exemplary in this regard. As Pakistani political scientist Eqbal Ahmad argued in 1986, "When practiced and supported by powerful states, terrorism is legitimized as an instrument of attaining political objectives." It is *justified, legitimate, political* violence. It is not violence as *violentia*, in the Kantian sense; it is *Gewalt*. By contrast, the actions of groups fighting for social change, even when self-disciplined and not involving the use of physical force, are often portrayed by states as violent, terrorist actions. The state not only claims a monopoly on violence, but also *a monopoly on the legitimization thereof*.

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Is confrontation and violence the appropriate means for African Americans to achieve their political aims, to fight against the social and political problems they face? When a white journalist asked Angela Davis this question in 1972, inside the walls of the California State Prison where she was unjustly imprisoned, her response took autobiographical contours:

> I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama. Some very good friends of mine were killed by bombs, bombs that were planted by racists. I remember from the time I was very small; I remember the sounds of bombs exploding across the street, our house

> shaking. I remember my father having to have guns at his disposal at all times because of the fact that at any moment we might expect to be attacked. The man who was at that time in complete control of the city government … would often get on the radio and make statements like: “Niggers have moved into a white neighborhood. We better expect some bloodshed tonight.” And, sure enough, there would be bloodshed.

It is common today to identify in Angela Davis’ response a justification for violence: because the American state not only perpetrates but encourages violence against African Americans, the latter would have a right to resort to violence to defend themselves. But the emphasis in Davis’ account here is rather on the ways in which violence *defines* the experience of being Black in the United States. Beyond the question of the justification or legitimation of the Black Panther Party’s calls for revolutionary violence, she is drawing attention to the ways in which the “fear” and the “danger of violent death” radically shape Black lives and lead eventually to violent “explosions” in response. For Davis, violence is not simply an act to be justified and legitimized but, more fundamentally, a social experience:

> I mean, that’s why when someone asks me about violence, I just, I just find it incredible. Because what it means is that the person asking that question has no idea what black people have gone through, what black people have experienced in this country since the time the first black person was kidnapped from the shores of Africa.

It is because our life is a life plagued by violence, Davis seems to argue, that we, Black Americans, long for a (potentially violent) revolution that will liberate us. She is not justifying violence, at least not here; rather, she is reminding her interlocutors that social violence must be grasped beyond its justification. It is the *experience* of violence and the desire for freedom that are at the centre of her response.

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The state's monopoly on violence has always been predicated on its ability to prevent individuals from suffering violence. Traditionally, this has served as an argument to justify potentially violent resistance against states that perpetrate forms of violence considered by its subjects as unjustified or illegitimate. This intimate connection between the justifications of the monopoly of violence and of the right of resistance is the Achilles' heel of the state. That is why it is fundamental for the state to claim (albeit sometimes in subtle ways) *a monopoly on determining what consists of experiences of violence*.

In light of this, social movements have historically sought to broaden our conception of violence. It is thanks to the struggles of labour movements around the world that we today recognize poverty and the suffering that results from precarious working conditions as forms of violence. Women's rights movements, in particular, have advocated for characterizing as violent certain forms of intimidation and coercion, such as psychological harassment (termed, in countries such as France, as "moral violence") and marital rape, that were not traditionally considered as such. Today, Black activists seek to show that racism, in *all* its various forms, is also a form of violence.

Always lagging slightly behind, philosophers and theorists sought to follow. Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, for example, famously argued in his article "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" (1969) that violence can be *structural* when there is an "avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs," such as the perpetuation of poverty through institutionalized class disparities. A year later, French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron argued in *The Reproduction* that violence can be *symbolic*. Through education, media, and a variety of other forms of socialization, socially dominant groups impose a system of thought on the groups they dominate. In thinking and acting within such a system of thought, the dominated participate in their own domination. Bourdieu argues that this form of violence helps shed light on how patriarchy works: not only, or even mainly, as a system based on men's physical violence, but also on implicit and explicit social norms that permeate everyday life in patriarchal societies. More recently, Indian theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak sought to show in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) that violence can be *epistemic* when it undermines and destroys Indigenous and traditional forms of knowledge. For Spivak, violence is perpetrated when the colonizer constructs an image of the colonized as incapable of thinking, or of thinking *properly*. The colonized is seen as an "Other" needing education, domination, domestication. This serves to prevent any other forms of knowledge from being recognized as such.

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Recent social movements – from the "yellow vests" to #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo – have sought to show that violence cannot be understood only through the gesture of the blow, but equally through the systemic suffering that permeates our daily lives. Violence is a social phenomenon, not in spite of the state but often because of it. The state is responsible for perpetuating forms of violence that it should prevent. The way in which the state contributes to various forms of violence (sexism, racism, classism, imperialism, etc.) could lead us to the conclusion that it seeks to have a direct or indirect monopoly on *all* forms of social violence – and that it *depends* on social domination to exist as such.

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But what is violence? Many theorists find in philosophers such as Aristotle and Spinoza elements of a possible answer to this difficult question: to do violence to someone or a thing is to act against their nature, to remove them from their "natural place," to totally or partially destroy them, to prevent them from securing their own conservation, preservation, or existence. While useful as a starting point, these definitional elements do not help us to answer the questions that generally concern us as individuals and citizens: Is what others are doing (or not doing) to me violence? May I act violently – and, if so, under what circumstances? Is nonviolence ineffective or an unattainable goal?

Beyond these disputes over the term, the idea of violence crystallizes a deeper social problem: the use of force, physical or otherwise, seems at the same time *both* to enable and to prevent society to work as a cooperative project. The problem of violence would only be completely solved in a world where there would no longer be either reason or temptation to resort to violence – in a world of perfect states or a world with no state at all. Only in such a world, beyond *violentia* and *Gewalt*, would the idea of political violence become an oxymoron.

Eraldo Souza dos Santos is a philosopher and historian of political thought who is currently a doctoral student at Panthéon-Sorbonne University. His research interests include the history of political concepts, the politics of social movements, and Black internationalism (South and Southeast Asia).
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