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The Demonic Genius of Politics? Social Action and the Decoupling of Politics from Violence

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This paper explores why new ways of "knowing" and acting on violence could lead to a reconsideration of Weber's pessimistic coupling of politics and violence. This coupling remains hugely influential almost a century after it was formulated. It has become possible to revisit it, firstly, because of the potential for new interdisciplinary conversations. These have opened up ways of understanding violence as a properly social phenomenon and the significance of our vulnerable, social bodies to its reproduction. Secondly, social action *on* violence has led to recognition as "violence" of varied acts of somatic harm previously not named as such. In the process, expressions of violence reproduced over time and through spaces of socialization (from the intimate to the construction of the nation state) are socially and politically de-sanctioned. Politics and the State could be reconceptualised as essential for reducing (rather than monopolizing) violence and creating conditions to live together without it.

Keywords: violence, politics, state, social action, interdisciplinary conversations

> "He who seeks the salvation of the soul, of his own and of others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics, for the quite different tasks of politics can only be solved by violence. The genius or demon of politics lives in an inner tension with the god of love ... This tension can at any time lead to an irreconcilable conflict." (Weber 1991 [1919], 126)

This paper explores the way violence is simultaneously absent and present in our everyday understanding of politics and the State. It argues that politics does not have to be an arena inherently and unavoidably reliant on the tools of violence. Indeed, politics could be seen as primarily an arena for violence reduction. Social action *on* violence is one route towards realising such a goal. However, the ontological assumptions about human violence behind, for instance, the Weberian approach to the modern State remain a conceptual limit to such social action. They have provided an apparently intuitive foundation for why violence and its monopoly must be coupled to our understanding of politics and the State. While there have been philosophical challenges to this, they ultimately fail, it is argued, to provide a focus on violence as a phenomenon with its own distinctions. Social action on violence raises new consciousness about its lived experiences and multiple forms, including state violence. Such action can influence and be influenced by an emergent epistemological leap in the study of violence, made possible by the interdisciplinary potential of new knowledge. Over time, there is a source for a new foundation for the State and Politics, which does not rely on the tools of violence.

Weber's proposition about the impossibility of avoiding violence in politics and the importance of a state monopoly of violence to the modern state remains a reference point not just for political scientists but for the real world of politics. It has also meant that the violence deeply present in state practices and political life in general is often not recognised as such. In effect, violence in society can be removed through the creation

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of a state monopoly which is also “legitimate”. Weber’s attention to the concept of “legitimacy” was, however, limited or what I call “thin”. It means paradoxically, as Schinkel (2010, 30–31) points out, that “legitimate” violence (*potestas*) exists only by virtue of “non-legitimate” private violence (*violentia*). The modern State’s very existence is based on this distinction *and its preservation*. This limits our capacity to imagine a state which reduces violence by virtue of its own non violence. Weber’s human ontology of violence has become an intuitive “common sense”. While Schinkel himself doubts such a possibility, this paper argues social action on violence can at least begin a process of re-conceptualising the State and political life as possible without violence.

The first part of the paper explores varied efforts to counter Weber’s propositions. The most influential of these still rest on a human ontology of violence. Violence is better understood as a phenomenon, it is argued, “without” politics, in order to understand its role “within” politics. Rather than an intrinsic and inevitable relationship, we can trace how humans do act – and more frequently so in recent decades – to *de-sanction* violence through their social actions, particularly as their sensibilities towards violence increase. Elias (2000) argued that sensibilisation was an historical process of “civilisation” in Europe, involving affect control and self restraint, beginning with elites and the monopolisation process. However, such sensibilisation as has occurred took centuries and has remained incomplete and even reversible, even more so outside Europe. Elias (1998) himself accounts for the collapse of the Weimar Republic by the way that an economic and political crisis foundered on the structural weakness of its monopoly of violence. However, this paper argues that violence sensibilities do not just “happen” over time, but require active processes of what I call emotional enlightenment (Pearce, forthcoming). Social mobilisation creates political possibilities for turning new social sensibilities into state action as “law”[1], but underpinned by social and mental health practices that in turn create the conditions to live without violence.

