

OVERCOMING MODERNITY AND VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT: Violence is one of the most pervasive problems in the world today. Despite all efforts to apply the powers of reason in order to contain, if not completely eliminate violence, violence proves to be capable of escaping capture and re-emerging in new and unexpected forms. Reason and rationality appear to be powerless against violence. The paper explores some philosophical issues that shed new light on the persistence of violence in the modern world. It argues that the failure of modernity to recognize and come to grips with the process of construction that constitutes the basis of our relationship with reality plays a critical role in the continued survival of violence.

KEYWORDS: Violence; Epistemology; Construction of knowledge; Enlightenment

For over two centuries now the West has exercised an unprecedented hegemony in the modern world. Its powerful effects are ubiquitous. There is hardly any aspect in the life of the contemporary global community that the pervasive influence of the West has not affected: from politics to economics, intellectual ideas, science, technology, the arts, and many others—all bear an unmistakable mark of the impact of Western supremacy. The very notions of modernization and modernity that are integral to the contemporary world are hallmarks of Western culture.

The Enlightenment project has been and remains at the heart of the unprecedented role of the West. This project is ultimately not about a rigid set of doctrines or policies. More than anything else, it is about a promise and a commitment to human reason. In the minds of those who have framed and shaped this project, the rule of reason will pave the humanity's path toward liberation. They share one profound conviction: that the rule of reason will help resolve all problems faced by the humanity and will bring democracy, justice, equality, economic prosperity, and peace to our troubled world. The world renewed by the salutary rule of reason will know no violence, no fanaticism, no tyranny, and no war. There will be

no oppressors and oppressed, no victims and victimizers. Under the guidance of reason we should be able to exercise rational and compassionate control over nature and its resources for the benefit of humanity and the world.

Such is the promise that the West has extended to the rest of the world. There have been moments in history when the fulfillment of this promise seemed close at hand. The most recent moment occurred towards the end of the twentieth century with the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War when many believed that we were on the threshold of an era of peace, prosperity, and the dominance of liberal democracy throughout the world. Some even hazarded to proclaim that history had finally reached its end.¹ Yet this moment did not last very long.

Subsequent developments have proven such predictions to be an illusion, a dream of wishful thinkers that had nothing to do with the real world. The attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, was a rude awakening from the self-congratulatory complacency into which the West lulled itself. It has revealed how deeply divided the world is and what powerful destructive and violent forces are at work. Ever since the events of 9/11 no one has had any doubts that we continue to live in a dangerous, uncertain, and utterly unpredictable world, and that the fulfillment of the Enlightenment promise remains as distant as it has ever been. In what we hear today from politicians and pundits, religious leaders and public figures, and even common citizens one can sense the same unsettling and troubling questions: Will the world survive? Will our children see the future? Will the promise made several centuries ago ever be fulfilled? Will reason, rather than power and violence, prevail in our world?

Since the dawn of the modern era, Western culture has viewed reason as a dynamic property of the human mind that is capable of organizing reality and developing it in ways that are beneficial to the human race and the world in general. Much of the project of modernity is about the affirmation, validation, and realization of what it sees as the infinite potential of human reason. The elimination of violence is one of the most important goals that the rule of reason is supposed to achieve. Many have believed, and continue to believe, that rational human agents guided by reason should be able to find ways of resolving conflicts without resorting to violent, destructive, and brutal forms of behavior. They cherish the hope that wars can become obsolete and violence will have no place in human interactions.

No one sees the project of modernity as a one-time deal with a clearly identifiable set of goals. Rather, most view it as an on-going process with constantly expanding horizons. However, this view does not mean that as the project evolves, its goals and

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

promises will constantly receded into a distant future. On the contrary, the project of modernity is about setting rational goals and achieving them. In contrast with otherworldly promises of religion, much of the appeal of the project of modernity rests on its practicality, realism, and the expectation of success. In fact, the very spirit of rationality and empirical proof --characteristic for the project of modernity -- implies that those who embrace this project measure its success by the attainment of its goals.

