

# Kinds of Violence

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Normative discussions of legitimate violence are notoriously fraught with a variety of problematic distinctions. On the state level, for example, consider the doctrine of double effect as a *jus in bello* principle of the conduct of war. Likewise, consider invocations of violence to preserve public safety, including controlled killing itself as a legitimate form of punishment in the US and several other nations. The complexity of the moral considerations of such state actions is well known. Weber, in a sparer fashion, constructs his definition of the state itself as a ‘human community that successfully claims the *monopoly* of the legitimate *use* of physical *force within* a given *territory*’.<sup>1</sup>

At the foundation of the dominant contemporary idea of the State, the liberal tradition famously introduces self-preservation, and violence in its name, as a *sine qua non* of the human condition in both any state of nature as well as a social order. Further, the concept of individual rights, and in particular liberty, becomes paramount in liberal political theory as an additional part of the conceptual architecture of this picture, stemming from self-preservation, but including ideals of workmanship and property ownership in Locke.<sup>2</sup> In a variety of ways, the individual bearer of rights, so often the trump card in discussions of normative political questions, intersects with a notion of liberty that is essentially negative. Much has been written on the problematic distinction between negative and positive liberty, both at a conceptual level and at the level of consequences of practices. I point to the privileging of negative liberty, freedom from interference, in the liberal tradition for purposes of highlighting it as an ideal

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<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” in Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.) *From Max Weber* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

<sup>2</sup> See John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*. Edited by Ian Shapiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 312.

theoretical concomitant of the market system, and one that occludes other normative claims. Specifically, this hypostatization of the negative dimensions of liberty as prior to conditions of human flourishing contributes to the justification of practices that are best understood as ‘economic violence’. In fact, these practices point up a contradiction with wider notions of self-preservation.

But what happens to the liberal normative justification for violence after a Hegelian and Marxist historicisation and materialisation, respectively, of the conceptual life of the species? What are the consequences for our diagnosis when the critique of the liberal order finally faces the question of violence after the principles of liberalism have been exposed as having been co-opted into instrumentally functioning as an ideological feature of the legitimization of capitalism? Further, what follows from the fact that the contemporary defense of a political economy of expanding free markets and minimalist state regulation relies on a distorted and false picture of the metatheoretical and justificatory status that liberals would otherwise claim for economics? For example, the very idea that free contracts between individuals are so clearly superior to the chains of feudalism becomes subject to critique when the abstract models of agency and rationality are once again set upon their feet. But one need not go too far afield from the Enlightenment tradition itself to find David Hume attacking the very notion of the capital-labour contract when he said (to paraphrase) that the kind of liberty the worker experiences in selling their labour is the same as the one of a person who, having been shanghaied, wakes up on a seafaring ship, deep in the ocean, and is given the ‘free’ choice to row or walk the plank. So much for the concept of ‘exit’.

But how does legitimate violence flow, if at all, from a theory that primarily targets *systems* as opposed to individual actors as its focus of critical and descriptive analysis of the conjuncture at which any group sits with respect to the development of the capitalist mode of production?

As is well known, Marx did not have a problem with the expropriation of the expropriators. However, when historical agency is moved to the level of class actors in this tradition under conditions of a variety of historical conjunctures, the historical record presents a

deep challenge to praxis oriented to revolutionary change. However, in the tradition of Western Marxism, it is perhaps Antonio Gramsci's work that offers the most sophisticated discussion of force, violence, and war. He was crucially concerned with just such questions in his own writings.

Specifically, Gramsci targeted the intellectual landscape at his time as the legitimating and causally supportive force of the exploitation endemic to capitalism as a mode of production. Before exploring economics as a constitutive element of the question of violence under these conditions, it is worth noting the lineage from which Gramsci operates and its place within larger intellectual trends in critical theory. Gramsci and a variety of left-Hegelian emancipatory thinkers have been seen to embrace 'totalising,' 'essentialising' and 'absolutising' perspectives. In response, thinkers friendly to the ends of Marxism or Democratic Socialism have embraced a variety of conceptual positions in opposition to what they consider to be these particularly egregious errors indicative of a kind of modernist triumphalism, the metaphysics of presence, epistemological ethnocentrism and false universalism, and the infallibility of a foundationalist and overly scientific view of rationality. This movement has alternatively gone under a variety of names, including post-structuralism or post-modernism. It is my contention that this is an overreaction to tendencies in some thinkers within a diverse tradition that is filled with nuance and within whom 'the fallibilism of modern self-consciousness' was a feature, though of course not a perfect one.<sup>3</sup> The details and support for this claim are outside the scope the current concern of this essay, but in the tradition of Western Marxism there are plenty of critical, fallibilist, anti-authoritarians who read communism as radical democracy, and Gramsci is not particularly subject to the pitfalls of these overarching mistakes of Enlightenment rationality. Indeed, he targets such overreach frequently, and in particular the kind that reads economics

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<sup>3</sup> Thinkers who assert these irreducibly dominating and subjugating features of the exercise of rationality include most prominently Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. These and other thinkers, such as Jacques Derrida, who criticize rationality along these lines are addressed by Jürgen Habermas in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 326.

as a law-like science which is akin to the natural sciences and thus value-free.

