Violence, Nonviolence, and Definitions: A Dilemma for Peace Studies

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Defining "violence" and "nonviolence" is less simple than one might think. In peace studies, broad definitions allowing for structural and psychological violence are common. Yet such definitions pose surprising problems when we want to contrast violent political responses from nonviolent ones, as is required if we wish to argue for the moral preferability of nonviolent strategies. Perversely, some standard nonviolent approaches turn out to be violent after all, if one uses broad definitions of "violence." After working through representative accounts by Johan Galtung, Robert Paul Wolff, and Robert Holmes, I suggest a return to a narrower definition in which violence requires the application of physical force. We may find in nonviolence the potential for a deliberate and autonomous human response, morally favouring nonviolent strategies.

In a recent work, *A Force More Powerful*, authors Jack DuVall and Peter Ackerman offer a history of some successes of nonviolent "people power" in the twentieth century. According to Ackerman and Duvall, there is such a thing as nonviolent force, which is a display of conviction and withdrawal of cooperation: "it works by identifying an opponent's vulnerabilities and taking away his ability to maintain control."[1]

> A mass nonviolent movement can force a favorable outcome in one of three ways: by coercing a ruler to surrender power or leave; by inducing a regime to compromise and make concessions; or by converting the regime's view of the conflict, so that it believes it should no longer dictate the results.[2]

The following fundamental presumptions behind this account need further exploration:

1. We know what *violence* is.

2. We know what *nonviolence* is.

3. In the pursuit of political goals, nonviolent means are generally *morally superior* to violent means.

Clearly, an understanding of the first two claims is needed in order to explore the third. Presuming that *nonviolent* political strategies are those that are *not violent,* the second claim seems to follow from the first; "violence" is the primary term in the order of definitions, so we would know what is nonviolent if we knew what is violent.

We might suppose that defining "violence" should be a relatively simple matter, that we can clearly tell the difference between violently applying physical force in the course of a conflict, and alternative means of pressure such as mass demonstrations and boycotts. And we might suppose that a general preference for nonviolent methods over violent ones is clearly morally defensible. However, if we look into some representative writings on the topic, we will see that matters are not quite so simple.

So far as political strategies are concerned, theories about the justifiability of violence have typically concerned the use of *physical violence*–injuring, killing, damaging, and destroying persons and property by such means as shooting and bombing in the contexts of wars, resistance, revolution, and terrorism. These discussions presume a conceptual framework quite different from one in which "violence" is understood to include *structural violence* or *psychological violence*. The assumption underlying most discussions is that there is violence in war, terrorism, and revolution because these activities involve assaults, killings, maimings, destruction, tortures, and bombings. It is also commonly assumed that there is no such violence when people hold candlelight vigils, conduct petition campaigns, or stage sit-ins at lunch-counters. To put it bluntly, when there is violence, it is something intense and physical: people are wounded and killed, and buildings are blown up. What has been called nonviolent action is action that may have elements of manipulation and coercion (and thus, arguably, psychological violence) but avoids *physical violence*.

Although the point is rarely acknowledged, what peace advocates have called techniques of *nonviolence* may in various ways *diminish* some persons and groups (albeit with the goal of improving the wellbeing of others). If one endorses a broad definition of "violence," the history of nonviolent action

will be diminished accordingly.[3] In seeking greater clarity in the notion of "violence," one of my primary motives is to avoid this result. This is not to deny that avoiding all coercion would be desirable, were it feasible. Early in his career, Gandhi seems to have understood nonviolence as contrasting with violence in a broad sense. One would win over an opponent not by applying coercive economic or social power but rather through persuasion, the winning over of heart and mind. The nonviolent "force" of persuasion would involve no harm. Later Gandhi shifted to allow a coercion short of physical violence.

In *A Force More Powerful*, explicit definitions are not offered. Upon studying their account, it seems clear that by "violence" DuVall and Ackerman are referring to the sort of *physical violence* involved in war, terrorism, and revolution; the tools of violence include guns, tanks, bombs, and other instruments of physical force. Violent methods include intentional killing, beating, assaulting, torturing, wounding, or damaging by the use of physical force. And by "nonviolence," these authors understand such forms of "people power" as fasting, petitioning, leafleting, mass demonstrations, strikes, and the withholding of payments. A similar frame of reference is evident in the work of Gene Sharp.[4] Sharp defines three broad categories of nonviolent action: protest, non-cooperation, and intervention. Protest includes such means as demonstrations, marches, and vigils. Non-cooperation involves strikes and boycotts, which may be social, economic, or political in their impact. Intervention includes such means as fasts, nonviolent occupations, and the operation of a parallel government.[5] Sharp notes that nonviolent methods may involve elements of *coercion*.

In these works, the term *nonviolent action* refers to those methods of protest, non-cooperation, and intervention in which the actors, without employing *physical* violence, refuse to do certain things they are expected or required to do; or do certain things they are not expected, or are forbidden, to do. In a particular case there can of course be a combination of acts of omission and acts of commission.[6]

> Nonviolent action is a generic term: it includes the large class of phenomena variously called nonviolent resistance, *satyagraha*, passive resistance, positive action, and nonviolent direct action. *While it is not violent, it is action, and not inaction*; passivity, submission and cowardice must be surmounted if it is to be used. . . . The fact that in a conflict one side is nonviolent does not imply that the other side will also refrain from violence. Certain forms of

nonviolent action may be regarded as efforts to persuade by action, while others are more coercive.[7]

Problems arise here concerning coercion and nonviolence. If a broad definition of "violence" is presumed, coercive actions falling short of physical violence will actually count as violent.

