

The “Violence Turn” in Peace Studies and Practice

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1 Introduction

Bernardo Arévalo de León and Ana Glenda Tager have written a succinct and substantive article, which adds to evidence of a shift from the centrality of war and conflict (armed and non-armed) in the study and practice of peace, towards a focus on violence, or rather that aspect of violence the authors call “armed social violence”. Violence, I argue, is the opposite of peace and this step towards recognising the wider expressions of violence is to be greatly welcomed. Violence is extensively studied, but in disciplinary silos. We lack a “converter” to enable us to interpret the learning from these various silos and to help us build new understandings of the varied mechanisms of violence reproduction and reduction. Despite nods to interdisciplinarity, academia reinforces the silos, while practice cannot easily embrace the complexity within and between each.

In my response to the lead article, I will follow its structure, initially by addressing the conceptual issue of why violence is best placed at the heart of peace thinking and peacebuilding and secondly, why this is so difficult to operationalise. In response to the conceptual challenges, I will argue that we need to build much greater sensitivity to the plurality of violences (see Box 1) and the feedback loops between them. Peace processes do not end violence, as the experiences of Guatemala and El Salvador illustrate (Pearce 2016). While the scale of collective and organised violence remains an urgent preoccupation, I argue that we also need to trace the way violence, as a phenomenon with multiple expressions, reproduces through time and space. Thus, while I applaud the widening of the field of peacebuilding to acknowledge the significance of armed social and criminal forms, this still limits our approach to violence. I argue that we need to understand violence as a phenomenon with its *own* distinctions and multiple expressions. Violence is not always armed. Operationalising the “violence turn” involves enhancing sensitivity to multiple violences in order to avoid reducing peacebuilding to an expanded but still restricted focus on selected expressions of violence which are categorised as either (armed) political or (armed) non-political. The dichotomy between social and political violence can be exaggerated, as acknowledged in the article, and this has implications for how we frame the *phenomenon of violence*. We need to understand why violence remains such a potent “language” or medium of communication in social *and* political realms. Violence reduction is a prolonged process which requires a multiplicity of actions across all the spaces of socialisation – from the intimate to the community as well as to the construction of the nation state itself (Pearce 2005). The connections between these are neither self-evident nor inevitable. When violence takes collective forms, its dangers will obviously multiply. However, our willingness to use violence in such forms does not spring from nowhere. Understanding violence as a phenomenon with its own distinctions is a critical task alongside the urgent efforts to deal with its everyday manifestations. This also has implications for building forms of security that do not produce more violence. Peacebuilding can delimit and prioritise its tasks, it will be argued, while remaining alert to the way violences reproduce and mutate in everyday lives, particularly in those of the poorest, as well as differentially across the domains of gender, generation and sexuality.

2 The “violence turn”: conceptual issues

The lead article offers us a new concept of “armed social violence” to describe what the authors call an emerging global phenomenon. This phenomenon consists of the varied forms in which organised violence expresses itself, including in countries which have been involved in relatively successful peace processes. In other words, violence through trafficking drugs, arms, and/or people, through youth gangs and vigilante groups. The significance of the urban nature of much of this violence is highlighted in contrast to the predominantly rural theatres of historical inter-state and many civil wars. The influence of Latin America on these debates is no coincidence. Nine out of the ten most violent countries in the world today are calculated to be in Latin America (UNODC 2014; Igarape 2016). As the most urbanised region of the global South, with a prolonged history of wars, civil wars, military dictatorships, organised state repression, insurgencies, criminal and interpersonal and gendered violences, Latin America brings into sharp focus the way these “plural violences”¹ intersect and leave painful legacies on communities and society as a whole. Individual loss and trauma have social effects which can generate intergenerational transmission of violences (De Zulueta 2006). The idea of peace, therefore, requires us to understand the violences that are not necessarily organised, but nevertheless foster a capacity for the collective use of violence, such as in war.