The second part of the paper is therefore focused on violence as a phenomenon subject to social action. An alternative foundation for politics could emerge through such action, alongside openness to new knowledge about violence from interdisciplinary insights, in turn opening up new fields for action. From philosophy to biology to sociology and history, as well as related disciplines, violence’s distinctions and particularities emerge. We have new tools for comprehending violence and the mechanisms of its reproduction. By bringing violence back to the body, understood as a social body, it can be distinguished from biological aggression. The acts and actions of somatic harm that constitute violence are meaning-laden and -generating (Pearce, forthcoming). Its effects are transmitted and reproduced through time and space (Pearce 2007a). This second part of the paper, therefore, explores how the idea of the “social body” might enable us to rethink the “body politic”. The social body is a body vulnerable (Miller 2002; Bergoffen 2003; Staudigl 2004, 2013) to physical, emotional and psychic harm. Acknowledging the “vulnerable body” clarifies the origins of the intuition around the coupling of violence and politics. Ongoing somatic impacts of violence in private and public social interactions have made it almost natural for politics and the State to be structured around our mastering of each other, the “domination of man over man” as Weber expressed it.

Recognising the vulnerable body is not an abstract process. Hence, acknowledging the way social action increasingly puts this onto the public agenda enables us to imagine a politics whose tasks are not best resolved by violence. Such action includes, for instance, mobilisation by sections of society across more and more cultures against abuse in the intimate sphere of social life and naming it as violence. Politics itself can become a field where the conditions to live without violence can be struggled over. As violence is grasped as a phenomenon rather than in selected aspects (Schinkel 2010), its inevitable reduction through monopolisation is no longer taken for granted. The conceptual decoupling of violence from politics becomes a possibility through the recognition and exposure of its contingent expressions at various levels and layers

[1] Walter Benjamin’s critical exploration of the relationship of law to violence discussed below, should be borne in mind when conceptualising law that emerges when the state responds to new social sensibilities on violence.

of human sociability and social experience. I call this a reverse "recoupling" of violence and politics, where violence reduction – not its centralised monopolisation – is at the core of political life, potentially reshaping the way human affairs are managed.

1. Human Violence in our Foundational Theories of Politics and their Critics

1.1. Violence as Legitimated State Violence

Of course, we should not begin with Weber when talking about a violence ontology in politics. The figure who first springs to mind is Thomas Hobbes, also writing at a tumultuous moment in history. Hobbes first expressed the intrinsic relationship between humanity's ever present disposition for violence and the idea of the sovereign monopoly on coercive force. This makes politics possible, he argued (Hobbes 2010, 89), as well as all the creative and productive pursuits which become possible in a "society".

Whereas Hobbes wrote against the backcloth of the "early modern state" in formation, Weber wrote about the "modern state" of the twentieth century, which in turn was a response to the formation of nation states from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, culminating in the First World War of 1914–1918. In historical hindsight, these "European centuries" and the capacity of Europe over time to contain intrastate violence through building up national armies and state taxation capacity, gave European political thought a head start in defining what the state *is*. With much of the world still under European colonial influence, alongside the socio-political upheavals in many parts of the world, and the "American century" yet to begin, Weber seemed to offer an insightful and apparently indisputable articulation of how the State and politics were inherently configured by the ontological violences of humanity. He also offered a chance to contain them. The State, argues Schinkel, became "the people's means of moral protection against themselves" (2010, 30). Violence and violence reproduction by the State is no longer "violence", but legitimated protective action. The question is, whether by the beginning of the twenty-first century we cannot do better than this. Have we made sufficient theoretical and empirical progress on rethinking the nexus of violence, politics and the State?

As Andreas Anter (2014, 48) points out in his study of Weber's theory of the modern State, the idea of the state as based on command and compliance was the accepted norm when Weber wrote. However, Weber believed that rulership was not a monopoly of the state and also that all rule requires a basis for its legitimacy. He argued that the legitimation of domination by the modern state is "by virtue of the belief in the validity of legal statute and functional 'competence' based on rationally created *rules*" (Weber 1991, 79, italics in original). Weber insists on justifications for rule and for the violence that underpins it. However, his concept of legitimacy remains deeply problematic as a means to do this. In his own words in the text, what some translate as "physical violence" (Weber 2000, 310–11) and others as "physical force" (Weber 1991, 78; Waters and Waters 2015, 136), is "legitimate" in as much as people *believe* it to be legitimate and believe in the validity of the legal statutes. He sought no transcendental conceptualisation of legitimacy. Thus, the violence that the State uses is rarely "seen" as violence, but as merely the repertoire of actions needed for rulership, legitimated by belief in its legality, in turn formalised by statute.