THE NOTION OF STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE: JOHAN GALTUNG

In 1969, Johan Galtung published a paper called "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,"[8] with the goal of establishing a definition of violence to set an agenda for peace research. Galtung begins by defining peace as the absence of violence and goes on to say that the agenda for peace researchers will depend on what they understand peace to be. He seeks an expansive agenda for peace research and, accordingly, offers an extremely broad definition of "violence": "Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations." Galtung notes that on some conceptions violence must be *physical* and must result in *physical damage* at the hands of an agent who intends that to be the consequence. But he rejects such conceptions as too narrow, believing that if peace were to be understood as the absence only of physical violence, the quest for peace would be an intellectually and morally impoverished endeavor.[9] Thus, he claims, "an extended concept of violence is indispensable."[10] On his account, violence extends beyond the physical, beyond the individual, and beyond the intentional.

Galtung embraces the implications of this broad definition with considerable enthusiasm, even though he realizes that they will be counter-intuitive to many. In the eighteenth century it was not known how to treat tuberculosis, so no human agent (individual or institutional) could have prevented tuberculosis. But in the twentieth century the disease was preventable. Hence, says Galtung, in a twentieth-century context, those who died of tuberculosis were victims of violence. So too is one who is coerced or enticed to act by a more powerful agent. Often violence is a feature of an interaction between two people. If a man beats his son and bangs his head, thus damaging the son's hearing, the son is a victim of violence at the hands of his father; as a result of this physical damage done to him, he will develop at less than his full potential. It would be a case of psychological violence if a father were to discourage his son from undertaking some potentially rewarding activity by telling him he

was unlikely to succeed.[11] Such denigrating advice could also damage the son, and prevent him from developing as he might otherwise have done. Thus on this account personal violence may be either physical or psychological; in both cases individual persons are harmed by other individual persons.

Harms to individuals can also be the effects of institutional and structural aspects of societies. The shift to a notion of structural violence is central in Galtung's account. A person has been affected by *violence* in this sense if influenced to develop at a level less than his or her physical or mental potential. A person can be negatively affected by patterns of economic distribution, and by prejudices incorporated into social policy and structure and embodied in institutions regarding health, transportation, and other matters. People can be negatively affected—harmed—by social institutions even if no individual person intentionally harms them.[12] Galtung claims that a person who has limited mobility because the society in which he lives has not provided transport in and out of his home region experiences the effects of *violence*. This sort of harm Galtung deems to be the result of *structural violence*. Any systematic social inequality or hierarchy having negative effects on some person or persons amounts to structural violence. This account identifies *structural violence* with *social injustice*: "In order not to overwork the word *violence* we shall sometimes refer to the condition of structural violence as social injustice."[13] Like personal violence, structural violence may be either physical or psychological. Galtung proposes that the distinction between personal and structural violence corresponds to the distinction between negative and positive peace. In this suggested framework, the absence of interpersonal violence would constitute negative peace and the absence of structural violence would constitute positive peace.[14] Galtung considers this conceptual framework advantageous for peace researchers because it leads beyond a narrow conception that would play into a simplistic "law and order" conception of society and miss the significance of institutional and social factors with regard to opportunity, deprivation, and social hierarchy.

While one may appreciate Galtung's desire to establish a broad agenda for the field of peace research, the proposed conceptual framework leaves much to be desired. A major problem here is that the proposed definition of "violence" is so broad that scarcely anything remains outside it. Suppose a man unintentionally hurts the feelings of a female colleague. If she is discouraged from achieving her potential, she can be said to have had "violence" done against her. Or, shifting from the individual to the institutional level, suppose

that a school district purchases extra mathematics texts for the students within its jurisdiction. If the use of the new books gives these students an advantage in competitive tests, students in other jurisdictions will be disadvantaged. If the result is that they cannot develop to their full potential, the book purchases can then be said to constitute structural violence.[15]

Here the notion of violence has become so expansive as to leave virtually no conceptual space for *nonviolence*. Government agents can be said to *lose their potential* if citizens withdraw their cooperation; businesses will *not develop as they could* if consumer boycotts undermine their profitability. The logical expansion of the notion of "violence" has the consequence that many instances of supposedly nonviolent strategies turn out not to be nonviolent after all. Substantive questions about the nature and merits of nonviolent political actions such as strikes and boycotts as compared with the waging of war and armed resistance cannot be clearly formulated in such a framework. Furthermore, it is not necessary to employ a broad notion of violence in order to set a broad agenda for peace research. Disadvantageous and unjust social conditions need not be labeled as instances of "violence" in order to merit study by peace researchers. Conditions such as poverty and social inequality can be studied as contributory causes of physical violence or as unjust and undesirable in their own right.[16]

THE ACCOUNT OF ROBERT PAUL WOLFF

In his 1969 article, "On Violence," Robert Paul Wolff contends that questions about the legitimacy of violent means in political struggle should be rejected as inherently confused and hopelessly ideological.[17] He claims that people use the term "violence" selectively. We call political actions "violent" if we believe they are *illegitimate*, he says, and we regard them as *illegitimate* when we regard them as being against our own interests, which tend to be class-based.[18] It is still common for analysts to use "violence" as a negative term to label whatever actions and policies they deem to be wrong. Joseph Betz distinguishes between force and violence, saying that force is a genus within which violence is a species, and violence is force that it is wrong to use because it violates a person's right to physical wellbeing.[19] In other words, violence is wrong by definition; one does not call something violent unless one has judged it to be wrong (as a violation). Greg Sorenson, by contrast, states that one should examine whether constructive uses of physical violence exist rather than settle the question by definition.[20] Sorenson recommends what he calls a constructivist position,

stating that one should avoid utopianism in peace studies and seek to maximize nonviolent action while allowing for the possibility that violent action may be necessary and justifiable. This more pragmatic approach would require a presumption against physical violence, but reject any notion that violence (of whatever kind) is morally unjustified by definition.

