The state and the people, symbolic violence and physical violence

The conversation between Fanon and Bourdieu raises questions of violence and colonialism, and the relation between them. Despite the insight and sympathy with which Bourdieu grasped the realities of colonial domination and resistance in Nigeria, these were not the insights he was to take back to France and use in the elaboration of his theory of social order. Rather, what he took back to France to elaborate into a suite of theoretical innovations for understanding society were the insights he drew from his study of rural indigenous society. In consequence, his work has very little to say about social change, transformation, resistance, revolution, beyond those occasional and suggestive passages we noted in Reflection 2, frequently marked by references to Algeria or colonisation more broadly. On the face of it, therefore, Bourdieu should have little to say to South African social reality.

But the division between Fanon and Bourdieu -- real violence in the colony, symbolic violence in the metropolis; revolution in the colony, invisible and unchallengeable domination in the metropolis -- may be too stark. The relationship between symbolic violence and physical violence is much closer than such dichotomies make them appear. And as with symbolic violence, the relationship between the state, the law and popular violence in communities is a complex and reciprocal one.

This reflection precedes through a discussion of seven propositions regarding physical violence, drawn from ongoing research into the dynamics of social change in South Africa.

Collective violence on the part of subalterns is frequently a response to the symbolic violence that works to silence them.

Fanon certainly thought so: one reason why subaltern violence was necessary was that it was the only way to break the internal chains of oppression. South Africa's Steve Biko, and other intellectuals of the Black consciousness movement, also argued that the first necessity in the struggle for freedom was that blacks should overcome the internal complex of inferiority fostered by white racism. The symbolic violence of racism, in other words, has enormous force in the colonies. It has been argued by some that popular violence in South Africa, particularly ethnic and xenophobic violence, has roots in the self-denigration fostered by the symbolic violence of racism.

Physical violence always has a symbolic dimension.

As Bourdieu remarks, even naked force " has a symbolic dimension" (2000:172). When police gather in force to stop a demonstration, and shoot protesters with rubber bullets, they are not only attempting to control 'rioters', they are asserting the symbolic authority of the state to deploy violence in maintaining 'order'. In South Africa, however, this kind of symbolic display is apt to ring with undertones that subvert its official meaning. For

the crowds of community protesters, police action of this sort conjures up a different symbolic universe, undermining the authority of the state: the casspirs[1] "remind us of apartheid, that we are not free in this democracy. We don't need casspirs. We need police that respect human rights." (Langa 2010)

For their part, when protesters burn down municipal buildings they are challenging the symbolic authority of the state with a symbolic power of their own, as we saw in Reflection 3. During the struggle against apartheid, burning collaborators to death with the dreaded 'necklace' -- a tyre drenched in petrol -- was a way of purifying the community. In post-apartheid South Africa, vigilante crowds kill and sometimes burning criminals to death because of ineffectual policing, and xenophobic crowds on occasion kill and burn foreigners, drawing on a similar symbolic repertoire.

Building on this, we see that subaltern violence is embedded in its own structures of symbolic meaning which shape its rules and repertoires. This is signalled by a woman worker, discussing strike violence:

> There's no sweet strike, there is no Christian strike.... a strike is a strike. You want to get back what belongs to you. You want the response must be positive and quick. You won't win a strike with a Bible. You do not wear high heels and carry an umbrella and say 1992 it was under apartheid, 2007 is under ANC. You won't win a strike like that. (Von Holdt 2010b)

The contrast drawn by the striker between Christian behaviour and strike behaviour signals a shift in moral register: a strike has its own moral codes distinct from those of Christianity. And a community protestor uses almost exactly the same words to describe protest action against dirty municipal water supplies, suggesting that they resonate with a common sense of popular justice shared among diverse subaltern groups:

> I am a Christian, but when the strikes[2] start you put the Bible down and then you fight. It is necessary to use force. The water is clean now because of the strike.

Subaltern violence is ambiguous, with both emancipatory and corrosive dimensions.

Deployed against unjust authority subaltern violence disrupts the symbolic order which elevates such authority above the people, and not infrequently it delivers concrete results – clean water, higher wages. Violence,it is clear from our respondents, and as Fanon argues, constitutes an assertion of popular agency and a celebration of popular power. Yet it has its dark side, to which Fanon pays too little attention. Frequently its victims are other subalterns, and it exacts a terrible trauma on their lives. The xenophobic attacks provide an awful illustration of this.

