Violence and social justice

Vittorio Bufacchi
Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2007, pp. xi, 218, hardcover £55.00, $32.95, ISBN: 0230552951

Contemporary Political Theory (2010) **9,** 513–516. doi:10.1057/cpt.2010.13

'No justice, no peace', threatens the bumper sticker and rally sign, raising in this popular form a serious question for contemporary political theory: What is the connection of violence and justice? Does injustice justify violence? Is violence, by its very nature, unjust? Vittorio Bufacchi attempts to clarify some of the conceptual puzzles surrounding our thinking about violence. Even if one demurs from some of his conclusions, the clear exposition of his liberal position makes this book a valuable contribution for political theorists trying to understand these critically important questions.

Bufacchi offers a new definition of violence. He distinguishes between two common accounts of violence, which he labels the 'minimalist approach', which sees violence as an act of 'intentional, excessive force' and the 'comprehensive approach', in which violence is 'a violation of rights' (p. 26). The first of these approaches, Bufacchi argues, views violence more from the perspective of perpetrators, and the second, more from the perspective of victims. Arguing that the distinction between these two approaches is more ideological than logical, Bufacchi suggests his own alternative, as a way to provide an account of the nature of violence that 'aspires to be universally valid' (p. 29) and which can be seen to be from the perspective of a third-party observer.

According to Bufacchi, then, violence is best understood as a 'violation of integrity', 'used here in a strictly non-philosophical sense, meaning wholeness or intactness' (p. 40). 'An act of violence is fundamentally a violation of the integrity of the subject or object that suffers the violence, to the extent that the act of violence takes something away from the victim, therefore shattering the pre-existing psychological and/or physical unity that was in place before the violence took place' (p. 46). For Bufacchi, this definition combines elements of both of the previous two understandings, but allows a third party to make the judgments about when violence has occurred. This allows him to identify four faces of violence: 'when integrity is violated intentionally by means of a direct action; when integrity is violated intentionally by means of an omission; when the violation of integrity is foreseeable (even if not intended) as

© 2010 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1470-8914

a result of certain actions and when the violation of integrity is foreseeable (even if not intended) as a result of certain omissions' (p. 91). From this definition of violence, through a series of elegant moves, Bufacchi is able to demonstrate that what is wrong about violence is that it results in humiliation, understanding humiliation as an affront to one's integrity. By this account, then, Bufacchi defines violence as overlapping with the unjust. Bufacchi ends by considering whether violence can ever be just; he forces Fanon's argument for violence into a kind of 'identity' argument for violence and finds it unconvincing, but argues that consequentialist accounts can help us to answer the question of 'just violence' by introducing a kind of proportionality. This short summary does not do justice to the intelligence of Bufacchi's analysis; it is worth reading carefully.

The most obvious target of Bufacchi's argument is obviously and predictably approaches that see violence as 'structural violence'. Bufacchi takes issue with this approach, begun with the Norwegian thinker Johan Galtung, whose more expansive definition is that 'violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations' (quoted at page 134) and for whom such structural violence is more harmful than direct violence. For Bufacchi, structural violence so broadens and weakens the category of violence as to make it meaningless; better, he argues, to call such exploitation 'exploitation' and not to assimilate it to the term violence. What, he asks, is gained by calling it violence? Quite the contrary, argues Bufacchi, expanding a term waters down its conceptual and moral force. Further, he argues, since some people see violence as biologically inevitable, then 'if an injustice is reclassified as an act of violence, there is the potential risk that injustice will also be seen as inevitable' (p. 137). 'Fortunately', he continues, 'this debate between geneticists and philosophers can conveniently be by-passed if we rethink the relationship between injustice and violence … ' (p. 137). Then, drawing upon the work of Judith Shklar, who saw injustice as so harmful that 'most of us would rather reorder reality than admit that we are the helpless objects of injustice' (p. 139), Bufacchi observes that the harm of injustice is that it, like violence, is bad and wrong because of 'the Humiliation Factor, namely the sense of humiliation, vulnerability and powerlessness that goes with having one's integrity violated' (p. 139).

This argument reveals both the strengths and limits of Bufacchi's approach. His goal is to create a philosophically clear concept of violence. Yet in his attempt to provide a delimited and perspicuous account of violence, Bufacchi ends up bracketing some of the problems that are associated with using this concept in the real world. His 'third person', 'impartial spectator' conception of violence forces the question about *who* decides when a person's integrity has been violated to another level, but it does not eliminate the question. And in

making the question of humiliation the key, Bufacchi, though he recognizes 'social and political dimensions' to this question, evades the serious problem that we might call, after Peter Bachrach's famous 'second face of power', the 'second face of violence' problem. After all, imagine that Shklar is right and some people do not see the injustice, or by extension, the violence committed against them, as humiliating. We might agree that a woman who thinks it is 'natural' that her husband will slap her if she makes a comment about the number of beers he has drunk has had her integrity violated, but if she does not, and if she is not humiliated, is it violent? On the one hand, Bufacchi's impartial spectator is meant to solve this problem. But as many feminist analyses of domestic violence show (Bufacchi makes a passing reference to domestic and family violence at page 24), the 'objective' analysis is inadequate to providing any basis for changing the violent situation. Has her integrity been violated if she says, 'well, I deserved it today and it is no big deal'? Similarly, Fanon's account of violence does not rest upon 'identity', but on something close to what Bufacchi calls 'humiliation'. Reading Fanon's accounts of the individual Algerians who have suffered psychological devastation in *Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 1963) might well lead some 'impartial spectator' to think that colonialism is intrinsically violent. But suppose the impartial spectator sees such cases as isolated cases of individual devastation, and accepts the idea that colonialism has a civilizing mission (Narayan, 1995). Might not accounts that are 'subjective' in such cases prove more revealing about the nature of violence, and what the injustice of such violence is?

It was to avoid such gaps between 'objective' and 'subjective' accounts of violence that lead theorists of structural violence, and Iris Young in defining violence as a 'face of oppression' to their conclusions. One wishes that Bufacchi had engaged the feminist literature on the nature of violence more directly, and that he had responded to the logic behind concepts such as structural violence rather than simply criticized them for their vagueness.

There are many other questions about violence that we would want a political theory of violence to answer. Bufacchi evades the question about whether humans are intrinsically violent, and thinks his account stronger for this evasion. He also does not consider in depth the psychological questions about the effects of violence on perpetrators and victims. And his account of violence does not help us think about whether it is appropriate to provide 'restorative justice' as a remedy for violence.

But it is unfair to ask Bufacchi to have taken on all of these questions. As he wisely notes at the outset of this book, the question about the relationship of violence and justice can only become more important to political theory in this new century. In providing such a clear and thoughtful addition to this discussion, he has done a major service to contemporary political theory.

References

Fanon, F. (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.

Narayan, U. (1995) Colonialism and its others: Considerations on rights and care discourses. *Hypatia* 10(2): 133–140.

Joan C. Tronto
Department of Political Science,
University of Minnesota,
Minneapolis, USA