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It has become commonplace to critique the project of modernity. Numerous detractors have disparaged Enlightenment civilization for its insensitivity to the plight of the poor and underprivileged, its unrestrained search for gratification, for the ravages of merciless exploitation of people and nature, for its acceptance of the oppression of women and ethnic minorities, for its racial inequality, its imperialist expansionism and indignity of colonial domination, its disregard of human rights, and for religious intolerance. Many have expressed doubts about its overall direction and prospects for success. The skepticism of post-modernism regarding the capacity of reason to understand reality has gained substantial support in intellectual circles. Even devoted advocates of modernity have expressed doubts about a possibility of its success. In his contribution "Modernity: An Unfinished Project" Jürgen Habermas, one of the most important modern thinkers in the Enlightenment tradition, concludes that the prospects for the fulfillment of the Enlightenment promise "are not very encouraging."²

Few concerns about the project of modernity attract more attention than the continued survival of violence. More than two centuries separate us from the time when Immanuel Kant reflected on the capacity of reason to create eternal peace, and they have seen violence on an industrial scale. The great French revolution surrendered the ideals of liberty and inviolability of rights to the violence of the Terror and the Napoleonic wars. The revolutions of the 19th and 20th century, colonialism

² Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project," in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1997), 38-55, pp. 54-55.

and nationalism also claimed their share of brutality and barbarity. The massive slaughter of the two world wars in the 20th century with the extermination of six million Jews under the Nazis shocked even those who were not oblivious to man's capacity for evil. Even the triumphant moment of liberal democracy that followed the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Soviet Communism was marked by numerous outbursts of savagery and barbarism across Europe and the world.

Such is the visible record of the period that has experienced an unprecedented growth of material wealth and technological power. But there has also been insidious forms of violence that went unrecorded and unpublicized—violence that has been difficult to track or document: the violence towards women, domestic violence, child abuse, lynching, gay bashing, and even more subtle and insidious forms of violence—such as psychological, verbal, or symbolic—that ruined lives and careers, and left indelible scars on individual and collective psyche.

One would certainly be in remiss to see the modern period exclusively in terms of violence and destruction. In his well-publicized book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* that has generated a great deal of controversy, Steven Pinker, a Harvard psychologist, has marshaled a great deal of empirical evidence to prove that despite all the wars and destruction, the current exposure to violence is significantly less severe than it was several hundred years ago, to say nothing about several millennia.³ Pinker has no illusions about the human race. He sees humans as equally predisposed to both conflict and cooperation by the evolutionary hard wiring of our brain. However, he also emphasizes what he sees as an encouraging influence of the “civilizing process”—the term he borrows from Norbert Elias. In Pinker's view the improved material circumstances of human existence and the ameliorating cultural attitudes have significantly diminished the level of violence in the modern world by comparison with the preceding periods.

Pinker's statistics and arguments are not universally accepted. Some feel that statistics may be misleading in assessing the level of violence in the modern world. The declining percentages conceal much greater absolute numbers. The statistical odds may mean little for those who still lose their life to violence today. There is also no guarantee that the relatively peaceful period that we have experienced since World War II will not end in a new cataclysm. Some of the aspects of the civilizing process cited positively by Pinker may appear to be a dubious blessing. For example, the monopolization of violence by the state may diminish the level of violence among individuals, but it certainly preserves violence as a tool of the state vis-à-vis its citizens. The irony has not escaped Elizabeth Kolbert who in her review of Pinker's book has

³ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).

cited Churchill's remark: "It may well be that we shall by a process of sublime irony have reached a stage in this story where safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation."⁴

Dan Stone also observes that violence "need not involve the relation of individuals; the state is just as capable of treating the 'object of violence' as one 'potentially worthy of bodily harm, or even annihilation'."⁵ In his review of Pinker's book in *The Christian Science Monitor* Jordan Smith argues:

