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Yves Winter^a

^a University of Minnesota, USA

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Violence and Visibility

Yves Winter

University of Minnesota, USA

La violence des hommes a ceci de particulier que même si on la tait, surtout si on la tait, elle se propage aux générations suivantes.

What is particular about the violence of men is that if silenced, especially if silenced, the violence spreads to the next generations.

—Julia Kristeva, *Micropolitique*¹¹

In his seminal article “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” Johan Galtung pitched the term “structural violence” as a counterpart to “direct” and “personal” violence. “Structural violence” is defined as an injury that is not immediately attributable to an acting subject, but is “built into the structure” and manifests itself as inequality of power, resources, and life opportunities.¹² Galtung argues that the failure to prevent injury, pain, and suffering is as relevant to social and political analysis as is their perpetration.¹³ According to this notion of structural violence, everything that hinders individuals from developing their capabilities, dispositions, or possibilities counts as violence. This includes not only specific forms of targeted discrimination but also more diffuse forms of inequality.¹⁴

The virtue of Galtung’s concept of structural violence is that it opens up the category of violence so as to include poverty, hunger, subordination, and social exclusion. It makes it possible to theorize differential access to power and resources as a form of violence, shifting the category of violence away from surface phenomena toward a broad set of social relations. Yet the capaciousness of Galtung’s term also marks its limits. As has frequently been pointed out, the notion of structural violence is broad and vague; it neglects the specific differences and historical variations of forms of injustice, their intersections, and the ways in which they are compounded. Slavery, racism, sexism, colonialism, and class domination, as well as other disparities, are collapsed into a single category—the proverbial Hegelian night, in which all cows are black.¹⁵ It is for these and other reasons that the concept of structural violence has, with some exceptions, largely lost its appeal to social theorists since its heyday in the 1970s.¹⁶

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Micropolitique* (Paris: Editions de l’Aube, 2001), p. 51, my translation.

¹² Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6:3 (1969), p. 170.

¹³ See also Newton Garver, “What Violence Is,” *The Nation* 206:26 (1968), pp. 819–822.

¹⁴ See also Johan Galtung and Tord Hoivik, “Structural and Direct Violence: A Note on Operationalization,” *Journal of Peace Research* 8:1 (1971), pp. 73–76.

¹⁵ For a recent sample of such criticism, see Loïc Wacquant’s response to Paul Farmer, “An Anthropology of Structural Violence,” *Current Anthropology* 45:3 (2004), p. 322.

¹⁶ For an exception, see Nancy Fraser, “The Force of Law: Metaphysical or Political?,” *Cardozo Law Review* 13 (1991), pp. 1325–1332.

Yet in spite of these limitations, the concept of structural violence addresses a key theoretical problem, namely that conventional—what I call *positivist*—definitions tend to associate violence with visibility and with actions that can be attributed to an individual subject. Proponents of positivist definitions of violence restrict violence to the intentional, direct, immediate, and visible infliction of physical harm, the assault or encroachment on the physical integrity of another human being or his or her property. Positivists typically see psychological, cultural, structural, or symbolic violence as illicit “metaphorical” extensions of the “true” concept of violence and as attempts to “politicize” social research.¹⁷ In support of this view, appeals are often made to “common sense” and to “normal and ordinary” usage, which are taken to corroborate this terminology.¹⁸ The argument relies on a (usually tacit) positivist epistemology that, irrespective of the well-known criticisms by authors as different as Nietzsche, Adorno, Kuhn, and Feyerabend, conceives of science as the study of observable phenomena, denies the possibility of knowledge of unobservable objects, and insists on a rigid fact/value distinction.

Thus, Charles Tilly, in his entry on “Public Violence” in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, defines violence restrictively as “episodic social interaction that immediately inflicts physical damage on persons and/or objects, results at least in part from coordination among persons who perform the damaging acts, occurs at least partly in publicly accessible spaces.”¹⁹ Tilly’s definition explicitly excludes inflictions of physical injury that are not immediate or episodic as well as injurious acts that cannot be assigned to an individual agent, not to mention any form of injury that does not occur in a publicly accessible space. Thus, while throwing paint on a building—if performed in a coordinated manner—may be counted as “public violence,” any infliction of physical injury (not to mention psychological, cultural, and symbolic harm) that lacks a clearly identifiable perpetrator and that is not “immediate” would fall outside of Tilly’s definition.