Wolff's account vividly illustrates problems of loaded definitions of "violence."[21] He begins by defining *political power*, which he says is the ability to make and enforce decisions about matters of social importance. Political power is *de facto* if it simply means having the ability to have one's commands accepted and generally obeyed. It is *de jure* if we take it to include the notion that the authority has a moral right to command and to be obeyed. Wolff argues that there is no coherent standard of legitimate authority in politics and therefore no solid basis for any defensible general view about the desirability or justifiability of violent or nonviolent strategies. Like Betz, Wolff regards *force* as ethically neutral. He begins by defining "force" in a physical way, saying, "Force is the ability to work some change in the world by the expenditure of *physical* efforts." But as he continues his exposition, Wolff extends his conception of force so that he counts coercion and enticement as uses of force. He says, for instance, that if an employer *entices* his employees to work longer hours by offering them a bonus, his actions would constitute "an employment of force."[22] Wolff thus acknowledges that nonphysical force exists and may be applied effectively by agents in the course of political conflict. Strangely there is no consideration here of the fact that employees could refuse the bonus. Nor is the distinction between a threat and an inducement taken into account.[23]

We see, then, that Wolff allows that *non-physical* means can amount to uses of *force* and can be means of exercising *power,* exercised through money, social opinion, or *de facto* political authority exemplified by the police, military, and other coercive apparatus of the state. On this account, threats and enticements through any of these means all constitute means of *enforcement.* At this point, Wolff offers a definition of "violence": "Strictly speaking, violence is the *illegitimate or unauthorized use of force* to effect decisions against the will or desire of others."[24] If *force* were understood in solely physical terms, so too would be *violence*. Given that in Wolff's exposition *force* has been extended to cover cases of financial and social pressure, whether through coercion or enticement, the notion of violence will be extended accordingly.

So "violence" for Wolff is not understood in physical terms only. The narrow notion that violence is something physical can be understood, he says,

as an understandable by-product of our tendency to view attacks or threats on our bodily persons as different from other sorts of harm we might suffer. Wolff states that narrower accounts, according to which violence necessarily involves physical force, are objectionable. First of all, he alleges, they are not sufficiently sharp to be of any analytical use. And secondly, they serve the objectionable ideological role of ruling out the only form of political power (violent rebellion, rioting, revolution) available to certain social groups.[25] Made with regard to issues of the 1960s, this comment is not irrelevant forty years later. It has been said, for instance, that for Palestinians in struggle with the Israelis, the suicide bomber is the "delivery system" and terrorism is the *weapon of the weak*. (A common presupposition here is that when nonstate actors use terrorism they are justified in doing so because they are justified in doing *something* and do not have the state apparatus to develop military resources. The comment presumes that approaches short of physical violence are not considered or have been considered and found defective in the context.) Wolff was clearly thinking of rioting urban blacks, activists objecting to the Vietnam war, and protesters occupying university offices. Wolff notes that because he includes the element of legitimacy, his proposed definition of "violence" has both normative and descriptive elements.

At this point, Wolff shifts to contest his own proposed definition on the grounds that it requires a distinction between the legitimate and the illegitimate use of force. A new turn is taken here because Wolff is unwilling to endorse any such distinction. A philosophical anarchist at this stage of his career, he takes the position that *every exercise of force in politics is illegitimate*, for the fundamental (anarchist) reason that freedom of choice and personal autonomy require that people should make their choices independently, with no one being compelled or coerced to act on the orders of another. If one follows through on these premises, there will be no valid general distinction between illegitimate and legitimate uses of force and hence no coherent notion of violence. General questions about the legitimacy of violence or the superiority of nonviolence will simply disappear. The logical and ethical foundations for any study about the effectiveness of nonviolent political strategies simply do not exist, Wolff contends. Spelling out the implication, he states:

> When you occupy the seats at a lunch counter for hours on end, thereby depriving the proprietor of the profits he would have made on ordinary sales during that time, *you are taking money out of his pocket quite as effectively as if you had robbed his till or*

smashed his stock. If you persist in the sit-in until he goes into debt, loses his lunch counter, and takes a job as a day laborer, then you have done him a much *greater injury* than would be accomplished by a mere beating in a dark alley. He may deserve to be ruined, of course, but, if so, then he probably also deserves to be beaten. A penchant for such indirect coercion as a boycott or a sit-in is morally questionable, for it merely leaves the dirty work to the bank that forecloses on the mortgage or the policeman who carries out the eviction. Emotionally, the commitment to nonviolence is frequently a severely repressed expression of extreme hostility akin to the mortifications and self-flagellations of religious fanatics.[26]

If we presume that it is the *harmfulness* of actions that raises questions about their suitability as political tactics and strategies, then a general presumption against physical violence and in favor of nonviolence appears not to be defensible.