Moreover, repertoires of violence expand and become embedded in organizational practices. Violence corrodes democracy, both within organizations where disputes or

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[1] Armoured police vehicles.
[2] The word 'strike' is used to describe not only industrial action, but forceful community protest.

factional struggles are settled through violence (see the discussion under *'Democracy and violence both ways to structure power'* for an example of this), and in the broader body politic, where violence becomes an alternative to the democratic act of voting: "Violence is the only language that our government understands… we became violent and problems were immediately resolved. It is clear that violence is a solution to all problems." (Langa, Dlamini and von Holdt 2010)

A brief vignette of the death of one of our respondents illustrates the complex way cycles of violence reproduce themselves over time. During the 1980s Mr T had participated in battles between local self defence units and vigilante gangs sponsored by the apartheid security apparatus, in which several people had been killed. At the time our research team met him, Mr T was a taxi owner and chairman of the local taxi association. The taxi association had been racked by internal conflict which had recently turned violent, again with deadly consequences.

The current community protests against the town council in his community were violent, and this man formed part of a delegation of elders who went to the ANC head office to request an urgent response to resolve the conflict. He was, he told our researchers, motivated by the desire for peace, fearing that the protests would reignite the taxi war. He spoke about the importance of exploring non-violent methods in dealing with community problems, so that the mistakes of the past in which people start killing each other, were not repeated. He also mentioned that since being elected chairperson of the taxi association there had been three attempts to kill him.

A few days later Mr T was gunned down and died on the scene. Mr T's life and death had paradoxical meanings in the community. At his funeral gunshots were fired in the air, celebrating a fallen hero and soldier. Mourners sang revolutionary songs referring to the activities of the self defence units. He was spoken of as a hero, and also as a man who had brought peace to the community. "We have peace in our time because of Mr T," said one speaker.

Violence, democracy and peace are entwined in perplexing and complex ways in societies such as ours, characterised by a legacy of colonialism and the turbulence of complex transition. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, and its relation to the broader symbolic order, provides rich insights; however, it needs to be expanded and brought into relationship with structural violence and physical violence if it is to help us make sense of this social reality.

Democracy and violence are both ways to structure power

Democracy and violence have a complex and shifting relationship with each other.

The crucial element in the popular resistance to apartheid was the building of popular democratic organisations, such as trade unions and residents associations. This was an innovation, the possibility of which was considered by neither Fanon nor Bourdieu in their analysis of the Algerian revolution, and it constituted a very different form of

empowerment on the part of the colonised than the strategies of violence advocated by Fanon. Indeed, it provided a durable structure of empowerment through which subalterns could challenge not only the apartheid regime but also their own leaders over questions of strategy and tactics, and it would be sustained into the post-apartheid period.

While popular democratic organisation enabled workers and residents to negotiate with the authorities, it did not eliminate violence; indeed, the context for building such organisation was an intrinsically violent one, characterised by street battles, the destruction of property, massacres, assault and detentions, judicial repression and guerrilla operations. Under such conditions, democratic organisation entailed also a coercive element. My research into the internal dynamics of trade union organisation during the 1980s at Highveld Steel provided insight into the relationship between democracy, coercive violence and power.

As union militancy at Highveld steel increased, the shop steward committee, directly elected by members in each department of the steelworks, designated a number of militant and active members who were not shop stewards to form a 'strike committee', with the informal understanding that this would mobilise workers, identify strikebreakers, and apply 'punishment' to the latter, usually in the form of beatings with a sjambok. This was understood as a way of teaching and enforcing the 'union law' regarding solidarity. Though the shop stewards expected the strike committee to be subordinate to its overall direction, a struggle for power rapidly developed between the two committees, as the strike committee came to believe that the compromises entailed by negotiating with management were a sign that shop stewards were 'selling out'. Violence escalated, strikes were accompanied by more and more widespread and serious assaults, and eventually the union split into two.

Underlying this split was the way internal organisational democracy and the complex procedures governing relations between the union and management empowered workers differentially: the more articulate, educated and skilled residents of the township proved to be highly effective shop stewards, in contrast to the illiterate and less educated rural migrant workers in the hostels, and so it was the former who tended to be elected and re-elected. This led to bitterness among the hostel-dwellers, particularly as the union had initially been established by them.

Democracy disempowered them. The violence of the strike committee was a way of taking the union back. For the strike committee and its constituents, it was the sjambok that had built the union. For the shop stewards and their constituencies, it was democracy that had built the union and the sjambok that was destroying it. Both sides mobilised symbolic power in the struggle over the meaning, practices and leadership of the organisation. When the union split, it was into 'the union of the hostels' and 'the union of the township'. Although the two were eventually reunited in the union, deep fissures, buttressed by memories of violence, continued to surface at times of stress. (Von Holdt 2003:147ff)

As this study showed, democracy does not do away with all violence: every democracy has its 'law', and every law has its coercive dimension. Furthermore democracy, even within subaltern organisations, does not empower everyone equally, but itself constitutes a structure of differential power. For those who are marginalised and disempowered, violence provides an alternative strategy for reconfiguring the structures of power. However, violence also proves to be profoundly corrosive within subaltern organisation, undermining democracy, producing a climate of fear and the withdrawal of members, division and splits. Violent repertoires have a long life, reproducing themselves within organisational structures and cultures, where they are always available as a resource in future conflict. Democratic leadership stands revealed as an extremely complex and demanding practice.