Box 1: Plural violences

Why do we recognise some violences and not others? And why does this change over time? Rape in war, for instance, was only ‘seen’ after the rape of Bosnian women in the early 1990s. Yet it has been a practice in war for centuries. I would argue that the problem lies in the ring-fencing of certain acts of violence almost into a hierarchy of what, at any given moment, particular societies consider ‘acceptable’. It is often social movements which have ‘de-sanctioned’ certain forms of violence, such as the movement which emerged in Delhi after the death of a victim of gang rape in 2012. Seeing violence in its multiple expressions enables us to explore questions about whether particular experiences of violence can lead to other violences (e.g. revenge killings). We can ask questions of childhood experiences of abuse and whether and in what contexts these might lead to violence against others in later life. Or is there a correlation between post-traumatic stress disorder from participation in war and acts of domestic violence in peace time? More than this, we can begin to see that violence has certain qualities as a phenomenon. One of these is the hurt inflicted on the body of the Other, either through specific physical acts or actions over time which generate harmful somatic effects through patterns of domination and humiliation between individuals. These effects might be physical and/or psychological. We then need to unpack the meanings within these acts and actions and/or the meanings they generate through performative messages of cruelty, for instance, aimed at controlling others through fear and terror.

¹ Desmond Arias and Daniel Goldstein speak of “violent pluralism” to describe the way multiple violent actors operate within Latin American politics with varied and changing relationships to state institutions and political leaders (Arias/Goldstein 2010, 21). The idea of “plural violences” focuses attention on the acts and actions of violence rather than the actors (see Box 1).

2.1 The mutating violences of Medellín, Colombia

Experiences in Medellín, Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s – when the city was by far the most violent in the world, with a homicide rate of 381 per 100,000 people in 1991 (Melo 1995, quoted in Bedoya 2010, 95) – highlighted for me the notion of violence mutation and the complex blurring of boundaries between social and political violence. It is worth revisiting the case of Medellín briefly, as it is emblematic of the two arguments in the lead article by Arévalo de León and Tager: on the one hand, the specific contextual factors which generate violence and, on the other, the rise of armed social violence. It also reveals the intersections of multiple violences through space and time.

Following the civil war of the mid-twentieth century known as *La Violencia* (The Violence), displaced peasants built urban communities on the steep slopes above the Aburrá Valley, where Colombia’s second city is located. They brought their experience of violence, yearnings for security and cultures of self-reliance to their new lives. They constructed houses, struggled for services and turned to their own for security in the absence of state provision. Medellín’s poor neighbourhoods or *comunas* became sites with multiple social dynamics of increasing complexity during the 1970s and 1980s following the crisis in the textile industry and the steep rise in unemployment. Informality generated a form of violent entrepreneurship, epitomised by the trajectory of Pablo Escobar from petty car thief to head of the Medellín cartel. Escobar trained a generation of assassins amongst the teenage boys of the *comunas*. In the course of the 1980s, neighbourhood militias and insurgent militias (Bedoya 2010), linked specifically to the ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) guerrilla group, established bases in some poor areas of the city. Homicides grew from the late 1970s and rocketed after the mid-1980s, when guns rather than knives became readily available. In the midst of the rise in criminal violences, ‘social cleansing’ assassinations of ‘undesirables’ appeared, of homosexuals, prostitutes and petty thieves, carried out by private right wing armed groups often with the involvement of the police. Human rights campaigners and social and political activists were also targeted.

In the 1990s, a new generation of drug traffickers emerged, collaborating with paramilitary forces now growing in strength and connected to the nation-wide struggle of the Colombian government against the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*), ELN and other guerrilla groups. Neighbourhoods were controlled by independent urban gangs or *combos*, sometimes collaborating with the paramilitary and sometimes defending their own territories and extortion rackets. Social intolerance killings continued. Violence against women and sexual abuse did not receive the same statistical attention as other violences, but was rampant. Towards the late 1990s, the violence became much more connected to the wider war, with the FARC establishing footholds in some of the *comunas*, notably *comuna 13*. Meanwhile, organised crime had also transformed into what have been called “violence managing agencies” (Bedoya 2010). The *Oficina de Envigado* (the Envigado Office), for example, under its leader Don Berna, collaborated with the state to dislodge the FARC from *comuna 13*. When the paramilitary groups demobilised in 2005, the *Oficina* followed suit. While violence declined following the demobilisation process, when Don Berna was later extradited to the United States, the battle for control of his violent enterprise caused a new upsurge in violence in Medellín. Following this violent dispute, homicides once again began to fall and Medellín began to gain recognition for bringing its murder rate down to a high but, in historical terms, dramatically reduced rate. The year 2015 began with 32 murders, the lowest January figure in 35 years (Abello Colak/Pearce 2015, 207).