On this account, any presumption that it is "better" to settle a dispute with money than with fists is a product of custom only, not defensible by reason. Wolff's own proposal is that when selecting a strategy for seeking political and social change, people should do what is likely to do the *least harm* and bring the *best results* in a given context. The terms "violent" and "nonviolent" are not useful in deliberations about methods. They are (inevitably, for Wolff) ideologically loaded. People use them selectively, according to their own interests.

Commenting on the United States in the late 1960s, Wolff hypothesizes that the upper financial classes sought to protect central financial and government institutions, and reserved the term "violence" for activities that threatened them. The term could be rhetorically effective due to the common assumption that violent actions, simply because they were violent, were wrong. The liberal middle classes wanted safe suburbs, universities, and corporate environments, so for them violence was what happened when these institutions were under threat. The lower middle class and working classes understood violence to be street crime, ghetto riots, and antiwar marches, because these threatened patriotic symbols of authority dear to them. As for revolutionaries,

two complementary rhetorical devices are employed. First, the connotation of the term "violence" is accepted, but the application of the term is reversed; police are violent, not rioters; employers, not strikers; the American army, not the enemy. In this way, an

attack is mounted on the government's claim to possess the right to rule. Secondly, the denotation of the term is held constant and the connotation reversed. Violence is good, not bad; legitimate, not illegitimate. It is, in Stokely Carmichael's great rhetorical flourish, "as American as cherry pie." Since the outclass of rebels has scant access to the instruments of power used by established social classes–wealth, law, police power, legislation–it naturally seeks to legitimize the riots, harassments, and street crime *which are its only weapons*. Equally naturally, the rest of society labels such means "violent" and suppresses them.[27]

Strictly speaking, the strategies that Wolff takes to be complementary are contradictory. In the phrase "which are its only weapons" Wolff commits himself to the assumption that disruptive, illegal, and physically violent methods are the *only means available* to the socially marginalized. This commitment is strange, given that earlier he discussed the lunchroom sit-in, which was a strategy of the nonviolent civil rights movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King. For Wolff the concept of *violence* is useless. If we think a strategy for change is not legitimate, we will call it violent; the term "violent" only serves to express our attitude and retains no cognitive meaning. Taking Wolff one step further, we can say "if it's bad, call it *violent*." Any more objective notion of violence would depend on a distinction between illegitimate and legitimate uses of force, which cannot be drawn in general terms.

Wolff's account is open to serious objections. His rejection of any distinction between legitimate and illegitimate exercises of power has little credibility, depending as it does on premises of philosophical anarchism. His definition of "force" is careless. And his definition of "violence" is eventually deconstructed by his own arguments.

But we can learn from this account without accepting it in its entirety. People often use "violence" in a selective and self-serving way.[28] Such selective usage amounts to a kind of Our Side Bias (compare "I am firm; you are stubborn"; "my use of force is needed; yours is violent").[29] Our Side Bias is objectionable for logical, ethical, and political reasons. Using the word "violence" selectively so that it functions to negatively label disfavored acts is a poor substitute for principled reasoning. The term "terrorism" is often used selectively in this way. Many people condone the violence in wars and regard it as justified. Yet when others, opposed to their side, use violence in political conflict, they regard it as unjustified, and express that view by calling it "terrorism." The practice is not

helpful. The selective and self-serving application of a loaded term is made to substitute for substantive reasoning. We will accomplish nothing if we assume political and ethical conclusions in advance, pack them into our terminology, and ignore the need for argument and evidence.[30]

ROBERT HOLMES ON VIOLENCE, NONVIOLENCE, AND THE VIOLATION OF PERSONS

In his essay, "Violence and Nonviolence," Robert Holmes begins by speaking of problems of *violence* in concrete physical terms, referring to wars, weapons, especially nuclear weapons, and the risk of a devastating nuclear war.[31] Holmes distinguishes force from violence, defining *force* neutrally, in terms of effecting change in the world. Holmes states that neither *violence* nor *force* are to be equated with *power*, which should be measured in terms of the effectiveness of the force at one's disposal. Holmes states that, like force, power can be either physical or nonphysical. "We speak, for example, of the armed forces when referring to agents of violent power, but also and with equal appropriateness of the power of truth or of love."[32] Gandhi and King believed there was such a thing as *nonviolent force*.

Holmes acknowledges that paradigm cases of violence against persons involve physical force: "physical force is partly definitive of the notion of *physical violence*." Most acts of physical violence involve the intentional use of physical force to cause damage or death to persons against their will.[33] However, Holmes does not wish to restrict violence to physical violence. He shifts his discussion to *the doing of violence* or *violation*, following upon Luke 3:14 and its admonition to "do violence to no man." This conception, he says, has a respectable philosophical legacy that allows for non-physical harm inflicted by non-physical means.

> Consider the debilitating effects of prolonged and intensive brainwashing, or of ghetto schools upon young children, or of the continual humiliation and debasement of a child by his parents. In none of these cases need physical violence be used, but in each case *violence is done*, and of a sort that may be far more injurious than physical violence.[34]

The foundation for the notion that there is such a thing as *doing violence to a person and doing such violence is wrong* is the ethical principle that persons are preeminently worthy of respect.