Gramsci is a particularly interesting figure within this tradition as his own model of emancipatory political change is some distance from those of his Soviet revolutionary contemporaries. While not offering the most detailed criteria for deciding when violence is legitimate in class struggle, he created a conceptual framework using the concept of war as a touchstone. ‘Wars of *manoeuvre*’ and ‘wars of position’ are the terms of art he used to describe the axis of political strategy under conditions of capitalist hegemony; and much less discussed, the taxonomy he provides also includes ‘underground war’.<sup>4</sup> That Gramsci saturated his analysis of hegemony with such discussions of consent and coercion, force, and violence clearly points in the direction of a kind of violence that is legitimate within situations of capitalist exploitation. Such types of violence, as symbolic, gender, political, and economic violence, are now part of the habitual conceptual vocabulary that we have at hand to explore what a war of position or a war of manoeuvre must endorse in terms of counter-hegemonic action, and yes, violence. Wars cannot be carried on without violence. But Gramsci was also clear-eyed enough in his understanding of the revolutionary situation in Italy and other European countries to be very reticent with respect to physical, class-based violence as a means of change. That is, the conditions for a war of manoeuvre are difficult to diagnose.

It is through Gramsci’s analysis that the contemporary panoply of kinds of violence can gain a register pointing towards some violence as legitimate under current conditions, including strikes and some forms of expropriation.

### **Economic Violence**

The type of violence I am concerned with diagnosing today is a hybrid. It could perhaps be called symbolic violence, but I prefer the term ‘economic violence’ as the main frame of our juncture. Due to

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<sup>4</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Vol. 1*. Ed. Joseph Buttigieg, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 219.

the inextricability of the symbolic legitimation of neoliberal globalisation from the discipline of mainstream neoclassical economics, I believe that the threshold for violent actions of a very restricted sort may have been reached in certain contexts by *even* the classical liberal criteria of self-preservation mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The two bases of this judgment are environmental sustainability, on the one hand, and the creative dimension of human labour on the other. In this sense, a Gramscian legitimation of violence in these instances may perhaps be best characterised as self-defence or preservation. It is an open question, and a provocative one, but it must be seen as one that is timely given the dire straits of humanity under the weakening ecosystem that sustains life.

While it has become an increasingly popular, and very welcome, movement to criticise the intellectual foundations of neoclassical economics (to say nothing of their function in legitimising capitalist hegemony) from a variety of theoretical perspectives, including post-structuralism, normative economics, interpretive social science, and feminist economics,<sup>5</sup> it is interesting that Gramsci had already diagnosed a fundamental methodological, philosophical, and thus normative problem in both Soviet Marxism and liberal utility-maximising neoclassical economics. He used the term ‘economism’ to discredit both models of philosophical anthropology, or models of human activity, and spent much intellectual labour criticising these mirror images in opposed political camps. The reductive interpretation of *homo sapiens* excluded the creative and thus political and cultural dimension of human agency and served to distance Gramsci from his more positivistic colleagues such as Bukharin and others.

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5 See for instance, Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: neoliberalism's stealth revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015); Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); the classic immanent critique of Edward Nell and Martin Hollis, *Rational Economic Man*, revised edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Julie Matthaei, “Beyond Economic Man: Economic Crisis, Feminist Economics, and the Solidarity Economy.” Más allá del hombre económico: crisis económica, economía feminista, y la economía solidaria Cayapa. *Revista Venezolana de Economía Social*. Año 10(19) (2010), 65-80.

More specifically, as is well known, Gramsci targeted Bukharin's adaptation of a concept of law in human history as exclusive of indeterminacy, and of the necessity of free, conscious struggle and development on the part of the working class with respect to their future.<sup>6</sup> The self-reflexivity of the human agent, which poses such a deep challenge to the social sciences - the fact that the agent changes their field of action in reflecting on it, changing the very nature of the action itself, thus changing the field being observed, whose observations in turn change the actor's intentions, *ad infinitum* - is eliminated. Human action is rather modeled as explainable by covering laws akin to those at work in the natural sciences, reducing seeming intentional actions to epiphenomena of deeper cause and effect processes.