However, extortion and abuse of all kinds continued in vulnerable neighbourhoods. Homicides were reduced but forced disappearances grew. What had changed, as I was told when visiting one of the *comunas* in April 2015, was that gangs had learnt that collaborating with the city’s effort to reduce its murder rate enabled them to continue to exert territorial control with less interference. Permission to kill was needed from the gang leaders. However, mothers spoke of how the virginity of their daughters was being sold by violent entrepreneurs and extortion and daily loan scams still made life barely tolerable. Drugs were increasingly sold to the youth in the neighbourhood. Many talked of the infiltration into some *comunas* of a new generation of criminal bands, made up of former paramilitaries, of which the most powerful were the *Urabeños*. This group not only embedded themselves in urban neighbourhoods with a long history of

unrest, but also came to control cocaine trafficking routes to Holland, Spain and Belgium (InSight Crime 2016).

Over the decades, new expressions of Medellín’s plural violences emerged as war, and criminal enterprise mutated. Homicide figures only partially reflect the evolution of these phenomena. This very brief overview shows how multiple violences are harnessed for social, political *and* economic goals. Their ebbs and flows respond to numerous factors, external and internal to their contexts. A multiplicity of actors was involved in Medellín – from state actors to youth gangs, to criminal syndicates and citizens themselves, only sharing the characteristic that the overwhelming majority were male.

Arguably, Medellín is an extreme case, but extreme cases can sometimes highlight aspects of the norm. It also exemplifies the trajectories of two distinct phenomena: criminality and violence. These are distinct in the sense that not all crime is violent and not all violence is considered criminal (e.g. UNODC 2014). This begs the question: what are the contexts and dynamics which cause violence to “go viral”? In asking the question, we do well to keep in mind what the lead authors highlight: the dangers of applying simplistically to other global regions the processes governing the concentration and containment of violence in Western European state formation.

2.2 The problem of violence

In the course of the 2000s, the “violence turn” has revealed more connections between violences and allowed us to ask new questions about the nature of contemporary lethality. The Global Burden of Armed Violence reports have taken what they call a “unified approach” to lethal violence where they take account of violent deaths from all sources: conflict, criminal and interpersonal (Geneva Declaration Secretariat 2011, 12). It is the logics and connections between these violences which remain under-studied.

Hence, we can follow the mutations of violence and criminality (of which armed social violence is evidently one) *or* we can begin to focus on the problem at their heart, which is not always measurable by counting bodies. This problem is that of violence itself. This is not the place to discuss this immensely complex topic but it will be covered in detail in a forthcoming book (Pearce 2017). The central thread for navigating the complexity is to recognise the way that violence affects our bodies, understood as mind as well as matter. Seeing it in terms of acts and actions of somatic harm can challenge the tendency to select which violences matter. We can focus instead on the meanings that are invested in such acts and actions, whether it be bullying at school, prolonged coercive control of women in their home, cruelty towards prisoners, etc. The social interactions and processes which turn the biological impulse for aggression into the cultural and social acts of hurting the body of the Other (and sometimes ourselves) can manifest themselves in any and every social space. While those of most concern at any point in history might involve the construction/destruction of nation states, we are now recognising that multiple violences in sub-national, particularly urban contexts also matter in terms of how the politics of state and nationhood unfold. At the same time, violence in homes, schools, streets and prisons also has an effect on violence reproduction and is accelerated by gender norms which make men ‘more male’ when they use violence (Pearce 2005). Hurting the body of the Other, it is argued, remains an immensely potent form for pursuing a range of goals but is also, at times, a goal in itself.