The problem with the positivist paradigm, which tends to dominate research on violence, is that it introduces, from the very outset, a principle of selection that refuses to recognize certain forms of injury as violent. Granted, every attempt to define a social phenomenon involves a selection. Yet the positivist emphasis on *agentive intentionality* and *visibility* appears to be purely methodologically driven. On what grounds can we assume that violence occurs always at the surface, that its effects are always visible, that it constitutes an action performed by one or more individuals? The fetishization of the visible hinders analyses that seek to connect visible modes of injury to concealed ones, while the priority of the act hampers investigations into social and historical conditions for contemporary formations of violence. If, as Julia Kristeva points out in the epigraph to this paper, silence and invisibility are centrally intertwined with contemporary forms of violence, then the refusal to acknowledge formations of violence that do not correspond to the

¹⁷ See, for instance, Charles Tilly, “Violence: Public,” in Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (eds), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2001), p. 267.

¹⁸ See, for example, C.A.J. Coady, “The Idea of Violence,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 3:1 (1986), p. 4.

¹⁹ Tilly, “Violence: Public,” p. 267.

narrow positivist criteria amounts to a willful neglect. If we are looking for a robust account of violence that captures what Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois call the "continuum of violence," we need a more resilient set of concepts, one that goes beyond the basic juridical grammar that presupposes an intentional agent as violence's perpetrator.²⁰

The Grammar of Structural Violence

Why does it matter that forms of injury and abuse that cannot be described as immediate physical assault or force be called "violence"? Perhaps no text addresses this question quite as interestingly as Friedrich Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England*:

When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another, such injury that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence—knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, *its deed is murder* just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains.²¹

Engels argues from a consequentialist perspective: whether a person is killed by a shotgun or by the deprivation of the basic necessities of life is irrelevant. Individual agency and legal responsibility are unsatisfactory criteria for determining the incidence of violence. If social relations have lethal consequences, then they should count as murder, irrespective of whether there is an identifiable individual human subject to whose intentional actions the violence can be causally attributed. Engels' point here is both analytical and normative: the outrage that is palpable in the passage quoted is a reaction not only to the conditions of the working class, but also to the lack of recognition. Calling these conditions *violence* is an attempt at scandalization, an effort to make them visible and recognizable within the socio-political grid.

Engels' appeal to a logic of equivalences—it does not matter whether someone is killed by a bullet or by poverty—is easily mistaken for a crude empiricism. Yet packed into the perhaps simplistic (but no less compelling) equivalence between

²⁰ Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, "Introduction: Making Sense of Violence," in Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (eds), *Violence in War and Peace* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 1.

²¹ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Vol. 4, Marx Engels Collected Works (New York: International Publishers, 1975), pp. 393–394, emphasis added. For the German original text, see *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England. Nach eigener Anschauung und authentischen Quellen*, Vol. 2, Marx Engels Werke (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1957), pp. 324–325.

victims of crime and victims of exploitation is, I think, a call for an expansive and non-subjective theory of violence, a theory that would be a substitute for the positivist view that recognizes violence only when there is a visible perpetrator who can be held responsible and to whom blame can be apportioned. By foregrounding forms of violence that go unnoticed and unrecognized, it expands the field of visibility and registers forms of invisible violence. In this passage, we encounter Engels as a reader of violence who reads to us (and who, as we will see, stumbles over his sentences in an effort to make the violence legible). Engels writes that this violence is unrecognized and invisible—"it does not seem what it is," because "no man sees the murderer" [*weil man den Mörder nicht sieht*]. The lack of an identifiable subject, the impossibility to attribute this *Gewalt* to a single agent (as required by positivist definitions of violence, such as the one offered by Tilly) constitutes a field of invisibility. But this field of invisibility is not simply an absence or a lack of visibility. In this field, the murder does not appear as murder because it seems "natural," because it is an offense of "omission" rather than of "commission."