Neoclassical economics is perhaps the expression of this positivistic tendency in the social sciences *par excellence*. What is this model and how does one attribute 'violence' to it? Neoclassical economics is famous for removing class agency and social structure from its conceptual framework. In the words of Duncan Foley:

For one thing, the Rational Consumer integrates the roles of the Classical Worker, Capitalist, and Landowner. Everyone is, after all, to some extent a worker supplying labor-power, a capitalist who owns at least some dividend or interest yielding assets, and a landowner. The marginalist revolution obliterates the vigorous class distinction of Classical political economy to create a Representative Economic Agent who is a scale model of the whole society... [T]he characteristic problem of the Rational Consumer is different from that of the Worker, Capitalist, or Landowner, who had to fight out their class positions existentially. The Rational Consumer's function is to Choose. Thus he (or perhaps even she) becomes Sovereign in the neoclassical picture of the function of the

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<sup>6</sup> See Giuseppe Fiori, *Antonio Gramsci: a life*, Trans. Tom Nairn (London: Verso, 1990); Joseph Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Antonio Gramsci, *Modern Prince and other writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1959).

capitalist society. The immense investment of resources in productive facilities and infrastructure is simply the most convenient device by which the Rational Consumer can transfer her wealth from the present to the future. Her Tastes govern the allocation of social resources among competing ends. Though to the indiscriminating eye the enormous capitalist firms and trusts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century might appear as formidable centers of economic and social power, the penetrating economist recognizes that they are actually pussycats under the heel of the Rational Consumer, whose whim expressed as demands on the market bring them to heel.<sup>7</sup>

A short sketch of the main features of *homo economicus* and the model of practical reason therein is in order. This will fill out the dominant picture of human action at the root of what I called above the symbolic legitimation of our contemporary global order. The generality of this sketch will belie a certain skirting of issues with regard to the nuance that utility-maximizing models of the rational chooser have gained in response to the myriad critiques it has undergone. Still, though there have been, and continue to be, technical innovations to widen the understanding of preferences, for instance, the model of rational choice that informs *homo economicus* remains at least minimally committed to the following features:

1. All actions and events are explained by reference to an individual utility-maximiser or aggregate of such utility-maximisers.
2. This chooser maximises their utility based upon a given schedule of preferences,
3. and perfect information regarding the ability to realize those preferences,

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<sup>7</sup> Duncan Foley, “The Strange History of the Economic Agent” *New School Economic Review*, 11 (2004), 84.

4. and a perfect internal computer that is able to calculate which preferences can be realized, given perfect information, and chooses accordingly.

The amount of conceptual underpinning that allows these features to constitute the model of *homo economicus* is enormous, and a treatment that truly belaboured the entirety of disagreement that an alternative model of human choice would have with such a picture is of course beyond the scope of this paper. Inherent in the original claims that these assumptions help to explain or predict human economic action in a scientific manner are an entire battery of theses, including at least four:

1. Human action is explained according to methodologically individualist tenets.
2. Maximising personal utility is the prime motivator of action.
3. Perfect information is possible.
4. Human beings have the power or habit of computing choices, given preferences and information, in a 'rational' manner which is imputable and unaffected by historical contingency or exigencies of any kind; that is, it is *a priori*, unconditioned and perfect. It is algorithmic.

A helpful way of conceiving of this agent is as, in Martin Hollis' terms, a 'throughput'.<sup>8</sup> Convincing arguments have been shown that rational choice models restrict the agent from formulating different preferences according to different problematic situations within the choice situation itself. Any deviations from stated preferences that subjects may avow, or any inconsistencies in the choice given stated preferences, are dissolved by the claim of what the agent would do if they were rational, or by invoking such technical fixes such as 'counterpreferential' choice, and 'revealed' preferences. Though there are good reasons from a variety of theoretical perspectives to reject

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<sup>8</sup> See Hollis, M.. *Reason in action: Essays in the philosophy of social science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 49.



such a model of choice, and indeed these rejections are becoming more numerous, the point here is to highlight the model in a general fashion.<sup>9</sup> This also because it informs policy, both in terms of international relations between power players and neoclassical economic development actions.

### **The Violence in this Model**

The costs of enlisting neoclassical economics as an ideological spearhead through which capital sets up extraction process around the globe is well-documented, and thus the fallout of what Gramsci diagnosed as the ‘economism’ of this model of human action can be assessed. Specifically, the question of the globalisation of the liberal market model of political economy is perhaps the most obvious starting point for discussion. The empirical results of this story are debated, but there is good evidence suggesting that the ‘development’ projects framed according to neoclassical principles and foisted upon many countries fail in terms of quality of life indicators as proposed by the UNHDR.

