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Democracy, Violence and Emancipatory Movements: Notes for a Theory of Inversionary Discourse

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Preface

In 1990 the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development initiated a research project on Political Violence and Social Movements, which has sought to understand the problem of political violence with reference to a new framework of analysis which treats violence as a kind of discourse of power with its own dynamic. As such, the phenomenon of political violence has been probed from an "interior" as well as an exterior perspective. An attempt has been made to apply this theoretical framework to eight movements which, though widely divergent in their ideology and objectives, have used political violence at some stage as a core element of their overall struggle. The case studies analyse the use of violence in Colombia, Italy, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Peru, South Africa, Spain and Sri Lanka. The studies have now been completed and are to be published in a volume edited by David Apter and Bruce Kapferer. The project has been co-ordinated by David Apter, Henry J. Heinz II Professor of Comparative Political and Social Development at Yale University.

This paper represents an attempt to apply "discourse" theory to violence-prone inversionary and emancipatory movements, most particularly as these relate to democracy. The starting point of the analysis is the generation of certain "contradictions" by the development process. These include polarization between functional élites and the functionally superfluous. The former, by generating new capital-intensive production techniques, contribute to the marginalization of those who, as a consequence, become functionally superfluous. Those so marginalized in economic terms are also likely to be marginalized in other ways and to develop over time attributes defined negatively by the rest of society including criteria of ethnicity, religion, language, race, and other cultural characteristics.

This structural-development process poses political dilemmas of both a moral and political nature. The moral problem is over what principles to apply in order to remove this contradiction. The political problem is that even if one knew what principles ought to be adopted, how in fact they could be rendered as practice, especially in democracies, is unclear. For one of the paradoxes of modern democracy is that those with the greatest need get the least attention. The analysis suggests why it is that political systems are at best "sticky" in their responsiveness and why, from an institutional point of view, it is so difficult to effect policy changes by means of the normal coalitional and bargaining politics essential to what might be called a "choice model". In this sense, and from the point of view of institutional politics, marginality produces political "invisibility".

Political movements seeking to realize alternative policies according to rectifying principles lack the power to effect change in the political system. Hence, they tend not only to use violent methods, but to combine violence with the creation of discourse such that it (i) generates symbolic capital in the absence of economic capital, and (ii) produces discourse communities which come to represent, at least in their own eyes, "chosen people". The basis of such discourse and the process by which it occurs is explored in this analysis in some depth, involving as it does the translation of defining events – which people experience individually – into collectivized and shared attributes which come to constitute a "fund" of power on which people can draw. The process by which this occurs involves retrievals of the past, the generation of political memory, and logical projections. It creates discourse communities out of violence itself. As such, discourse communities generate their own interior moral principles, languages of power, and their own objects. As this occurs, it becomes more and more difficult to deal with them in mediating terms. Hence, when violence does break out, it is difficult to bring to an end. Indeed, as the analysis in this paper seeks to show, in such communities violence creates its own objects.

Most emancipatory and transformational discourses attack democratic institutions not only because of their lack of responsiveness, but in principle, i.e., as a model system of choices based on market principles in both the political and the economic spheres. They seek to

replace models of social life based on ideas of "order" as well as democratic ideas of "choice" with an "inversionary discourse" model. In terms of democracy such inversionary discourse, when combined with violence, both threatens the status quo by challenging institutions and ideas and engenders changes in the prevailing scope and meaning of equity. In so far as they are able to generate symbolic capital, such movements use moral principles to realize some degree of gain in economic and political terms, including compensatory access – economic, social and institutional – for marginals. By stimulating concrete political struggle, inversionary discourses and the movements they represent intensify the depth and magnify the power of public discourse. In these terms, political violence has historically been associated with the evolution of democracy itself. By the same token, the incorporation of changes enables democracies to strengthen themselves. In this sense, and despite the dangers involved, as so constituted democracy is both an open-ended process and an institutional "solution" to any particular movement using political violence.

May 1993

Dharam Ghai
Director

1. Contextualizing Violence

Our aim in the following paper is to formulate some observations about political violence and democracy in terms of discourse theory. Such theory is preferred to more conventional modes of analysis such as rational choice or group interest politics, relevant though they might be, in order to "read" violence through events in a fashion relevant to an understanding of how democracy evolves.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the theory itself is in relation to the Sendero Luminoso in Peru.[1] In his essay, Degregori shows how a Maoist mytho-logics uses sacral texts to define a logic of revolutionary praxis. By means of exegetical bonding, violent events are retrieved, interpreted, and projected in the form of millennial solutions. Put together by the ideologues of the movement, violence is endowed with special symbolic referents, and a local pedigree enlarged to include a putative Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong Thought. As Degregori suggests, the Sendero Luminoso portrays itself as the last and most pure radical redeeming movement. All others have failed or betrayed the cause. Emphasized are themes such as violation and betrayal which not only define inequities but establish an agenda of violence in the form of a projective or "overcoming project".