As a proportion of the world's population, or even just Norway's, the sixty-nine casualties on Utøya hardly register. By Pinker's method of accounting, they received far too much coverage; in an average year in Norway, some three hundred people die from accidental poisoning. But the shootings illustrate in nightmare fashion what we all know to be the case. Hate and madness and cruelty haven't disappeared, and they aren't going to. Systems break down and, worse still, can be subverted. This is one of the lessons of Auschwitz, and it's why, since 1945, most people have hesitated to argue that modernity and violence are opposed . . . The demons may yet return (Smith 2011).⁶

This article does not intend to enter the fray over Pinker's book. Both Pinker and his critics agree that the level of violence in contemporary society still remains prohibitively high and that violence and the civilizing process have proven to be compatible if not agreeable companions. The question is: Why do they coexist? What makes their coexistence possible? Will the civilizing process ever be able to get rid of violence and deliver on the promise of modernity?

CRITIQUE OF THE MODERN CONCEPTION OF REASON

The persistence of violence under modern conditions is an enigma that continues to baffle researchers. Explanations of this persistence vary widely: from the emphasis on biology and evolution, to social conditions, to culture and politics.⁷ Despite their

⁴ Elizabeth Kolbert, "Peace in Our Time," *New Yorker* 87, no. 30 (October 3, 2011): 75-78.

⁵ Dan Stone, "Modernity and Violence: theoretical reflections on the Einsatzgruppen," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 1(3), 1999, 367-378, p. 374.

⁶ Jordan Michael Smith, "The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined," *Christian Science Monitor* (October 20, 2011).

⁷ Here are some references to these different perspectives: Martin Enserink, "Searching for the Mark of Cain," *Science* 289, no. 5479 (July 28, 2000): 575-580; H. J. Eysenck, "The Origins of Violence," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 5, no. 3 (1979): 105-107; Suzanne Maiello, "Broken links: attacks or breakdown? Notes on the origins of violence," *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2000), pp. 5-24; Christopher J. Ferguson and Kevin M. Beaver, "Natural born killers: The genetic origins of extreme violence," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 14, no. 5 (September): 286-294. Alexander Lee, "Who Becomes a Terrorist?: Poverty, Education, and the Origins of Political Violence," *World Politics* 63, no. 2 (2011): 203-245; Arjun Appadurai, "Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization," *Development and Change* 29,

differences, all these perspectives agree that in one way or another—by omission or by commission—reason is implicated in this continued survival of violence. Critics of modernity, such as Hannah Arendt or Zygmunt Bauman, lay violence squarely at the doorstep of reason. They see violence as instrumental to reason and view it as a direct outcome of the project of modernity—an inevitable consequence of its efforts to control and compartmentalize human life in the name of putative progress, technocratic efficiency, and governmental bureaucratic logic.⁸ As Gianni Vattimo summarized:

The discovery that the rationalization of the world turns against reason and its ends of perfection and emancipation, and does so not by error, accident, or a chance distortion, but precisely to the extent that it is more and more perfectly accomplished.⁹

Others try to vindicate reason and modernity from the alleged complicity in violence. Dan Stone, for example, in his article “Modernity and violence: theoretical reflections on the Einsatzgruppen”¹⁰ disputes the argument that violence is a logical consequence of modernization. Although he recognizes the fact that violence and modern civilization can coexist and that violence can survive within modernity, he does not see them as intimately and logically connected. In his nuanced reading of the reports by Einsatzgruppen, Stone tries to show “how the conjunction of rationalized society and violent passions—which exist now as they did before 1945—erupts at certain moments into so apocalyptic a force.”¹¹ Stone sees Nazi violence as a product of the paradox in their project. According to his interpretation, the Nazis attempted to destroy the foundation of modern society; but this attempt, in his view, “was derived

no. 4 (October 1, 1998): 905-925; José Casanova, “Cosmopolitanism, the clash of civilizations and multiple modernities,” *Current Sociology* 59, no. 2 (2011): 252-267; Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970); Jr. Barrington Moore, “Thoughts on Violence and Democracy,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 1968): 1-12; Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (New York: London: Zone; Distributed by MIT, n.d.); Peg Birmingham, “On Violence, Politics, and the Law,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 24, no. 1 (2010): 1-20; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Dan Stone, “Modernity and violence: theoretical reflections on the Einsatzgruppen,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 1, no. 3 (November 1999): 367.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁹ Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, cited in Dan Stone, “Modernity and violence,” p. 375.