It was not Weber's intention to "justify" state violence. His non-normative approach to "legitimacy" was intended to describe the basis of acceptance of different forms of rulership. However, it is in the name of claims to "legitimacy" that rulers, even those backed by legality, use violence. A significant debate took place around these terms in the key inter-war years in Germany. For example, Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* was written just a year after Weber wrote *Vocation as Politics*, and was influenced by the same events. It was written before Benjamin embraced Marxism in 1924 (Khatib 2016, 43). Another example is the abidingly influential anti-liberal text on *Legality and Legitimacy* written by Carl Schmitt in 1932, just as the Weimar Republic entered the final phase of its political crisis and violence was escalating. These two thinkers, from opposite ends of the political spectrum, illustrate the vulnerability of Weber's efforts to find a liberal political solution to ontological violence. Both also assume an ontology of human violence.

Walter Benjamin questions the idea that law – whether natural law or positive law – can ever offer a legitimate justification

of violence. In both cases, violence is merely justified in terms of the means it offers for a just end (natural law) or in terms of the justness of the means used to ensure the end (positive law), in other words preservation of the law itself. Thus, law-making violence and law-preserving violence are both expressions of violence which are not justified or justifiable except as means. Violence can be neither a legal nor ethical goal. In his *Critique of Violence* (1978 [1921]), Benjamin was asking whether there is a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence. This distinction goes to the heart of Weber's effort to legitimate the violence used by the modern State. Rational legal forms of authority do so through the rules that people believe are valid. Yet the phenomenon of violence is ultimately the instrument in all cases, so Benjamin's question (when does violence become law?) means that selectively recognising some violence as legitimate remains highly problematic. Without straying into Benjamin's efforts to find grounds for a "pure violence", the key point is that violence as law has no more justification when it is used to preserve the law or to make the law. Law cannot legitimise violence as a just means when that means merely preserves the law. The law is born of violence. Violence in the name of state law enforcement under elected governments believed to be legitimate is hardly unusual. The "Black Lives Matter" campaign in the United States has made it its mission since 2012 to expose selective state violence, in just one example from recent history.

However, the Weberian proposition is vulnerable in other ways. What happens when violence is used *within* (and perhaps against) the political system and when Weber's "thin" legitimacy or belief in the state's monopoly is incapable of preserving it? Violence of multiple kinds grows within political systems despite claims to a legitimate state monopoly. As commitments to liberal cosmopolitanism and neoliberal globalisation faded in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, this weakness became clearer as populisms of right and left sought to re-found the State in relationship to its "enemy". Liberal democracy increasingly found itself in the middle of polarising narratives, amplified by social media, in which hate and threats of violence were commonplace. An article in the UK *Guardian* in July 2016, following the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox, and the Brexit vote vividly reflects on the changing language of politics in the country that ensued. The journalist asked, how did the language of politics get so toxic? He suggested it had to do with something deep and subtly rooted:

> a careless, universal conception of politics as a battleground, a metaphor so entrenched that we don't even notice it ... What is stranger still is the speed with which the old rhetoric of violence and confrontation has returned across the political spectrum. On the morning of the referendum result, Farage celebrated a victory that had been won "without a single bullet being fired". When Thomas Mair, Cox's alleged killer, appeared in court on Saturday 18 June, he gave his name as "death to traitors, freedom for Britain". Not two weeks later, the term "traitor" was being used by some of Jeremy Corbyn's supporters as a standard term of abuse for anyone deemed disloyal. (Bland 2016)

Carl Schmitt's anti-liberal arguments have gained new resonance in the violent narratives emerging in contemporary liberal orders. Violence, he argued, is always a potential reality, but the State must identify the "enemy" (Schmitt 1996). Schmitt assumed that humans have a need for domination and will kill for their convictions, and liberalism cannot provide a form of politics that recognises that. The way of avoiding the inevitable enmity and conflict between men and its descent into "absolute violence" and ultimately annihilation, is precisely when the State acts to decide who is the enemy and to defeat the enemy without eliminating the friend/foe distinction *per se* (Bernstein 2013, 44). Schmitt uses the potential for violence as a reason why the State must assume a sovereign role in determining when that should be. He does so in order to put forward his argument for the inherent vulnerability of parliamentary democracy, which uses legality and illegality as arbitrary interpretations of the "empty functionalism of a mere arithmetic majority and minority calculation" (Schmitt 2004, 30). Rather than active consent, legitimacy is for Schmitt merely a choice not to resist authority, a right which itself always raises the latent potential for violence (McCormick 2004, xxiv).