The case is also an example of how an inversionary discourse model creates symbolic capital out of violent events, how an internal language is formed, with its own codes, around which a discourse community is organized, while its networks define functions in terms of violent activities. It suggests how difficult it is to negotiate a solution, and also how and when, if a cosmocratic leader like Guzman is captured, the movement will begin to dissolve.

Other cases of violent movements shade off from this extreme example of inversionary discourse. The Irish Republican Army is very high on narrative themes, retrievals, myths, and the symbolism of colonialism, exploitation, etc. - and in religious and ecclesiastical as well as secular terms. It has a remarkable vocabulary of martyrdom. But it is weak on logical texts, and almost at a loss for projected outcomes.[2]

At the opposite end of the spectrum, indeed, as an exemplar of how violence can become an intrinsic part of the state as an exchange model, is La Violencia in Columbia. Violence follows well understood rules of a game. Its aims are instrumental, with reciprocities of power resulting from and dependent on violent exchanges. Symbolic encounters are of hardly any significance. Violence is less between the state and social movements than competition between groups for clients and supporters. The structures of violence remain in place over time while outbreaks fluctuate according to coalitional gains and losses.[3]

The Italian Red Brigades[4] come closer to the inversionary discourse model and the Basque E.T.A.[5] comes closer to an exchange model. Movements like the Tamil Tigers[6] are more on

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1. See "The Maturation of a Cosmocrat and the Building of a Discourse Community: The Case of Shining Path, 1963-1980" by Carlos Iván Degregori, in David E. Apter and Bruce Kapferer (eds.), **The Legitimization of Violence**, mimeo, 1993.
2. See "'Reading' Violence: Ireland" by Paul Arthur, in David E. Apter and Bruce Kapferer (eds.), op. cit.
3. See "Violent Exchanges: Considerations on Violence in Colombia" by Malcom Deas, in David E. Apter and Bruce Kapferer (eds.), op. cit.
4. See "Italian Political Violence 1969-l988" by David Moss, in David E. Apter and Bruce Kapferer (eds.), op. cit.
5. See "E.T.A. and Political Violence in Spain's Basque Country" by Michel Wieviorka, in David E. Apter and Bruce Kapferer (eds.), op. cit.
6. See "The Facts of Death: Tamil Secessionist Insurrection" by Jagath Senaratne, in David E. Apter and Bruce Kapferer (eds.), op cit.

the inversionary discourse side, while the African National Congress[7] in South Africa has moved steadily towards the exchange model side with the Shi'a movement[8] in Lebanon more or less at the centre.

These movements suggest certain discursive theoretical themes which perhaps can provide the materials or notes for a more general theory of political violence. We say "notes" because given the complexities of political violence they do not lend themselves easily to a more fully integrated theory. Nevertheless we will now attempt to offer some ideas which might in the future be reformulated in a more general way. It goes without saying that any such theory would have to evolve in a context of empirical research. While violence is a terrible oversimplfier, discursively it is infinitely complex.

We begin by asserting the impact and significance of discourse both in terms of the generation of political violence as a thing in itself and in its relation to democracy as a political system. We agree with most theorists of democracy that, as a political system, and at least in the last instance, democracy is a final solution to such violence, because of the sheer resolving power of overlapping and pluralized interests against which no alternative form of discourse community can, for long, remain immune. However, we will also argue that political violence is an intrinsic part of democracy itself and its evolution.

Here we intend to depart somewhat from the conventional literature on democracy, particularly the three main models which have come to dominate the discourse. In these models, the political system works to render difference less rather than more significant while interests come to prevail over principles. Coalition formation is the basis of accountability and public policy is a consequence of compromise, mediation and bargaining. Specific institutional expressions of these processes will vary according to the prevailing type of civic polity. For example, in a "strong state" constructed on the basis of an assimilationist civil society (as in France), groups have few rights as groups while citizens have many rights as citizens.

In a more pluralist polity, group diversity at the level of civil society is considered a virtue and assumes a critical role in the working of the political system. A plurality of interactive networks of roles rather than classes is manifested in large coalitional or catch-all political parties whose clienteles consist mainly of interests large and small (as in the United States). In the third type of democratic political system, a consociational one, groups are not only not the basis of the civic polity but they represent cleavages so deep and fundamental that they constitute separate "discourse communities" which become fault line cracks in civil society based on religious, linguistic, racial or other affiliations. Mediation and compromise at a political level depend on the effectiveness of élite bargaining under non-zero sum developmental conditions, enabling each group to gain more than they lose by remaining within the state (as for example in the Netherlands). By and large none of these models deal