¹⁰ Special paramilitary death squads in Nazi Germany that were responsible for most of the mass killings of civilian population during World War II.

¹¹ Stone, p. 376.

from that society itself.”¹² It is this contradictory agenda of undermining modernity from within modernity that led to the eruption of violence. As Stone summarizes:

What the Einsatzgruppen reports demonstrate is the existence of violence within modernity, not violence that rejects modernity, but nevertheless a violence which, in its shabby brutality, cannot simply be seen as a logical consequence of modernization.¹³

Contentions over persistence of violence show how intractable the problem is. Despite concerted efforts to contain it, violence remains ubiquitous. It continues to reappear in places where we least expect it. The ideals of the Enlightenment promised the world of peace, justice, and tolerance. Yet they could not prevent and, as some argue, actually contributed to the terror of the French Revolution, colonialism, world wars, and the savagery of genocides. In trying to understand wars, crimes, abuse, torture, we seek to assert the power of word and human reason and their supremacy over violence. Yet reason and word appear to be impotent against violence. Despite all efforts, violence remains immune to our words and deeds; it always manages to escape a capture. It is, as David Bell and Lawrence Schehr put it, “an ineffable of our existence”—uncontainable, unrepresentable, and ultimately uncontrollable.¹⁴

But why should this be so? Why is violence capable of escaping capture? Why reason is powerless against it? Is it possible that reason itself contains violence? This question is not new. One encounters this idea, for example, in a curious inversion of the Malthusian loop by George Bataille, who has argued in his *The Accursed Share (Le part maudite)* that the economic rationality produces excess energy that needs to be destroyed.¹⁵ To Adorno and Horkheimer the *Odyssey* reveals “a terrible vengeance” and mutilation that the birth of reason wreaked on the primordial world of myth.¹⁶ Although the answers provided by those who identified reason with violence may not be ultimately convincing, the possibility of reason’s complicity in violence that they raise certainly encourages one to explore the conception of reason that has been and continues to be dominant in Western culture.

“Reason” and “rationality” are very familiar words. We often use them without thinking much about the meaning that we attribute to them. We tend to forget that the way we think about and use reason may not necessarily be universal: it is a

¹² Stone, p. 375.

¹³ Stone, p. 376.

¹⁴ David F. Bell and Lawrence R. Schehr, “Reading Violence,” *SubStance*, No. 86, 1998, p. 3.

¹⁵ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. 1 (New York : Zone ; London : MIT Press, 1988).

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment,” *New German Critique*, no. 56 (Spring 1992): 109-141, p. 140.

product of a particular time and place. The way we think about reason has originated and evolved during the modern period in Western culture, and despite its numerous evolutionary permutations and peregrinations, still retains its original core. When reading Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, or Hegel, we still feel that despite many differences among them and between them and us, the way they and we think about reason is essentially the same. We accept this view of reason as a self-evident truth—a sort of Kantian synthetic a priori judgment. We consider it universal, that is, valid in all possible circumstances and under all empirical conditions. We are so sure of our way of understanding reason that we have rarely, if ever, submitted it to critical examination. We have never really asked ourselves a question if it is really true.

So what is this way that we see reason and how does it shape the way we use it? We can find the answer to this question by looking at some of the products of our use of reason. Let's take, for example, two philosophical perspectives that currently dominate the way we approach and interpret reality—realism and anti-realism.

