

## Gentle violence, brutal violence and the struggle to empower women

Both Beauvoir and Bourdieu investigate the invisible domination of woman in a modern western society, France, where modernity is layered with older orders of patriarchy going back to feudalism and before. Gender domination has been distilled over centuries and becomes for Bourdieu the prime instance of symbolic violence, which is 'a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition'. As Beauvoir puts it, this is an oppression where the oppressed 'has no grasp even in thought, on the reality around her. It is opaque to her eyes.'

What would Beauvoir or Bourdieu make of gender domination in South Africa, where 'gentle' and 'invisible' symbolic violence is joined by what can only be described as a campaign of private, explicit and atrocious physical violence against women? What would they make of the glaring disjunction between the new symbolic order arising out of the transition to democracy, which sets out explicitly to defend women against discrimination and empower them in all spheres -- public and private -- through policies, legislation and state institutions, and the competing symbolic orders which gain from society the vitality with which they continue to subjugate women?

These extraordinary disjunctions and juxtapositions between old and new, stasis and change, legislation and implementation, formal and informal, official rhetoric and daily practice, and between fractured and competing moralities, and all the contradictions, hypocrisies, clashes, enmities, alliances, polemics and fluctuations of mood -- hope, anger, despair, triumph, cynicism, mirth -- that accompany them, are precisely what characterise our society, providing formidable challenges to any attempt at Bourdieusian analysis of social order.

The rape trial of Jacob Zuma, at the time deputy president of the ANC, epitomised in the most public way possible the competing moralities and notions of patriarchal order in South Africa. Zuma's defence rested on a performance of himself as a traditional Zulu man deeply embedded in cultural notions of sexuality -- themselves publicly contested. Outside the court he danced and sang his trademark machine gun song before crowds of supporters, who threatened violence against the complainant. On the other side of the road, a coalition of gender activists and feminists demonstrated their support for the complainant. Inside the court, the judge dismissed all progressive arguments, criticised the women's organisations for challenging the 'conservative legal traditions of criminal law' while remaining silent about the conduct of the defendant's supporters outside the court, and brought all the most conservative assumptions of legal tradition regarding the complainant's testimony in rape trials to bear on his decisions. (Vetten 2007) Zuma was acquitted and went on to become president of the ANC and the country, and the complainant went into exile.

Much could be said about the significance of this moment for gender domination in South Africa. As Vetten remarks, two weighty traditions, that of Roman-Dutch law and that of

(ostensible) Zulu culture, found common cause in their defence of patriarchy (which is not to say that, even had the court been less biased, Zuma would have been found guilty). But three points are salient in relation to Bourdieu: it cannot be said that resistance to gender domination is unthinkable, nor can it be said that domination and resistance are invisible; and the symbolism of direct physical violence (machine guns, the burning of a picture of the complainant, threats of violence) is intimately tangled with the invisible dimension of symbolic violence.

White patriarchy overlaps in many ways with black patriarchy, but it also has its own symbolic universe, related to ideas about the conquest of Africa, the significance of the farm, 'swart gevaar' and anxieties about democracy and crime. Guns are central to this symbolic order, as an Afrikaner MP explained in an unpublished interview:

That whole tradition and psyche and culture of 'I own a weapon. I am a man because I've got a weapon' – that was part of our culture, that was the way we grew up. I think about the days when I walked with a pellet gun, with my friends, sometimes we just shot at rocks, but I was, I was *armed*...

The vast majority of legally owned firearms belong to whites. The symbolic meaning of the gun is closely associated with white masculinity, as many submissions to Parliament opposing The Firearms Control Bill made clear. 'My family sleep safe at night, secure in the knowledge that I will stand up for them,' read one (Kirsten 2008:138). It is not surprising that in the symbolic contestation over gun control legislation, Gun Free South Africa activists were subject to aggressively obscene phone calls by anonymous callers who made hostile comments about women, as well as about blacks, Jews and Muslims. But guns do not only constitute a form of symbolic violence – they also kill. South Africa has one of the highest rates of intimate femicides in the world, and many are killed with legally owned firearms. (Kirsten 2008: 8-9)

The relationship between symbolic violence and physical violence is a complex one. Some forms of symbolic violence legitimate specific repertoires of physical violence against the dominated, in which case the physical violence is girded around with tacit and explicit codes which regulate the occasions, kinds and limits of the physical violence which may be used. Part of the power of symbolic violence in this case is that it leads the dominated to accept that she deserves the 'punishment' directed against her.

In other cases, physical violence may be a response to an erosion of the efficacy of symbolic violence, or a breakdown of hegemonic masculinity; physical violence then may be a strategy for restoring patriarchy, or establishing the terms of a new form of patriarchy. Here the workings of the symbolic order may be more ambiguous -- it may have sufficient symbolic force to persuade the victim that she deserves punishment, or, on the contrary, it may fracture further if the physical 'punishment' is seen to transgress the codes enshrined in the symbolic order -- which is, after all, a kind of tacitly understood compact between men and women -- and becomes thereby an injustice.

Much of the violence against women in South Africa today is a response to the breakdown or erosion of older symbolic orders of patriarchy in both black and white communities, and an attempt to restore them, or reconstitute male domination in a different way, through the use of force. The older orders of patriarchy are challenged and destabilised by the anti-discriminatory provisions of the Constitution as well as a range of policies and pieces of legislation introduced by the ANC -- from the Employment Equity Act and the Domestic Violence Act to the quotas to increase the numbers of women holding political office.