> Persons are preeminently worthy of respect, and each person has
> a claim upon those whose conduct may affect him to be treated in
> ways which do not diminish him. To deprive him of his freedom,
> degrade him, or destroy his confidence are all ways of doing the
> latter and all are accomplishable without resort to physical violence.
> Indeed, most of them can be effected through the subtlest forms of
> personal and social interaction, inasmuch as it is in these areas that
> people are often the most vulnerable.[35]

Violence should not be done to persons, which for Holmes is to say that persons should not be *violated*. For Holmes, this means that persons should not be treated *in ways that diminish them*.[36] An act towards a person that diminishes him or her will count as a way of *doing violence* to that person, and hence as *violent*. (Clearly this definition is extremely broad; making a sarcastic remark or even expressing a criticism could count as a violation of a person and hence as violent.)

Holmes then proceeds to distinguish between physical and psychological violence. Psychological violence exists because persons are not vulnerable only in physical ways. They can be violated in the sense of being diminished and denied respect by non-physical means, as when they are insulted and humiliated by actions involving no application of physical force. Both physical violence and psychological violence are harmful to persons, though in different ways. A pattern of physically beating a child is harmful and physically violent; a pattern of continually demeaning him is harmful and psychologically violent. Both violate the person and hence there is a presumption that both are morally wrong. The old saying "sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me" is simply false. Sticks and stones can break my bones, to be sure, but the truth is that *words can also hurt me* or, in Holmes's sense, do violence to me. And there are cases in which insulting words are more damaging and hurtful even than broken bones. That people can be harmed by words and by other forms of non-physical force is an important fact. Furthermore, nonviolent economic sanctions can be profoundly harmful, as illustrated in the situation of Iraq under UN sanctions in the period 1991–2003.[37]

Holmes, then, claims that the concept of violence should be extended from its paradigmatic area of application, involving physical force, to apply to contexts in which psychological damage is done to persons. On this account, any violation of persons violates a fundamental ethical principle and amounts

to violence, whether physical or psychological. Both physical violence and psychological violence are *prima facie* wrong.

> Because the paradigms of violence are also paradigms of how human beings ought (*prima facie*) not to be treated, *violence in either form always requires justification*. The burden (of proof) morally is not upon those who oppose violence to show that it is wrong, though they should for various reasons be prepared to do this. It is first and foremost upon those who advocate it to show that it is right.[38]

Whether physical or psychological, violence against persons is *prima facie* morally wrong, given the fundamental ethical principle of respect for persons. To say that it is *prima facie* morally wrong is to allow that there might be an over-riding factor that renders such violence justified or excusable in some particular cases. The usual sort of argument advanced for such conclusions is that a violent response is the only effective means to prevent evil or redress wrongs.

Holmes explains that there is a substantial distinction between physical and psychological violence, one that is so great as to merit speaking of two different concepts, or types, of violence. One could say that *physical violence* is type 1-violence and *psychological violence* is type 2-violence.

If we employ this account, we arrive at two different conceptions of *nonviolence*. Persons who adopt, say, a political strategy of petitioning or mass demonstration may be concerned to avoid *physical violence* alone or to avoid both physical violence and psychological violence. In the first case (far more typical) *nonviolent* activists could engage in coercive manoeuvres, manipulation, mockery, satire, and harsh adversarial criticism of those whom they have identified as opponents.[39] In the second, they could not. It is common for such means as strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations to be nonviolent in the sense of lacking type 1-violence, but nevertheless to include elements of type 2-violence. And sometimes, using elements of type 2-violence, they can *force* oppressive or unjust regimes to change.[40]

Holmes notes that without devoting thorough research and extensive resources to strategies of nonviolence, we are in no position to see how well they compete with strategies of violence. The comment remains valid. But in order to explore this problem seriously, we need a clear distinction between what is violent and what is nonviolent. His own proposals cannot provide that

framework because they imply that many standard examples of "nonviolent" action turn out to be violent after all.

FOUR EMERGING PROBLEMS

Structural violence in Galtung's sense is not the same thing as psychological violence in Holmes's sense. And yet their accounts are similar in setting broad definitions of "violence" that do not require any use of physical force. People can be profoundly damaged by non-physical means including words that humiliate and demean them and structural features of social organization that deprive them of resources and opportunities. These things are harmful, as harmful sometimes as physically violent actions, and reasonably judged in light of that harmfulness to be bad. Thus, to some, it seems appropriate to label them violent, which implies a broad definition of violence. The underlying argument here is by analogy: if X involves physical force and is harmful and deemed violent, and Y, involving non-physical force, is just as harmful as X, then Y should be deemed violent too. As in Wolff, when one thinks something is bad, calling it "violent" is a way of expressing that evaluation.

Nevertheless, broad definitions of "violence" are objectionable for a number of reasons.

1. Such definitions run contrary to an important tradition of historical and political scholarship, in which *nonviolent action* has been understood to include applications of people power such as demonstrations, strikes, and boycotts. In this tradition of analysis, tactics deemed to be *nonviolent* are not physically violent. The history of "nonviolent" people power, as pursued by Gandhi, Sharp, Schell, Ackerman and Duvall, and others, is of great interest. It is undesirable to adopt definitions of "violence" that make the nonviolence of such actions disappear.

2. Definitions of "violence" so broad as to imply that a poor system of transport, a system of marking, or the chanting of slogans in a demonstration amount to *violence* amount to substantial deviations from ordinary usage. For that reason, they have a considerable potential for contributing to vagueness and confusion.