These dynamics, explored in a small case study of democracy from below, are repeated within large-scale democratic political systems, such as South Africa's after apartheid. Strike violence, for example, persists. Partly this is an enduring repertoire from the anti-apartheid period: as one worker put it,

> Since I was born, I have seen all strikes of violent. There are no such strikes as peaceful strikes.

Partly though, there is a deep sense that South African democracy masks great inequalities, and that the promises of liberation have not been experienced by workers. (Von Holdt 2010 b) Workers, in other words, are acutely aware of the structural violence which continues to oppress them; this brings us to the next proposition.

Symbolic violence also is interconnected with structural violence.

A national Constitution, according to Bourdieu, "is merely a founding fiction designed to disguise the act of lawless violence which is the basis for the establishment of law." Symbolic violence thus originates with a process of usurpation, "the inaugural violence" in which the law is rooted (2000:168). This inaugural violence would include what Marx called primitive accumulation in the advanced capitalist countries, as well as the wars and 'pacification'of the populace entailed in the formation of nation states. In the colonies, colonial conquest and land dispossession constitute a crucial dimensions of the "inaugural violence"; in South Africa that violent process of land dispossession continues to underpin the new post-apartheid constitution, often lauded as one of the most progressive constitutions in the world.

But Bourdieu's almost exclusive focus on domination and symbolic violence within the elite, such as takes place within the scholarly, bureaucratic and cultural fields, provides him with a curiously bloodless sense of symbolic violence; it is only when he turns to discuss briefly the symbolic violence experienced by workers in the workplace, that he finds it to be based on "structural violence" derived from the fear of redundancy. The symbolic violence experienced by subalterns, then, is bound up with the structural violence -- a concept pretty much unexplored by Bourdieu -- of their location in society, unlike the symbolic violence experienced in elite fields. The domination experienced by

a junior academic in the scholarly field is very different from the domination experienced by a mineworker, or by the residents of an informal settlements such as Orange Farm.

'Popular justice' may displace the state's monopoly over violence

In South Africa the post-apartheid state does not have a monopoly over either symbolic violence or physical violence. Research into popular crime-fighting initiatives, xenophobic violence, and strike violence, reveals the tension between subaltern organisation and the state over the deployment of coercion and the law, which is simultaneously a contestation over physical violence and symbolic violence.

In a place called Trouble, an area of RDP houses and shacks in Gauteng, the local Community Policing Forum attempts to support policing and reduce criminal activities. The grassroots volunteers in the CPF, though, find themselves squeezed between the violence of criminals, community vigilantism, and lacklustre and sometimes corrupt local police. A young woman street patroller in the shack section of Trouble told us that people are scared to talk about crime because of the danger of retaliation by the criminals. As an example she told us about a rapist who had been apprehended by her street patrollers, and who was now sending messages from his jail cell, where he was awaiting trial:

> 'Tell that girl and her group that I will be out very soon and I will deal with her.' So somewhere, somehow, you feel what is the use of patrolling? I do not have any protection.

As a result, the membership of the CPF is dwindling. She commented bitterly about corruption in the criminal justice system:

> I would like to put a big no, the law doesn't exist, the law doesn't work for us. As long as you have money, you can live the way you want in this country of ours. You rape a kid, you have money, you don't even go to court, you are out. I am talking from what I have seen. As long as you have money, then you are free man.

Because of this fear and ineffectual police presence, there has been a rise in community vigilantism:

> What they do is they catch a criminal, they won't come to me, they will whistle their whistle and the community gets up and the next thing you go there, the guy is already beaten up. The community does not care as long as he is dead, a criminal is a criminal. You steal other people's things, you deserve to die, they do not give a damn.

CPF members try to prevent mob justice, believing that it is the state's role to enforce the law, but they sometimes have to withdraw because of the danger to themselves.

Such interviews make it clear that there is an argument deep within communities over legality and community enforcement of codes of behaviour, over the state and extra-state

action. The same argument was apparent in Trouble during an outbreak of xenophobic conflict. Foreign nationals had used guns to repel an attack by South African residents, and there was a strong argument from some quarters in the community that residents should arm themselves and retaliate. The CPF and the local ANC branch combined forces to persuade the community not to pursue such a course of action. An ANC office bearer explained that, 'As the people we cannot take our own decision, but the government will come.… We cannot just take the law into our own hands whilst the government is there.' The chairperson of the CPF explained: 'it is part of law enforcement to prevent crime and prevent violence… It is in the nature of the CPF to be against violence, and to stop wrong things.'