3 The “violence turn”: operational challenges

Taking a new approach to which violences matter has opened up new possibilities for reflecting and acting on the sources of pain, trauma, insecurity and fear in our societies, in particular amongst the poorest. The poor suffer violences with greatest intensity. While the wealthy can pay for private security, live behind gates and use private transport and schools, the poor are exposed to ill-paid and often abusive state security, to warlords, drug traffickers, gangs, etc. The troubling question of our time is whether those who gain from this state of affairs and become rich by legal or illegal means have any incentive at all to adopt mechanisms aimed at reducing violence. Douglas North and his colleagues give a pessimistic interpretation. They argue that “natural states” or “limited access orders” are the “default social outcome” of historical responses to limiting human violence rather than “open access orders” (where, for instance, the rule of law, impersonal institutions and democratic forms of accountability are the norm). The latter emerged only some 200 years ago (North et al. 2009, 13) and the authors calculate that even today only 15 per cent of the world’s population lives in open access orders.

I have myself argued that Latin America is on a course of “perverse state formation” in which the state is a source of violence reproduction rather than reduction (Pearce 2010). Elites in the region appear to have little incentive to invest in the rule of law, unless – as my own field research in Medellín, Colombia and Monterrey, Mexico shows – violence has a direct impact on their own bodies and those of their loved ones (through kidnapping, for instance) or on their ability to enjoy freely privileged personal lifestyles. It does not appear, in the early 21st century, that violence will be reduced globally through some inherent development of legitimate state monopolisation of the use of force alongside the rule of law (see also Arévalo de León/Tager 2016, 3/4), despite the fact that Stephen Pinker identified this as one of his five factors to explain the decline in violence over time (Pinker 2011).

Action and agency are therefore required to generate new mechanisms to reduce violence and non-violent political dynamics which also address the political economy of criminality. In this context, what is the role of the policy, peacebuilding and practice communities that wish to act on armed violences? The authors of the 2011 Global Burden of Armed Violence report have argued that “convenient classifications and sharp distinctions *hinder* [my italics] our ability to develop effective practical and programmatic responses to armed violence in different settings” (Geneva Declaration Secretariat 2011, 15). They also argue that armed violence can have multiple and overlapping motives, it can change from one form to another over time, and it is rarely self-contained within a particular system of perpetrators, victims, survivors and conditions. There is, of course, a dilemma. Rigid frameworks and parameters around violence prevent us seeing all the violences that matter. However, without tight and specific guidelines, operationalising policy and practice in violent contexts becomes very difficult. Arévalo de León and Tager also argue for recognition of the multiple expressions of violence in different social realms but focus primarily on new forms of armed collective social violence. How, therefore, do we reconcile operationally the need to factor in the way violences interact over space and time with the need to focus on feasible and effective peacebuilding? We also face the problem that there is little research on such interaction at present. Those on the front line are in a position to gather evidence while seeking to act effectively as peacebuilders. However, if we begin to think in terms of plural violences, such front line community residents, researchers and activists might be encouraged to notice the extent to which individual experiences of intimate violences, for example, impact on collective participation in war and post-war violences.

Box 2: Everyday violences and co-constructing security from below: plural violences as a framework for practice

A plural violences perspective inductively constructs knowledge and practice together with those experiencing violence in everyday life. Without the knowledge that comes from lived experience of violences, we cannot understand how varied forms of violence impact on individuals and communities. This is particularly true in areas characterised by what I have called “chronic violence” (Pearce 2007; Adams 2014). Caroline Moser and Cathy McIlwaine (1999) recognised this in one of the early iterations of violence research through participatory methods. In Medellín, the Observatory of Human Security co-constructed a security agenda with community researchers, academics, NGOs and some individuals from the city administration. It began with building horizontal relationships in the *comunas* to give voice and agency to residents. Human Security was a term which resonated with people on the ground, as it did not require them to choose between the impacts of physical violence on their lives and those of unemployment, nutrition and shelter (Abello Colak/Pearce 2015). The methodology has also been used in some of the most violent *colonias* of Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Here, women living in the heartlands of armed groups gained a space as community researchers, exchanging experiences and highlighting the violences they are forced to navigate every day. A woman died every 13.8 hours in Honduras between 2005 and 2013, but in addition 27 per cent of Honduran women have reported experiencing some kind of physical violence at some point in their lives (Informe de Organizaciones Feministas de Honduras 2014). This violence cannot be explained purely in terms of domestic or criminal violence. Evidence suggests that women are killed because they are women, indicating a meaning-laden and meaning-generating component. This needs to be understood in the context of a country with one of the highest homicide rates in the world (UNODC 2014). From Medellín to Tegucigalpa, the kind of security the community researchers wanted to see would be an accessible public good, which *enabled* their participation so that they could express their various vulnerabilities and hold police as well as illegal armed actors to account.