3. Broad conceptions of violence work to subtly discredit admonitions to avoid violence. If vast numbers and many kinds of action are going to count as violent, the point in trying to avoid physical violence is not obvious. (Indeed, Wolff's discussion denies any point to it at all.) Here we can usefully compare an admonition to "avoid violence" with the advice "do not sexually harass."

Suppose that sexually harassing someone in the workplace is threatening him or her with the loss of job, income, or status if he or she does not agree to participate in sexual intimacy. On this supposition, using a narrow definition of what constitutes harassment, we can understand why avoidance is important and how harassment may be avoided. But now consider what happens when the definition of "sexual harassment" is greatly broadened. Suppose that sexual harassment is taken to include making any comment that can be deemed offensive on the ground that it highlights the sexual aspects of another person. (On this broad notion, even a comment such as "that's a very becoming outfit you're wearing today" counts as a form of sexual harassment.) On this broad definition it is harder to appreciate why sexual harassment is wrong and harder to have confidence that one can succeed in avoiding it. So broad definitions can end up undermining anti-harassment policies. Similarly, a broad definition of "violence" puts principles recommending nonviolence at risk. If violence in some sense or other seems impossible to avoid, one has little incentive to try.[41]

4. Broad definitions of violence open the door to some bad arguments purporting to rationalize the use of physical violence. If the status quo involves *structural violence*, to use *physical violence* when seeking to alter that status quo may seem justifiable on the grounds that opposition to one form of violence licenses another.[42] Such arguments will be familiar to many.[43] They assume that persons claiming the right to use (physical) violence in opposing (structural) violence have a legitimate case. In effect, the argument is that physical violence is a legitimate means to use in opposing some set of social institutions because those institutions themselves involve violence. The claim that physical violence and the violence of institutions are morally equivalent will be buttressed by the conceptualization of both as *violent* under the broad assumptions that whatever is bad is violent and whatever is violent is bad. Logically minded analysts will spot the fallacy of "Two Wrongs Make a Right" in this reasoning. But logical niceties are unlikely to feature prominently in deliberations about the means of political struggle.

Thousands have used such reasoning to convince thousands of others of the legitimacy of physical violence in political struggles. Millions have been killed or injured as a result. Such "two wrongs" arguments function to legitimize killing and destruction, often in the form of suicide bombings and other forms of terrorism. This history should be taken seriously. The supposition here is that physically violent methods are legitimate when used against structurally violent systems. One "violence" legitimates another, so to speak. At this point,

advocates of classical nonviolence, including many or most peace researchers, would probably wish to propose alternative strategies. But the conceptual space that would allow them to do so has disappeared by definitional fiat. Expansive definitions of "violence" function to legitimate physical violence and disguise the existence of options to it.

REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

As Galtung, Wolff, and Holmes acknowledge, people do generally assume that there is some particular importance attached to avoiding the physical violence that jeopardizes our physical health and survival.[44] *Why?* This question should be studied seriously, not least by those who would defend nonviolence as a preferred option. But we need to ask as well, What is the basis of the intuitive and common sense appeal of the narrower paradigm, according to which violence involves damage and destruction by means of physical force? The basic underlying question here is whether *physically violent means* are more objectionable than *non-physically violent alternatives to them*–and if so, why that is so. These questions need to be faced squarely and answered by reasoned arguments, not by definitions.

I propose that in the interests of clarity and careful reflection, we understand and use the term "violence" in its older, more restricted sense, as involving the use of *physical force*. What Galtung calls "structural violence" we may call "social injustice" or "social inequality"–as Galtung does, in fact, acknowledge. To deny the label "violence" to such conditions is not to imply that they are morally acceptable or that they fail to merit attention from researchers and activists. It is merely to shift away from the "if it is bad say it is violent; if it is violent assume it is bad" tendency, and propose that reflection avoid semantic expansionism. People pursuing peace research can concern themselves with social injustice without stipulatively expanding the meaning of the word "violence" in order to do so. One author has suggested that broad definitions reveal causation:

> An observer can understand the continuous spiral of violence, one that reaches its nadir in the death struggle of oppressor and oppressed, only when one appreciates the chain of causes. Injustice (covert violence) leads to revolt (overt violence); rebellion leads to repression (overt violence); repression in turn leads to a state of war.[45]

But it is not necessary to label things with the same term in order to find out that there is a causal relationship between them. Semantic expansionism serves more to obscure the facts than to reveal them.

While accepting Holmes's proposed ethical principle of respect for persons, I would resist his proposed definition of "violence" in terms of "violation" on the grounds that it is objectionably broad. Holmes is entirely correct to point out that it is *prima facie* wrong to insult, humiliate, denigrate, and degrade persons. Policies, practices, and actions that have these effects constitute violations of persons and require special justification or excuse–if, indeed, they can ever be justified at all. But these norms can be endorsed, and this point made, without resorting to a broad definition of "violence."

I suspect that good intentions have supported careless reasoning about violence and nonviolence. This expansion should not have been necessary; the claims at issue could have been substantiated in other ways. Instead of calling a transport system "violent" we can ask whether certain persons are disadvantaged by it and why and how, and go on to explore how it might be improved if improvement is called for. We should be able to claim that mass demonstrations, as say in Prague in the fall of 1989, have *forced* dictatorial regimes to yield power and have in this respect constituted instances of *coercion* and that they were *nonviolent*.