The Condition of the Working Class in England provides a detailed ethnography of poverty and of the suffering to which the poor are exposed. As Engels points out, society *knows* about these conditions and is aware that they are harmful and destructive to the lives and health of the poor. The violence perpetrated against this population is therefore both known and invisible. The problem, as Louis Althusser would say, is not that society suffers from a weakness or lapse of vision that could be corrected.²² Society sees and knows these conditions and the harm they cause and yet does not see them, does not recognize them for what they are. This invisibility describes a failure to acknowledge that is occasioned not by an inadequate optics but by an indifference structurally bound up with the discursive limits of intelligibility. To see is to encounter objects in a field of visibility, a field that is constituted through a series of political, cultural, and scientific procedures that determine what objects and problems are intelligible. The invisible, then, is not just a generic oversight but marks that which is foreclosed.²³ If Althusser is right, then the social scientific debate over what counts as violence is not as innocuous as one may imagine but reflects and contributes to these norms of visibility and recognizability.

The invisibility of the murder is what introduces the difference between the fact of violence and its appearance or rather the lack of an appearance. "[N]o man sees the murderer" implies that in this scopic economy, there is no subject that can identify the murderer. Yet, at this crucial juncture, the English translation of Engels' text breaks down, highlighting the problem of finding a language in which to speak and write about non-subjective forms of violence. The German text does not mark the lack of a seeing subject but instead indicates a shared and non-subjective inability to see: *weil man den Mörder nicht sieht* [because one does not see the murderer]. The untranslated indefinite pronoun *man* provides this passage with a vivid figure of the non-subjective nature of such violence and the visual economy in which this violence goes unregistered. The subject of the clause refers not to any specific person but remains unspecified. The indefinite pronoun *man*

²² See Louis Althusser, "From 'Capital' to Marx's Philosophy," in Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar (eds), *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1997), p. 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

refers to indeterminate persons; it draws attention not only to the fact that the murderer is unseen, but that the (grammatical) subject of that failure to perceive is itself underdetermined.

The indeterminacy is prolonged by the tortuous grammar of the clause that follows, a phrase that goes untranslated in the English edition of the *Marx Engels Collected Works*: *weil alle und doch wieder niemand dieser Mörder ist* [because all and yet again no one, is this murderer]. Engels' premise here, that "all" are responsible for the poverty and inequality that leads to death seems wrong, because not everyone is equally entangled in the (re-)production of inequality. Indeed, the idea that everyone—and therefore no one—is at fault is not the *cause* but the *effect* of the murderer's invisibility. Yet irrespective of the flawed premise, the problem Engels points to—how to assign responsibility for this violence—is embedded in the very syntax of his sentence. The grammatical subject *alle und doch wieder niemand* requires an impossible verb agreement: *alle* is a plural indefinite pronoun, whereas *niemand* is a singular pronoun, yielding what rhetoricians call a "syllepsis," a trope in which a verb is incongruent with at least one of the subjects it governs. This linguistic dissonance translates a conceptual problem: the impossibility of assigning responsibility for this violence to a subject is registered in the sylleptic syntax.²⁴ The lack of agreement between verb and subject seems to undo the certainty of the predication, tearing apart the subjective grammar as if to highlight that this grammar cannot account for a violence that eludes the subject-verb-object matrix.²⁵

Engels reads a violence that society cannot read, that does not appear because it cannot appear under the discursive conditions that structure the field of appearance. To read this violence is not to draw open a theatrical curtain or a veil behind which violence is lurking. To read this violence is a hermeneutic operation that does not function according to the modality of a discovery; it does not reveal violence from behind a screen, because this violence is not present in the form of an act, because it does not call out from behind the veil and does not project itself onto a reader. To read this violence is to read something that is not present, something that cannot appear because it is foreclosed by the discursive injunction that requires every violence to be attached to a subject. But this violence has no author and no voice; its mark is a silence, or a "blank," as Althusser calls it, which leaves its traces in the texture of Engels' discourse.