I would argue that our first goal is to promote sensitivity to plural violences, and to recognise its spatial and temporal dimensions and flows. What kinds of acts and actions of somatic harm are present in particular spaces of socialisation and what are their mechanisms of reproduction over time? By asking the question, we at least begin to *see* the varied forms and contexts in which such acts and actions take place. The way to begin to generate this sensitivity is, I suggest, by working alongside those who experience everyday violences. Different policy and peacebuilding actors might work at different points on the spectrum of violences, with some focusing on its armed and collective expressions and others on its intimate and inter-personal kinds. However, the sensitivity grows by better understanding the feedback loops and their interconnections from the people who experience them directly. A second step is to work with those experiencing multiple forms of violence, to co-construct an agenda for security as a public good which is accessible to all, distributed equitably and does not generate more violence through the abusive behaviour of state agents, for example. This agenda would recognise not only the plural violences of everyday life, but also their differential impact on population groups, from young men, women and children, to gay, lesbian and transgender people, amongst others. I would therefore add to Box 5 of the lead article (Arévalo de León/Tager 2016, 22), an eighth recommendation: building security agendas capable of responding to the differentiated experience of the plural violences of everyday life.

Box 3: Bradford/UK: what builds a peaceful city?

Violence is a phenomenon of major concern not only in the global South, but in societies worldwide. In the United Kingdom, the 2001 Bradford riot, in which mostly Asian young men fought the police on the streets of this multi-ethnic city, is a case in point of how to understand and deal with violences in cities of the Global North.

In Bradford, a city of around 500,000 inhabitants in the former industrial centre of the UK, 21.09% of its population was of Asian heritage in 2010. The riot was provoked by far-right groups attempting to organise anti-immigrant marches. It included fighting on the streets and a number of arson attacks on businesses, and took place in July (two months before 9/11). The young male participants who took on the police, leaving 320 officers injured, did not, in subsequent interviews, talk of religion as a factor (Bujra/Pearce 2011). Only later did some of those in prison turn more fervently to Islam.

The Bradford police learnt that building relationships with these young men and their communities was a far more sensible response than the everyday harassment and poor relationships which prefigured the riot. When another far-right group tried to provoke another riot in 2011, the communities, the local authorities, the University (through its Programme for a Peaceful City) and police, but also the former rioters themselves, had built much greater resilience to external threats. Problems of unemployment and marginality remain; drugs trafficking and interpersonal violences persist; policies towards the importance of community policing change. However, the post-riot responses in Bradford suggest that the solutions to violent threats lie in working respectfully with those most in danger of violent triggers to their frustrations and resentments against a society many feel has rejected them.

4 Conclusion

The “violence turn”, as I call it, in peace and conflict studies has enabled us to recognise the complexity of violence in human interaction, and how the lens of inter- and intra-state armed conflict is only one of its variants. Arévalo de León and Tager have shown how this has begun to shift assumptions for practitioners and peacebuilders. They have emphasised the rise of armed social violence as one of the new variants of armed violence in the world today. This response to their article has suggested that we need to go even further in building sensitivities towards the nature of violence as a phenomenon and its multiple expressions. It has argued for new forms of interactions by researchers and practitioners with those who experience everyday violences, both to better understand their lived experience of the various mutations of violence and crime, but also in order to co-construct the kind of security that does not reproduce more violence.

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[All weblinks last accessed 23 August 2016.]

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