The more restricted notion that "violence" should be understood to mean physical violence is endorsed by Ted Honderich, who defines violence as "a use of physical force that injures, damages, violates or destroys people or things." Discussing the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, Honderich reflects on political violence, which he defines as having a political and ultimately social intention.[46] Honderich in fact seeks to justify this terrorist violence as a response to profound inequality. But in so doing he uses arguments other than the "two wrongs" argument considered here. Ronald B. Miller offers a more technical definition embodying a similar idea. He understands acts of violence to involve the use of *great* or intense physical force intended to injure, damage, or destroy persons or inanimate objects, with no eventual goal of improving their value.[47]

On such accounts, violence is understood to be *physical violence*, meaning the use of *physical force* so as to damage or destroy persons or resources.[48] Persons willing to engage in violence for political ends may be willing to undertake acts of physical violence and to employ weapons of physical violence such as explosives, guns, machetes, knives, tanks, and bombs. War waged by

states or rebel groups and terrorism on the part of states or non-state agents provide familiar cases of physical violence employed by agents engaged in political conflicts. By contrast, strategies of resistance and social change such as mass demonstrations, boycotts, and strikes are not violent unless participants include such actions as physically harming persons and property.

Violence is by no means a simple and straightforward notion even on such accounts. As Honderich observes, the notions of damage and destruction have normative overtones because the person or thing affected is deemed to be *harmed* as a result of the violence. The case of the bomb that does not detonate poses another question: what are we to call acts intended to damage and destroy when they fail to do so? Did the person setting up this bomb commit an act of violence? Or did he merely intend to so, but not succeed? (The latter is preferable.) What if what would seem to be "the same act" qualifies as violent in one case and nonviolent in another? Context and intent matter here. If a dentist extracts a tooth in order to relieve pain and infection, his pulling it out by physical force would not typically be regarded as an act of violence. But if someone were to pull out a tooth in the course of interrogation and torture, such an act would constitute physical violence. The second action is intended to harm; the first is not. Typically, when one person or group uses physical force to damage or destroy the body or resources of another there is no consent; violence is conducted against the will of its victims, with a view to doing them harm. Thus, one may dispute cases in which the person who would appear in the role of victim-of-violence consents to the violence or even requests it, as in instances of sadistic sexual practices between consenting adults or mercy killing. Are such persons *damaged* when physical force is applied to them, resulting in apparent harm or even in death, given that they have consented to it?

A thought-provoking example is provided by Miller, who considers the claim that physical violence must involve something like "great force, severity, or vehemence, intensity of condition or influence."[49] Miller discusses a case in which someone dismantles a house under construction by taking apart its walls brick by brick. Let us suppose that such a person damages the house and eventually destroys it. Is this physical violence? Perhaps not, on Miller's definition: the man does not act in a violent (that is to say physically intense) way. In the light of this case, Miller proposes that violence involves not only the application of physical force but the application of *great or intense physical force*.

This feature may appear irrelevant, but I would urge that we begin our re-examination of violence by considering its moral significance. Think of destroying a house. One might blow up the house with dynamite; one would then commit an act of physical violence. One might dismantle it gradually, brick by brick, in which case it would eventually be physically destroyed, but there would be no application of "great physical force" in the context and no physical violence. Were we to argue that the second case involves violence, we would need a sense of "violence" going beyond the physical. As Miller points out, it seems incorrect to say that violence has been employed in the second case. So we can draw a semantic line here. But then we must go on to ask about the moral significance of that semantic line. If a valuable object is physically destroyed, why should it matter whether it is destroyed *quickly* or *slowly* or by a force that is intense or not? What would be the significance of the physical facts about intensity and speed? But thinking for a minute, we can see that the difference may have significance after all. Persons in the house would be injured or killed if it were blown up; they could walk away if it were slowly dismantled. They could negotiate; they could deliberate about what to do; they could seek allies in their cause. These are human responses.

When physical force is "great," intense and startling, escape or resistance is difficult or impossible. In the absence of physical violence, a human response is possible; deliberation, choice, autonomy, and a variety of actions remain open to an agent. It is this point, I suggest, that has moral significance and argues against the use of physical violence and in favor of nonviolent action. And it is this point about human deliberation and response that argues against violence, defined as physical violence.

ENDNOTES

1   Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press 2000), 494.

2   Ackerman and DuVall, *A Force More Powerful,* 501.

3   See Gene Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1979).

4   Gene Sharp, *Exploring Nonviolent Alternatives* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1970).

5   Sharp, *Exploring Nonviolent Alternatives*, 32-33.

6	Interestingly, much of the language of violent confrontation is echoed in the portrayals of nonviolence offered by theorists of nonviolence. There are *alliances*, *opponents* who *attack*, *enemies* who need to be *overcome*, *combatants*, *fighting*, *weapons*, and parties seeking to *defend* themselves and their interests. *Force* is applied; *strategies* and *tactics* are developed; *vulnerabilities* are studied so that *weapons* may be used effectively. There are *fights*, *sieges*, and *campaigns*, and in the end, *victory* or *defeat*.

7	Sharp, *Exploring Nonviolent Alternatives*, 31.

8	Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167-91.

9	In a later essay Galtung interestingly explains that the situation of 1960s Rhodesia motivated his notion of structural violence. Johan Galtung, "Twenty-Five Years of Peace Research: Ten Challenges, and Some Responses," *Journal of Peace Research* 22, no. 2 (June 1985): 141-58.

10	Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 168.

11	My examples.

12	I accept this point, though I would not describe it as Galtung does.

13	Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 171. Emphasis added.