The relevance of Schmitt's perspective is how it resonates with polarised political moments in history, such as our contemporary one. Liberal parliamentarianism only offers the possibility for a heterogeneous plurality of views, he suggests, not for an expression of the democratic will. "Every democracy", he argues "rests on the presupposition of the indivisibly similar,

entire, unified people, for them there is, then, in fact and in essence, no minority and still less a number of firm, permanent minorities" (Schmitt 2004, 28). One does not have to agree with Schmitt to see how his line of reasoning echoes through the decades and could easily find expression in US President Trump's frustration with Congress and with the numerical questioning of his "popular vote". And Schmitt left out the impact of the rising number of *actual* assaults and intimidations from the right on the socialist representatives in the Weimar Republic in his attempt to explain the inherent weakness of parliamentary constitutionalism. Violence remains potentially part of the repertoire of actual politics, and a thinly legitimised monopoly within a rule based liberal order does not prevent that.

1.2. From Biopower to Bare Life, from Non-Dominating Power to Agonistic Politics: Critiquing and Re-imagining the Politics and Violence Nexus

Weber, Benjamin and Schmitt, reflecting liberal, left and right on the political spectrum, accepted the human ontology of violence and engaged with how political orders emerged from that premise. Michel Foucault (1982) argued that violence came to be used less and less by the State in Europe as it adopted a range of tools to discipline and dominate its subjects. Foucault explored how the State's use of violence and dominating, coercive power evolved into techniques of power, and specifically "biopower", exercised at the level of life rather than over the subject's life and death. Violence, however, almost disappears under the weight of his conceptualisation of governmentality. It is Giorgio Agamben (1998) who shows that violence remains part of the repertoire of sovereign power in its foundation and in its control over the living. The political he argues (1998, 181) is founded upon the sovereign's power to exclude while including life under its power to kill with impunity, reducing it to "bare life". It is the sovereign who decides the state of exception and the boundary between law and non-law. This echoes Schmitt, but Agamben is unmasking the dangers of violent sovereign power. The US prison at Guantanamo Bay and its detention of alleged terrorists without any legal process was the real-life backcloth to his arguments.

Agamben brings back the ongoing *presence* of violence in politics and the State. Others have challenged the ontology itself or created new analytical tools for how politics, the State and violence could be re-configured. Hannah Arendt (1970) has been the most foundational in terms of her effort to reconstitute politics on the basis of power not violence, power conceptualised as its opposite. Arendt suggests that politics need not involve either violence or the domination of man over man. Arendt's political world is social, plural and intercommunicative, and formed by power as its "end" unlike violence, which is a means forever needing justification. Violence can never be legitimate, whereas power emerges through people coming together, and requires no other legitimation than the reciprocity and consensus around its beginning. Her emphasis on power as consensus, nevertheless, raises questions of whether her approach fails to embrace the inevitable conflicts that, it could be argued, are the lifeblood of politics and the pursuit of strategic goals within it (Habermas 1977, 15).

Here Chantal Mouffe (2005a, 2005b) steps in to suggest that politics could be conceived as a realm of agonism rather than antagonism. She is as opposed to Arendt's understanding of the political as a space for freedom and public deliberation, as she is to liberalism's assumption that plural interests can be reconciled in the private sphere, leaving the political as a neutral sphere of administration. Writing at the turn of the millennium and at the height of neoliberalism's rise, when politics in the developed economies of the West seemed to be increasingly reduced to an instrumental activity where private interests dominated within a framework of apparently neutral procedures, Mouffe was interested in the ongoing real antagonism of incommensurable world views. Her agonistic order would mobilise political passions, and democracy would offer a robust space of contention between competing positions on questions of poverty and injustice, for example, and the possibility of the construction of a new hegemony. The acceptance of such contestations is the legitimate meaning of politics, limiting the resort to violent destructiveness of the political itself.