This episode reveals a contestation deep within the community over the meaning of the state and violence. In this case organisations such as the ANC branch and the CPF engage in formative efforts to defend the legitimacy of the state and its monopoly over coercion and law enforcement against informal groups who advocate taking the law into their own hands.[3] The success of these organisations in this particular case may be related to the fact that foreign nationals were well armed and clearly capable of deploying their own extra-state violence. It is not impossible, though, that the argument will swing the other way in the light of the failure of the police to protect the community from violent crime more generally, or to make any effort to seize the weapons of the foreigners as they had promised. Where the state fails to demonstrate its monopoly over coercion, popular justice is likely to fill the vacuum.

Apartheid and the struggle against it undermined the legitimacy of the state and its laws. The new democratic state has not been able to securely re-establish the legitimacy of the law, with the result that the law tends to receive a qualified and provisional acceptance in many quarters; consider the comments of a striker, explaining why the law of the majority (' the law of the union') requires breaking the law of the state:

> I do not think the law is wrong as such. Law is supposed to defend the right to strike and the rights of those not on strike. But how can we follow that law? How are we going to be successful in winning our demands? *Umthetho oyaphulowa, oyenzelwe oko phulwa.*[4] We must follow the majority. The majority vote for a strike. (Von Holdt 2010)

Seldom, if ever, are violent strikers brought before a court of law. In practice, then, the law of the state has less force than the law of the strike, and the symbolic power of the state is further eroded.

Social order is jointly constructed by state and citizens

The discussion under the previous proposition illustrated a profound argument and contestation within communities which suggests that the authority of the law and the state

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[3] In other sites of our research, both the local ANC branch and organisations such as civic associations and CPFs adopted a very different stance, either supporting or turning a blind eye to xenophobic attacks.
[4] 'the law is made to be broken'.

are not simply imposed from above on the citizenry, but are actively constituted by citizens, indicating that there is a substantial constituency which supports such a project, against both the criminal erosion of law and order as well as the protagonists of vigilanteeism and 'popular justice'.

In exploring this proposition, we turn to a case study (Langa and Von Holdt 2011) of the community of Bokfontein, near Brits, where an innovative state intervention to establish a community-shaped public work programme, and the way in which this has empowered the community to bring an end to intra-community violence as well as resist calls for xenophobic pogroms. Bokfontein is the product of the removals of two separate communities from land earmarked for development by private and public developers, and consists of some 5000 residents living in shacks at a site far from towns and work opportunities, and with no public amenities. The people who live there were traumatised, angry and bitter, and the result was violent and deadly conflict between the two communities.

The Community Work Programme (CWP) is a public employment program which offers participants two days of work per week, at a minimum of R 60 per day, for as long as they wish to remain on the program. The community decides what is socially useful work is to be performed, and the work is organised by work teams and a project leadership selected from the community. In Bokfontein, the CWP project include the building of an access road, planting trees throughout the community, drilling a borehole and installing water piping, establishing a community park and vegetable gardens, the produce of which is used to cook daily meals for the children of vulnerable families, and home-based care programs for vulnerable households, including the chronically ill and AIDS sufferers. The CWP program, which employs about 800 participants from the community, has not only improved household incomes, but also allow the community to reimagine itself as a place with public amenities, public goods and public spaces, and as a caring community which assists the vulnerable and values socially useful labour.

Not only that, but the CWP program, and the community building process that preceded it, enabled participants to confront their trauma and the intra-community violence, and establish a new sense of solidarity:

> It helped us deal with the pain of our eviction and also the lines that were dividing us as communities.

> It made it possible for us to know each other. And it brought us together to accept each other as human beings.

The community building process also enabled foreign nationals, of whom many live in Bokfontein, and South African citizens to discuss discrimination and violence, and to explicitly understand more about each other's histories and cultures. When a nearby community attempted to mobilise Bokfontein residents in xenophobic pogroms, the community as a whole resisted this. The community leadership also explicitly reject strategies of protest and toyi-toying, in favour of negotiating with authorities and

business, and forging their own community development strategies: 'So when we toyi-toyi we become violent. What are we teaching our children? Are we not teaching them to also be violent?' (Malosi & Von Holdt 2011)

In Bokfontein an innovative state intervention has empowered the community to reimagine itself and its future, in a collaboration which has created the elements of a new symbolic order in the community, one which both restores the authority of the state and the law and sustains an active and confident citizenry in a partnership oriented towards development and the future. Here we can see the constituency identified in Trouble, which seeks a new kind of state authority and a peaceful and violence-free community, coming into a power which has both symbolic and material dimensions.[5]

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[5] CWP has already been rolled out into some 70 communities nationally, with a total of 90,000 people employed, and is sparking a discussion about a national employment guarantee.