Underneath its empiricist veneer, Engels' text, perhaps unwittingly, points to the norms of intelligibility that govern the appearance of objects and problems in public discourse, the norms that specify what bodily injuries and vulnerabilities

²⁴ That such a reading is not mere grammatical sophistry seems to be corroborated by Marx's own anxiety about the role and appearance of the grammatico-juridical subject of modernity. Indeed, as Marx emphasizes in *Capital*, "persons exist for one another merely as representatives" (pp. 178–179). As characters who appear on the economic stage, they "are merely personifications of economic relations" (p. 92). Qua *personifications*, then, persons cannot be understood as the (grammatical and juridical) subjects of violence but are mere carriers [*Träger*] of attributes; their properties are not predicates of subjects but are themselves effects of socio-economic relations. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, with an introduction by Ernest Mandel (London: Penguin, 1976).

²⁵ This is restating Nietzsche's point about the seduction of subjective grammar. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (Munich; Berlin: dtv/de Gruyter, 1988), p. 279.

are visible and intelligible as politically consequential. What Engels' text implies but does not say is that violence is always mediated by explicit or implicit cultural and political norms, by legal and moral norms of what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate force, by the distinction between kinds of injuries that are considered permissible and sanctioned and those that are not. At the same time as Engels' text calls for a theory of violence able to account for non-subjective violence, the passage highlights the difficulties of finding a language to describe and theorize such forms of violence. Such a language is invariably limited by the very laws of (English and German) grammar that require a complete sentence to contain a subject and a predicate. To account for such violence raises the question of how one accounts for silences and for violences that are not visible because they cannot be, which, paradoxically means not that they are hidden behind something but that they are invisible and yet at the same time in full view. This is the problem Engels presents but does not solve in *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*.

Visibility and Tragedy

If the task of a theory of violence is to account for modes of injury that do not meet the norms of recognizability because they are hidden from view *through* being openly visible, perhaps even hyper-visible, then Galtung's model of structural violence is only of limited value. Like Engels, Galtung presupposes that violence can be identified and diagnosed according to dichotomous categories of life/death, health/illness, prosperity/poverty, peace/violence. Like Engels, Galtung works with a *privative* notion of violence, in which violence consists of the deprivation or lack defined against a teleological norm of human potential. In Galtung's words,

Violence is that which increases the distance between the potential and the actual, and that which impedes the decrease of that distance. Thus, if a person died of tuberculosis in the eighteenth century it would be hard to conceive of this as violence since it might have been unavoidable, but if he dies from it today, despite all the medical resources in the world, then violence is present according to our definition.²⁶

The human potential, in other words, is defined in techno-scientific terms, as the state of the art of technological progress. This technological humanism is premised on both a normative vision of the human and the transcendence of the given. By defining violence as the "distance between the potential and the actual," Galtung determines violence as the failure to achieve the full human potential (in turn understood as a dynamic process of perfectibility). The demand that the actual be identical with the potential betrays a profoundly theological vision, one in which peace signifies human redemption and one in which there is little space for finitude. Is not the gap between the potential and the actual constitutive of a finite world? To the extent, then, that Galtung (and Engels) correlate the reduction of violence with the achievement of human potential, their theories of structural violence are embedded in an eschatological schema that conceives of

²⁶Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," p. 168.

peace and freedom as transcendence of finite limitations (and thus of historical contingency).

If we want to think about violence beyond the terms offered by the positivist paradigm and if we are simultaneously not satisfied with Galtung's or Engels' model of structural violence for the reasons outlined above, one possible supplement, which I would like to briefly sketch here, would be to rehabilitate an earlier meaning of the term "structural violence," a meaning that today has fallen in disuse. Before Galtung and the peace researchers at Oslo appropriated the term for the social sciences, the locution "structural violence" had been used by students of poetics to refer to the violence in Greek tragedy.²⁷ There, the structural component of violence lies not so much in its non-subjective and non-intentional dimension, as in the persistence and durability of violence that characterizes entire lineages, for instance the doomed house of Atreus, which from Tantalus through Niobe, Atreus, Agamemnon, and Clytemnestra to Orestes was cursed by murder, incest, cannibalism, and sacrilege. In the moral economy of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* or Euripides' *Orestes*, violence is not the product of a single perpetrator. Rather, it constitutes a shared curse that ties villains and avengers into a complex knot. There is a collusion of violence that implicates all sides and that is echoed in the shared fate of victor and vanquished, captor and captive.²⁸