14	I think we should charitably amend the proposal so that positive peace amounts to the absence of *both* interpersonal *and* structural violence.

15	This point has also been made by C. A. J. Coady in "The Idea of Violence," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 3 (1986): 3-19.

16	In a later article Galtung acknowledged that every definition would have some imperfections, indicating that he would prefer to ground a notion of violence in human needs. (That would also provide a broad definition, since the satisfaction of even the most basic human needs is a demanding matter.) Galtung also allows that violence is not done only to people; one may do violence to nature. Galtung, "Twenty-five Years of Peace Research," 141-58.

17	Robert Paul Wolff, "On Violence," *Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 19 (1969), 601-16.

18	This point has been noted by others. Some approve of it. Some disapprove. For one endorsing the point see Joseph Betz, "Sissela Bok on the Analogy

of Deception and Violence," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 19 (1985): 217-27. See also Greg Sorenson, "Utopianism in Peace Research: The Gandhian Heritage," *Journal of Peace Research* 28, no. 2 (1992): 135-44.

19   Betz, "Sissela Bok," 217-27.

20   Sorenson, "Utopianism in Peace Research."

21   These problems are also clearly pointed out by C. A. J. Coady, who refers to them as legitimist definitions. See Coady, "The Idea of Violence," 4-5.

22   Wolff, "On Violence," 605.

23   See, for instance, Michael D. Bayles, "A Concept of Coercion," in *Coercion,* Nomos 14, J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman, ed. (Chicago: Aldine Atherton 1972), 16-29.

24   Wolff, "On Violence," 606. Emphasis added.

25   These claims are not backed up by further argument.

26   Emphasis in the quoted passage is mine. Wolff, "On Violence," 610-11. While Wolff clearly embraces the consequence, I take it to be counter-intuitive in the bad sense. I do not accept that beating people up is no worse than boycotting their business. C. A. J. Coady takes a similar position.

27   Wolff, "On Violence," 615. Emphasis added.

28   Another author positively recommends it. See Betz, "Sissela Bok."

29   The usage is not helpful.

30   This point is emphasized in Ted Honderich's recent *After the Terror* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2002).

31   Robert Holmes, "Violence and Nonviolence," in *Violence: Award-Winning Essays in the Council for Philosophical Studies Competition*, ed. Jerome A. Shaffer (New York: David McKay Company, 1971).

32   Holmes, "Violence and Nonviolence," 109.

33   Holmes, "Violence and Nonviolence," 109. This last point strikes me as quite contestable.

34   Holmes, "Violence and Nonviolence," 110.

35   Holmes, "Violence and Nonviolence," 111.

36   At this point, there is a similarity between Holmes's account and Galtung's notion that violence is anything that deprives persons of their potential.

37   Dennis Halliday was a UN official who resigned due to his extreme dissatisfaction with the impact of the sanctions policies on Iraq during the 1990s. Halliday claimed that between one million and 1.5 million people had died in Iraq from malnutrition or inadequate health care facilities due to the impact of UN sanctions. He argued that the "nonviolent" sanctions were in fact killing people in very large numbers and referred even to "genocidal conditions." Halliday's views are described in Mark Siegal, "Former U.N. Official Says Sanctions against Iraq Amount to 'Genocide,'" *Cornell Chronicle*, 30 September 1999.

38   Holmes, "Violence and Nonviolence," 126.

39   My example.

40   The idea that we might better think of excusing violence in, say, Just Wars, as distinct from justifying it, was suggested to me by Wilhelm Verwoerd.

41   I owe this analogy to Anton Colijn.

42   This result constitutes a dilemma for peace studies. The problem is noted by Sorenson, "Utopianism in Peace Research."

43   Herbert Marcuse, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, October 27, 1968; quoted by Ronald B. Miller, "Violence, Force, and Coercion," in *Violence: Award-Winning Essays in the Council for Philosophical Studies Competition*, ed. Jerome A. Shaffer (New York: David McKay Company, 1971), 11-44.

44   This point is acknowledged by Galtung, Wolff, and Holmes.

45   Stephen J. Casey, "Defining Violence," *Thought* 56 (1981): 9.

46   Honderich, *After the Terror*, 91-97. Honderich does not note that other authors have interpreted the violation of persons to include psychological violence. Oddly, he does not wish to include *war* as an instance of *political violence*. He defines violence as extra-legal, as "a political and social intention–either violence within a society that is illegal or smaller-scale violence between states or societies that is not according to international law." I do not understand the rationale for this exclusion. In "The Idea of Violence," C. A. J. Coady also argues that it is anomalous and counter-

intuitive. It is clear that the bombing of cities and villages constitutes the use of physical force, and violence, in the context of political conflict. Where I agree strongly with Honderich is on (a) the notion that violence involves the use of damaging or destructive physical force and (b) such violence is *prima facie* wrong but not wrong by definition.

47   Miller, "Violence, Force, and Coercion," 25-26.

48   By "resources" here, I intend to include such things as personal belongings, buildings, cultural artifacts, transportation and communication infrastructure, and the natural environment. Thus the deliberate burning of a forest with the intent of harming a person, state, or group would count as an act of violence, whether or not one defines the forest as someone's property.

49   Miller, 19, citing the *Oxford English Dictionary*. (Such notions would have to be contextualized, because what would amount to great physical force in the context of pulling a tooth would not constitute great physical force in the context of blowing up a building.) The notion of contextual relativization is my own. I have also adapted Miller's example slightly.