Lawrence King has detailed the ways in which neoclassical models and the introduction of neoliberal economic processes contributed to greater mortality rates in the former USSR through shock privatization.<sup>10</sup> These serve as good illustrations of the above model, as their justification and legitimation includes a robust claim to be mandated by the value-free employment of the science of economics with the help of econometric modelling of aggregate utility maximisers. In addition, King has more recently been tracing rates of

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<sup>9</sup> The preference structure has also spawned much literature that is beyond the scope of my concern here today. Specifically, preferences are 1) given in a choice situation 2) current 3) homogenous and 4) consistent.

<sup>10</sup> “Mass privatisation and the post-communist mortality crisis: a cross-national analysis” (with David Stuckler and Martin McKee) *The Lancet.*, 373(9661) (2009), 399-407. “International Monetary Fund programs and tuberculosis outcomes in post-communist countries” (with David Stuckler and Sanjay Basu). *Public Library of Science Medicine* 5 (2008): 1-12; “The political economy of farmers’ suicides in India: Indebted cash-crop farmers with marginal landholdings explain state-level variation in suicide rates” (with Jonathan Kennedy) *Globalization and Health* 10(16) (2014): 1-9.

TB in countries that have introduced IMF structural adjustment programs, as well as suicide rates in India among farmers. The evidence is striking in terms of how IMF plans, resting as they do on the conceptual architecture of neoclassical economics, have resulted in widespread rises in inequality, the spread of TB and a rise in mortality rates. What is particularly crucial in pointing to neoclassical economics here is the additional feature of the reification of markets as a space where ‘natural’ forces are set free to work through the activity of rational economic humans.<sup>11</sup> The states King analyses are also particularly relevant to correlating the rise in mortality rates to the implementation of econometrically justified structural adjustment programs. It is in these states, lacking as they do the normal features of democratic civil society, democratic cultures of representation, and historical practices within a contemporary market society (which show up in neoliberalism’s adaptation of neoclassical economics as ‘inefficiencies’ and ‘costs’), that the market was given wide latitude to operate, and in a sense operated perfectly according to the logic of capital. In a deep sense, they were the laboratories of ongoing experiments begun with Milton Friedman and carried on by his even more radical neoclassical acolytes.<sup>12</sup>

However, what Gramsci allows for in contradistinction to the neoclassical (and, it is noted, the postmodern and Soviet) models of agency and hegemony is an understanding of the human subject that is both constituted by and constitutes its material and symbolic environment. The agent is both spontaneous and receptive, with respect to the social structures and economic activities that they find themselves thrown into, historically speaking, as well as in their native capacities.

Gramsci regularly invokes human creativity as a norm for articulating the criterion for self-defence, for class agency and for the naming of economic violence.<sup>13</sup> However, this naming process, the

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11 For a compelling philosophical account of the background to this architecture see Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*.

12 Think also of Pinochet’s Chile, a laboratory of Friedmanite policies.

13 Elsewhere I have taken up a fuller account of these insights of Gramsci’s. See, “Pragmatic Hegemony: questions and convergence” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 29(1) (2015): 107-117.

praxis of intellectuals at any given conjuncture, requires social inquiry that resembles the norms of democracy as much as any other political arrangement. Specifically, Gramsci's deep awareness and methodological inclusion of the periphery and his origins in the Sardinian subaltern infuse his commitment to the scientific element of class struggle. Far from excluding those class actors whose position he once inhabited before taking a role on the international stage and then his imprisonment, Gramsci makes their inclusion in the process of scientific praxis an essential element of class struggle that is both democratic and scientific. In addition, it is also a process whereby one can, through this social process of inquiry, determine when a war of manoeuvre is called for to end a system of hegemonic domination and establish a new hegemony. It is at this level, when the inclusion of the condition and input of the periphery informs the next step in class praxis, that one of the conditions for class action of violent expropriation or resistance can be legitimated. That is, the epistemic requirement of class consciousness and its articulation requires a multiperspectival dialogue on social problems among the people who constitute the problematic situations, the subject and objects of praxis. This is the way in which the both the methodological individualism and the compartmentalization of preferences from learning processes at the heart of neoclassical model of human action is overcome. However, if the situation is understood to be one where survival becomes a paramount interest, then self-preservation requires a recognition of this. And thus economic actions, be they the war of position in terms of a boycott or the war of manoeuvre as in a strike, are called for. This requires (and not minimally) a deep thinking and deliberation regarding the ensuing responsibility for the consequences of the latter's violence as constitutive of the process whereby a strike is enacted to stop economic violence of the sort referenced in this paper and unfortunately increasingly present at our historical conjuncture.