However, while violence is an implicit potential of conflict for Mouffe, it is not a problematic in its own right. The distinction between conflict and violence is not always clear, nor when exactly the former might degenerate into the latter. Arendt, on

the other hand, has what Frazer and Hutchings (2008, 105) argue is an abstract and disembodied account of violence. Arendt challenged the scientists of the 1960s who argued that violence was an instinct, and rather viewed rage and the violence which sometimes accompanied it, as part of a repertoire of natural human emotions which enable us also to be moved by injustice. Arendt and Mouffe demonstrate that we ought not to consider ourselves dependent on Weber for our understanding of politics, the State and violence. We have tools that help us to imagine a politics which is built on a non-dominating form of power or to imagine an agonistic politics which accounts for human passions but without descending into violent enmity capable of destroying political order itself. In neither case, however, do we have a satisfactory account of violence. Nor is there any acknowledgement of how the violence "outside" politics might impact on the conflict inherent in politics, understood as strategic action and involving incommensurable world views.

2. Violence: A Phenomenon Subject to Social Action

Weber's "thin legitimacy" does not provide a means of recognising the dangers of the state's violent power over life and death. Nor have liberal democratic politics eliminated the risk that politics can allow the will of the people to be claimed – potentially violently – by a faction, who might win the power of the State through media and other techniques that stand outside the parliamentary system but are not necessarily illegal. We need tools to enable us to recognise the significance of persistent violences in the multiple spaces of human socialisation and interaction outside and against the State and how they might impact on the way we *believe* our State has to be constructed and how politics is practised. The only way, it is argued here, that we can begin to appreciate the ongoing role of violence in politics and how to address it, is to focus on violence itself. It is to recognise the potent qualities and properties of violence, not as a human ontology but as something which across the socialisation spaces has communicated and constructed meanings in human social interactions. Rather than see these violences as an inevitable part of human existence which the State monopoly mitigates, it is argued here that those persistent violences are often reproduced by the State, while they also limit our capacity to imagine a politics which is not shaped by their intractability.

There is historical evidence that the State monopoly, where it has worked alongside a functioning rule of law, has reduced violence measured in homicides (Elias 2000; Pinker 2011; Eisner 2014). However, it has been estimated that only twenty-five countries and 15 percent of the world's population live in such "open access orders" today (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009, xii). And even in such orders where problems of organised and homicidal violence have diminished, varied forms of violence still impact on the private and public spheres. There is not space to develop that line of argument further here. Rather, this article aims to steer our focus onto the necessity of unpacking the problematic of violence itself and to question our selectivity towards the violences which matter to politics. In this context, it is important to see that how the "modern semantics of violence" (Schinkel 2010, 31) changes across time and culture. It does so, I argue, in an iterative process involving greater sensibilisation to violence, leading to social action on violence, to greater openness to the new knowledges which deepen our understanding of the phenomenon itself, and in turn, to further social action. In this way, the paradoxical logic that Schinkel identifies by which the State would lose its core function without private violence, which is the "bad/evil" violence juxtaposed to the "good" violence of the State, gradually disappears (2010, 31). The conceptual *possibility* of a politics without violence can emerge.

Stephen Pinker (2011, 680–81) highlighted five factors which have contributed to the reduction of violence: the Leviathan (accompanied by *Justitia*), gentle commerce, feminisation, the expanding circle of human connections and the escalation of reason. I would argue that what he omits is the active agency involved in the naming and de-sanctioning of many forms of violence previously unrecognised as such. It was a feminist movement that enabled "feminisation" of professional and political life to take place, and then for violent experiences of women to be taken seriously in the public and political realms. From child punishment being recognised as abuse and violence, to violence in the domestic sphere being recognised as a crime, to rape in war being recognised as unacceptable

(yet as normalised as warfare itself), the late twentieth century began to show sensitivities to forms of violence unimaginable in the past. Social movements, from feminism to victims' movements, and civil society organisations dedicated to human rights, for example, have played a critical role in opening up discussion on these and other expressions of violence. Violence in its multiple expressions has become a focus of social action, and in the process the threshold of acceptance of violence has lowered, at least in some parts of the world[2]. From torture and disappearance to bullying and mental health, the need for new understandings of the embodied social logics and effects of violence have been placed on the public agenda. New forms of violence become in this way part of political debate, demanding political action. Many more remain outside it. De-sanctioning tends itself to select aspects of violence. Only when violence is understood as a phenomenon, will these particular acts of de-sanctioning enable violence itself to be seen as a tractable human problem rather than an ontological one, constitutive of politics and the State.