As John Searle defines it,

Realism is the view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations. Realism does not say how things are but only that there is a way that they are.¹⁷

According to Searle, the realist view of the world has the following structural features:¹⁸

1. World (or alternatively, reality or the universe) exists independently of our representations of it.
2. Human beings have a variety of interconnected ways of having access to and representing features of the world to themselves.
3. Some of these representations . . . purport to be about and to represent how things are in reality. To the extent that they succeed or fail, they are said to be true or false, respectively. They are true if and only if they correspond to the facts in reality.
4. Systems of representation . . . are human creations, and to that extent arbitrary.
5. Complete epistemic objectivity is difficult, sometimes impossible.
6. Having knowledge consists in having true representations for which we can give certain sorts of justification or evidence. Knowledge is thus by definition

¹⁷ John R Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 155.

¹⁸ Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, pp. 150-51. For reasons of convenience and economy I provide a slightly abridged verbatim version.

objective in the epistemic sense, because the criteria for knowledge are not arbitrary, and they are impersonal.

As one can see from the above, the ontological separation of the subject and the object is at the very core of the realist view of the world. In accordance with this view, knowledge of reality is possible and involves an infinite asymptotic approximation between objects of reality and our representations of them.

There are numerous philosophical perspectives that disagree with realism. Despite their differences and even incompatibilities, they share some common features that allow to group them together under the general rubric of anti-realism.¹⁹ Broadly speaking, anti-realism is a philosophical critique of the main tenets of realism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into a detailed examination of these disagreements. It is quite sufficient to observe that they all boil down to one fundamental disagreement over the issue of validation. In contrast to realists, anti-realists maintain that we can never be sure how things actually are because a fit between a theory and data is insufficient for truth claims. Paul Horwich, for example, offers the following generalization:

It [anti-realism] derives from an impression of conflict between the alleged autonomy of the facts (their independence of us) and their accessibility (the possibility of our gaining knowledge of their existence). Consequently, it seems to the anti-realist that something of our naive point of view must be given up; some philosophical move must be made.²⁰

In support of their argument anti-realists refer to numerous theories in the past that fitted well with empirical data but have ultimately proven to be false (for example, the theory of flat Earth, the theory that placed Earth in the center of our planetary system, or the ether theory of light). They also point to the phenomenon of underdetermination—that is, the existence of different and often conflicting theories that are supported by the same empirical evidence—as a proof that a fit is no guarantee of the validity of a theory.²¹

¹⁹ For a good overview of both realism and its opponents, see Psillos, P. (1999) *Scientific Realism: How Science Tracks Truth* (London: Routledge); Ladyman, J. (2001) *Understanding Philosophy of Science* (London: Routledge); John R Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

²⁰ Paul Horwich, "Realism and Truth," *Noûs* 30 (January 1, 1996): 187-197, p. 188.

²¹ On underdetermination see Carl Hoefer and Alexander Rosenberg, "Empirical equivalence, underdetermination, and systems of the world," *Philosophy of Science* 61, no. 4 (December 1994): 592; Jarrett Leplin, "The Underdetermination of Total Theories," *Erkenntnis* (1975-) 47, no. 2 (January 1, 1997): 203-215; Lars Bergström, "Underdetermination and Realism," *Erkenntnis* (1975-) 21, no. 3 (November 1, 1984): 349-365; Alberto Cordero, "Realism and Underdetermination: Some Clues from the Practices-Up," *Philosophy of Science* 68, no. 3 (2001): S301-S312; Darrin Belousek, "Underdetermination, Realism, and

As one can see, there is a fundamental difference between realism and anti-realism. Anti-realism radically disagrees with the realist assertion that reality is knowable. Yet despite this critical difference, both realists and anti-realists have the same core conception of reality and reason. Both posit a gap between the subject and the object, except that the realists believe that this gap can be mediated by reason, while the anti-realists think that the credibility of such mediation is suspect. The gap between the knower and reality that is present in both perspectives indicates that both accept the traditional dualism as a given.