But patriarchy was already being eroded by economic and social shifts in society, such as the growing number of unemployed men, increasing employment of women, and the breakdown of traditional households with a growing number of women-headed households. Male 'breadwinners' who cannot bring home the bread, young men who cannot sustain their masculinity because they lack an income and cannot lobola, a growing number of women in positions of political and economic power, and the growing number of independent women who prefer to make their way outside of a relationship with a dominant male, make for an explosive social mix under the sign of a destabilised symbolic order. Gender violence is one response.

Many of these factors are visible in our research into community protests and local politics. Generally, politics and power are highly sexualised in local municipalities, and women are important symbols of male power, as Beauvoir intimates. Thus, many stories and rumours circulate in political circles as well as in the community more generally about the sexual liaisons of key political figures. Men with power in the ANC, the town council or the municipal administration are said to have numerous mistresses and to have fathered numerous children with them. Mistresses and girlfriends are given jobs in the administration or, if already employed, are readily promoted, according to these stories. In the symbolic order crystallising around the new elite, politics and power are highly sexualised, and sexual liaisons with mistresses and girlfriends signal status. (Langa et al 2010)

For women in the elite, however, the symbolic terms are reversed. Here the rumours are about the powerful man with whom the woman is involved in a sexual liaison, and her access to power is explained by his patronage. So, the woman mayor in one of the towns we studied was said to have got her position only because she was having an affair with a provincial MEC who 'forced her down the throat of the community'. In this way, the leadership of women who are appointed because of the ANC's official policy of increasing the number of women in political office is subverted by rumours that they owe their positions to their sexual subjugation to powerful men (Langa et al 2010). This goes along with the sense, articulated by these women, that they are generally disempowered and disregarded within ANC structures.

For young men who have little prospect of work or income, as for women in the elite, the symbolic terms of male power are reversed. To have a girlfriend, a young man needs money. Even more seriously, a young man without money cannot pay lobola to the parents of the woman he hopes to marry, and so is unable to start a family. Young

unemployed men in our research sites constantly compared themselves to men in the elite, expressing envy, anger and powerlessness, and criticising women for their materialism and a willingness to trade jobs for sex:

I hate that M-- guy [a councillor], he took my girlfriend. He has money and I don't have money. You can't find a girlfriend if you don't have money.

In contrast to those who display their status, wealth and power through mistresses and girlfriends, these young men are excluded from expressing their masculinity. Violent protest provides an alternative avenue for asserting their masculinity, whether in street battles with the police, or in demanding and bringing about the downfall of a councillor or mayor. In two of our research towns, the mayors who were under attack by the protest movements were women. Some of the young male protesters, their masculinity deeply troubled and insecure, were adamant that they would not be ruled by a woman, because woman made poor leaders, being incapable and 'stubborn'. (Langa et al 2010; Dlamini 2010; Von Holdt 2010)

This instability in, or destabilisation of, the symbolic order that gives meaning to patriarchy generates multiple fissure-lines through which violence may erupt. Such violence has a complex relationship with symbolic violence, as new symbolic orders are elaborated or resisted. Thus the young male protesters who told us that young women like to be beaten, so they can display the marks of assault as a sign of how much their men love them. If young women do indeed react like this, then they are subject to a symbolic violence which predisposes them to accept, and indeed, treasure, the physical violence of their men against them. This may, on the other hand, be a fantasy of power on the part of disempowered young men -- a symbolic violence they wish to exist, but doesn't, and nonetheless may predispose them to behaving violently. Young men who gang-rape lesbians, who also have benefited from the expansion of anti-discriminatory legislation and litigation, in an effort to 'discipline' them are no doubt also resorting to violence in an attempt to shore up patriarchy and fragile masculinity.

What we have in South Africa, then, is a picture of patriarchal symbolic order destabilised, and contending projects to reconstitute symbolic order. This applies as much to patriarchy as it does to class and racial hierarchies, and indeed the destabilisation of one has repercussions in the others, since different hierarchies in society do not exist in parallel, but mesh with each other, each hierarchy modifying or reinforcing the others. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic order and the symbolic violence it perpetrates provides powerful analytical tools for understanding society, but only if we push it to expand and take in the possibilities for destabilising and contesting symbolic order, and if we explore a much closer relationship between the gentle violence of symbolic domination and the brutality of direct physical violence.

Moreover, the South African case demonstrates that symbolic violence can be rendered visible and challenged. The numerous women's organisations and movements which have championed women's rights and contributed to progressive legislation and policies, and the difficult battles they take on in their communities, are evidence of this. Even

when the impact is limited, new rhetoric and new formal rights bolster discourses through which oppressed women may see their world afresh, its opacity becoming transparent, and find ways to challenge their domination. Indeed, in the same focus group described above, a feisty young woman drew on such discourses to challenge the men's views, and made it clear that she would never tolerate such abuse.

It may indeed be that stripping away or rooting out one layer of symbolic violence simply reveals other, deeper and more intractable layers. But that is no reason to abandon the idea of freedom which is enshrined in our Constitution and in much of the legislation enacted by the post-apartheid democratic parliament.