2.1. The Biology of Aggression and the Sociology of Violence

Getting to grips with the character of violence involves an interdisciplinary conversation on how the biology of aggression translates into the social body and ultimately the body politic. However, nothing exposes the weakness of our interdisciplinary conversations more than the study of violence (except perhaps the study of peace). In the 1960s, natural scientists tended to offer reductionist determinism, while social scientists denied that the biological body had any bearing on our social world. However, the fields of biology and neuroscience, for instance, have made enormous strides in their own engagement with the reciprocal impacts of the social and the biological. It is increasingly acknowledged that the biological body is entwined in systems of social relationships. Genetic and evolutionary explanations which have at times guided thinking on a human ontology of violence, are now placed within a range of other scientific studies, which reveal the impact of social relationships on our bodies and even our gene expression. Epigenetics, for example, has begun to show that childhood abuse can modify DNA to keep genes from being expressed, genes which might help in the management of stress, and can explain the long-term physical and psychological problems that confront such children. Whether and why some abused children become abusers becomes at least a relevant question for the study of violence. In this short section, it is not possible to detail all the potential for new conversations between natural and social scientists. However, our greater understanding of violence suggests that it is worth revisiting the human ontology arguments and how they impact on our construction of the political. Not all science necessarily challenges the ontology argument, of course. Stephen Pinker has also shown that violence can reduce, but he is also committed to an ultimately Hobbesian explanation of its origins. Yet, if we make a distinction between aggression as a biological impulse and violence as a meaning-laden and meaning-generating one, we can begin to question the Hobbesian logics that still imbue our politics.

Felicity de Zulueta, a biologist, psychotherapist and psychiatrist, provides the following summary of the differences between aggression and violence:

> [...] aggression is a form of social behaviour studied by ethologists, biologists and psychologists, whereas violence is more about the interpretation that is given to a form of social behaviour, an interpretation that is essentially determined by the social context in which we live. At times both terms are interchangeable but at other times they are not: an interaction deemed abusive or violence in one culture may be considered quite "normal" in another. (2006, 3)

Once we begin to accept that aggression is indeed part of our human ontology, but violence is a part of an interpretative realm, we begin the journey towards understanding the distinctiveness of violence. Aggression, and our capacity to address it, is part of the emotional/cerebral circuits which manage our responses to the social world. Our experiences in that world generate stored memories of pain and threats. Pathbreaking work by psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1971) drew attention to

[2] For empirical examples of this see Pearce (2007b) and McGee and Pearce (2009).

the importance of protection and safety to human survival, alongside reproduction and nutrition. He roots attachment in evolutionary theory and the gene-determined bias to reduce our risk of coming to harm through forming intimate relationships with a sexual partner, parents and offspring (Bowlby 1998, 90). Such relationships of proximity give humans the security to act in the world and to explore it (Holmes 1993, 67). However, separation and threatened separation generate frustration, anxiety and anger. While, in evolutionary terms, these emotions are functional to maintaining the intimate relationships, they can easily become distorted in ways that are dysfunctional. Bowlby argues that the latter is responsible for a great deal of the "maladaptive violence" in families (Bowlby 1998, 91), while trauma through abuse, deprivation and loss can profoundly affect the way we feel and behave (de Zulueta 2006, 54).

This intimate space of socialisation is just one where it is possible to explore how ruptures in attachment bonds generate stress and disrupt the emotional circuits which guide our capacity to relate to others. Other such spaces would include the street, the neighbourhood, the school the prison. Of course, this only *illustrates* a line of enquiry into how the biological and social body interact and whether in particular circumstances one can trace connections between traumatic experiences in childhood and violent responses and actions in adolescence, for example. It leads to questions on the temporalities of violence and its transmission over time and across generations.