What makes this violence structural is not that it is invisible but that it is inherited across generations. The violence is reproduced and contains a dynamic and fluid moment; it haunts the house of Atreus, lingering like a heavy fog over the tragic heroes. Perhaps it is only a coincidence that the term "structural violence" is common to the analysis of hidden violence in social relations and to the persistence of violence in tragedy. Yet even if that is so, it points to a productive polysemy: to say that a particular incidence of violence is structural can indicate both its non-subjective nature and its specific temporality—perseverance or recurrence—which mythology typically represents in the figure of a curse. To speak of a curse is of course to appeal to a mystification, but we might perhaps understand the curse as a figure that stands for the necessity of theorizing violence in terms that are neither positivist nor privative.

In contrast to the peace research approaches, which tend to highlight the distinction between agents and structures, the idea of a violence that lingers shies away from the structure-agency dichotomy and emphasizes instead different temporalities, spaces, and dynamics of violence. I am not suggesting that we must choose between describing structural violence either in terms of invisibility (Galtung's model) or inheritance (the tragic model). On the contrary: as the epigraph by Kristeva attests, it may be precisely by rendering itself invisible that violence is inherited across generations. If Kristeva is right that unrecognizability allows violence to be inherited across generations, then the two views of structural violence are in fact interlocked. And yet, while the link between (un)recognizability and reproduction strikes me as significant, I am not entirely convinced by the claim that for violence to be reproduced, it has

²⁷See, for instance, W. Arrowsmith, "Introduction to Orestes," in D. Grene and R. Lattimore (eds), *Euripides IV: Four Tragedies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 106.

²⁸Peter J. Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 68.

to be hidden and concealed. Indeed, I wonder whether that claim rests on a mistaken view of the public sphere, a view that assumes that making evil visible will necessarily lead to its eventual eradication. It seems to me that the inverse is at least as plausible, viz. that it is not invisibility that allows violence to be repeated and reproduced but that repetition and reproduction make violence invisible.

I have argued that we need the term “structural violence,” despite its problems and insufficiencies, to designate forms of injury inflicted in ways that do not meet the criteria of the spectacle and that therefore do not register as violence. Moreover, what makes such injuries structural is not simply that they do not obey the juridical grammar, according to which responsibility must be assigned to an individual agent. In addition, such violence is structural because of its recurrent and iterative temporality, the fact that it is reproduced—differentially of course—and that this reproduction and reproducibility are not just contingent but constitutive aspects of contemporary economies of violence.

What’s Wrong with Neoliberalism?

Thomas Biebricher
Goethe-Universität, Germany

Eric Vance Johnson
University of Florida, USA

With economic theory front and center in current debates over the role of government, neoliberalism remains the concept with the most diagnostic potency for describing our contemporary political-economic world. And while many commentators asserted that the 2008 crisis of finance capitalism and its accompanying economic disaster would undermine neoliberalism’s promise, for the time being policies of crisis management of governments and central banks have ostensibly mitigated the damage. Neoliberalism remains unchallenged as the pre-eminent economic regime and, despite rampant social inequality, it appears to be here to stay.

While providing an unequivocal definition is difficult, we agree with a number of others that, despite a certain degree of heterogeneity within neoliberalism and the somewhat blurry lines separating it from classical (economic) liberalism or (neo-)conservatism, neoliberalism can be conceptualized in an abstract though meaningful way.²⁹ For our purposes, *neoliberalism refers to a body of ideas and practices that emphasize individual responsibility and freedom (to choose); supports*

²⁹ See Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, “Neoliberalizing Space,” *Antipode* 34:3 (2002), pp. 380–404; Bruno Amable, “Morals and Politics in the Ideology of Neo-Liberalism,” *Socio-Economic Review* 8 (2010), pp. 1–28; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–79* (New York: Palgrave, 2008); Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare. Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization,” *Political Theory* 34 (2006), pp. 690–714.