We can also explore the transmission of violence across social spaces. How do experiences of trauma and violence in the intimate space impact on social interactions in other spaces such as the street and the school? Without suggesting a crude linearity, there is scope for further empirical work on what has been called by social scientists a "violence continuum" (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). A dialogue between the natural and social sciences on violence has become a fruitful one. And this is captured in the following words of biologist Debra Niehoff, in which she takes us a step further towards an understanding of the distinctiveness of the phenomenon of violence:

> Violence is the failure to respect the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable aggression. If we want to prevent this breakdown, to have people reserve their strongest responses for true emergencies, we must protect the nervous system from injury, destabilising levels of stress, drugs, isolation and victimisation. We must strive to create a safe environment flexible enough to accommodate some risk taking, structured enough to prevent confusion ... Behaviour is developed not determined. And because social behaviours like aggression lie at the cutting edge of adaptation to the environment, they are among the behavioural elements most open to change. (Niehoff 1999, 261)

By bringing in the idea of a boundary between "acceptable and unacceptable aggression", Niehoff raises the question of why violence is recognised as such in differential, culturally mediated ways. We give varied meanings to the acts of pain on the bodies of others and ourselves. Hurting a child can be punishment, discipline or violence. A value-neutral definition of violence which assumes that it is recognisably an act of physical force which aims to harm is questionable. Acts of meaning and judgement are involved, and, legitimation – as in Weber's attempt to legitimate the violence of the State – is always "liable to be contested" (Riches 1986, 11). It is the social scientists who take up these aspects of violence to open the discussion around its meanings. Anthropolgist David Riches explores the potency of violence as social and cultural resource across cultures, even where there is no word for violence. He argues that violence is equally efficacious for practical (instrumental) and symbolic (expressive) purposes (ibid., 25). That is its potency. And the notion of expressive violence leads us towards violence and meaning. Sociologist Randall Collins has located the micro-situational meanings of violence in the "contours of situations, which shape the emotions and acts of the individuals who step inside them" (Collins 2008, 1) and the way "interaction among several human bodies in close communication is quite literally driving their individual physiology from the outside in" (Collins 2013, 140). Collins's extensive empirical work brings him to focus on the physicality of the moment of violence-making. Literary scholar Jan Philipp Reemtsma, who uses sociological research but is not beholden to it (Reemtsma 2012, ix), also argues that violence "is first and foremost physical violence, the nonconsensual assault on another's body. 'First and foremost' means that physical violence is the point of reference for other, nonphysical forms of violence" (ibid., 55).

The reduction of violence to its physicality ignores for some the misrecognition (Bourdieu 2004) of repeated actions of somatic harm not recognised as violence. Yet, Bourdieu also sees symbolic violence in physical terms, when he notes the trembling of women who have been persistently subordinated when they speak with others (ibid.). Symbolic violence generates psychic somatic harm, often manifested physically. Structural violence (Galtung 1969) results in many forms of somatic harm, for example when a child suffers from avoidable malnutrition. The debate on the wider and narrower parameters of violence remains unresolved. However, the search beyond definitions and causality towards the meanings in violence has led to efforts to give violence its distinctive weight and significance as a phenomenon. Reemtsma is concerned to understand violence phenomenologically, not in terms of the perpetrator or his or her intention, "but the deed in relation to the body on which it is inflicted" (ibid., 56–57). The usefulness of the phenomenological lens is that it takes us away from the selectivity around violence and its particular expressions, such as self-directed, interpersonal, collective, private or public. We can appreciate why it is that "making sense" of violence seems counter-intuitive, and why we so readily allow an entity we call "the State" to essentially select for us which violences matter. By highlighting the centrality of a world experienced through the sensory capacities of the body, phenomenology helps us begin the process of making sense of violence from precisely that point. As Michael Staudigl argues, such a perspective on violence exposes the lived and vulnerable body in the whole spectrum of its embodiment, in contrast to the "underexposed notion of human corporeality" in most disciplines (2004, 57).

2.2. Violence without Politics: From the Biological to the Social Body

This brief and selective dip into varied disciplinary lenses on violence aims to emphasise the richness of the current debate and how far it has travelled since 1919. It also brings us to to the matter of conceiving a way of thinking about violence which could give it a centrality of its own. This underlines the incapacity of politics as currently conceptualised and practised to offer a route to reducing it in all its forms and expressions. Violence must be recognised not only as meaning-laden, but also as meaning-generating.

Violence belongs to our sense-making bodily selves, with origins in our social body. Its distinctiveness has to be sought in the fact that an act or action of pain or harm to the body of self or other is literally not senseless. As phenomenologist, James Dodd writes: "violence is situated in a world of sense, but in a manner that seems to hold it apart from sense" (2009, 15). Violence brings a rupture in our sense-making, but that itself enables its perpetrator to communicate something about the world to the victim. Our difficulty of expressing pain in language tells us a great deal about the potency of its communicative power: "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (Scarry 1985, 4). Some have argued that violence not only communicates meaning but that it generates meaning and goes beyond a mean-ends continuum, that violence is autotelic (for example Schinkel 2010). The notion that violence could generate its own sense is strengthened by the example of the Islamic State suicide bombers. These mostly young men appear to generate meaning in their own lives as well as in the world they aim to re-found, through an act of self-annihilation and social destruction. Another way that violence could be understood to generate sense is the way, as Schinkel notes, "many people feel drawn to violence because violence itself can give pleasure" (2010, 122). He links this to the pervasiveness of "frictional violence" (ibid., 129), straddling the real and the fictional worlds, where many will encounter violence on a daily basis even when they live in varying degrees of threat of actual violence.

The differential meanings borne by and generated through violence for women and men are also part of the story of its distinctiveness as a phenomenon. While women do commit homicides, it could be argued that violence does not have the identity-affirming character for women that it does for men. Indeed, women tend to be more female the less violent they are, which is the opposite for men. Men *fulfil* expectations of masculinity by acting violently (Pearce 2007a). Much of Norbert Elias's civilising story of violence decline is a story of male-on-

male interpersonal violence. It could not be understood without discussions of shame and honour in the male social psyche and the ease with which violence communicates meanings around these norms. The statistics on male-on male-violence continue to tell a story whose significance is best acknowledged through an appreciation of the differentiated gendered meanings of violence:

> Fatal violence is not distributed evenly among sex and age groups. Males account for 82% of all homicide victims and have estimated rates of homicide that are more than four times those of females (10.8 and 2.5, respectively, per 100,000). ... The highest estimated rates of homicide in the world are found among males aged 15–29 years (18.2 per 100,000), followed closely by males aged 30–44 years (15.7 per 100,000). Estimated rates of homicide among females range from 1.2 per 100,000 in ages 5–14 years, to 3.2 per 100,000 in the age group 15–29 years. (WHO 2014)

In Latin America, a new word – feminicide – began to be used in the new millennium to make visible the differential meanings of killing women rather than men. If the killing of women (femicide) is mostly hidden in the homicide statistics, this is even more true of the killing of women because they *are women* (feminicide). This new addition to the lexicon of violence is due to the breaking of silences and the accumulated social action on violence which gathered pace in the late twentieth century.

3. Conclusion: The Politicisation of Violence in a Reverse Re-coupling

We are ready to move away from contested claims about legitimacy and violence, with the State being *defined* through its claim to a successful monopoly of its legitimate use. A politics which assumes a human ontology of violence contained by a "legitimate" State monopoly has enabled the State to decide which violences are criminal and pathological, but leaving many unrecognised or misrecognised (Bourdieu 2004). Not only is our politics unable to address the multiple expressions of the phenomenon of violence, it is also vulnerable to their use and misuse by the State and those seeking state power. At the time of writing this paper, there was mounting evidence of state and non-state violence impacting on the electoral process itself, for example anti-Semitic attacks, racist abuse and death threats to UK politicians during the June 2017 election; the torture and murder of a senior Kenyan election official just prior to the July 2017 election; in Venezuela, the deaths of fourteen people in clashes with security forces during voting for President Maduro's controversial constitutional assembly also in July 2017.

If violence as a phenomenon becomes a central political issue, taking into account new knowledge about the social mechanisms of its reproduction, a case could be made that politics and the State should be the arena for addressing it rather than monopolising it. The idea of a central monopoly appeals intuitively, particularly when such monopoly is actively contested. It could be argued some form of enforcement, and thus violence as law, will be needed as violence sensibilities expose more aspects of violence and until our sensibilities towards violence challenge our understandings of revenge and punishment. However, to *define* the State through monopolisation ignores the history of violence reproduction, as well as reduction over time of some violences in some contexts, that this has entailed. The focus on what the State is and the tools politics should employ should not rely on its relationship to violence per se, but to how it builds the conditions to live without violence. A politics which begins from the vulnerability of the social body to the impacts of varied forms of somatic harm would offer a conceptual foundation more attuned with the most recent knowledge of violence. From within politics, the recognition that violence inhibits participation, preserves inequality – which, in turn, correlates with violence (Wilkinson and Pickett 2011) – and distorts if not destroys democracy, could lead to the politicisation of violence as a central concern of politics and the State, but one which does not constitute either.

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