This dualism goes far back to the very early periods in the evolution of human thought. Plato, for example, believed that mind and body were ontologically distinct. The division between thought and reality, mind and matter, body and soul, subject and object, and the knower and the known is characteristic for much of the European, and not only European, intellectual tradition.²² This ontological dualism powerfully shapes the way we conceptualize reason and the way it operates. However, is the positing of this gap justified? Is it supported by empirical evidence?

ONE-SIDED CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS PREDISPOSITION TOWARDS VIOLENCE

In order to answer these questions, I will turn to the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget on the origin of intelligence. In his remarkable study *The Origin of Intelligence in Children* and in his other studies Piaget provides a very detailed empirical account of the development of symbolic thought.²³ The starting point in his account of this development is reflexes, or physiological functions (for example, muscle contraction). These functions require neural circuits for coordination and regulation. Nerve signals recursively trigger these functions and thus conserve them. The more often this triggering takes place, the more often physiological functions are exercised, and the more stable they are. Stable recursively operating reflex functions form what Piaget calls circular schemata, or sensory-motor operations.

Sensory-motor operations conserve themselves in two ways. First, they become increasingly oriented toward external reality in search of stimulation. This process evolves from random groping to a more directed search for stimuli that leads to a gradual construction of the object on the level of sensory-motor operations (but not yet on the representational level). As the growing number of objects is incorporated into

Theory Appraisal: An Epistemological Reflection on Quantum Mechanics.," *Foundations of Physics* 35, no. 4 (April 2005): 669-695.

²² In philosophy of science, dualism often refers to the dichotomy between the "subject" (the observer) and the "object" (the observed). Criticism of Western science may label this kind of dualism as a flaw in the nature of science itself. On dualism see Robinson 2011; Dickens 2010.

²³ Jean Piaget, *The Origin of Intelligence in Children* (Madison: International Universities Press, Inc., 1998).

sensory-motor schemata—the process Piaget calls assimilation—the infant becomes increasingly orientated toward the exogenous sphere.

Second, sensory-motor operations conserve themselves through coordination with each other and mutual assimilation (for example, tactile, audio, visual, gustatory, and other functions). One example of such mutual assimilation is the activation of the audio function by the visual one, and vice versa. In other words, infants begin to “see” when they hear and “hear” when they see (for example, at a certain age infants begin to turn their head to catch the sight of the mother when they hear her voice). Mutual assimilations on the sensory-motor level require coordination and mutual assimilation on the level of neural networks. The increasing interaction on the neural level creates the permanent neural organization that combines neural networks and eventually leads to the construction of permanent mental representations, or images. This process is completed at the beginning of the second year when infants begin to look for objects that are hidden from a direct view. The search for a hidden object indicates that an infant has already constructed a permanent mental image of the object; in other words, for infants the object begins to exist even when they do not see it. Mental representations regulate the functioning of combinations of neural networks (that in turn regulate sensory-motor operations) and act recursively on them.

The above explanation shows that one and the same process constructs, on one hand, objects of reality as they appear to us and, on the other, organizes our mind. In other words, it is this process of construction that constitutes true ontological reality, not the subject or the object that are merely its products. This process plays a vital role in the development of our mind and in the construction of our consciousness, or what we call reason. It is the source of reason. Our representations of reality will change; our consciousness will change. But the process of construction will remain the same in all of its essential features. Yet despite the importance of the process of construction for understanding human reason and how it operates, we exclude the process of construction from our view of reality and represent its products—the subject and the object—as the true ontological reality. Despite the absolute primacy of the process of construction, the conception of reality prevalent in modern culture focuses either on the subject (anti-realists) or on the object (realists) that are merely its products. Thus our conception of reality is fundamentally flawed.

It is hard to overestimate the role of mind and consciousness in our individual lives and our civilization as a whole. Operations performed in our consciousness powerfully affect the way we interpret reality, which, in turn, shapes our actions. Therefore, the exclusion of the process of construction from our view of reality and our conception of reason also has a powerful effect on how we interpret reality and, consequently, how

we act. The exclusive focus on the products of construction creates a framework for interpreting reality that leaves out the most important part of reality. It should, therefore, come as no surprise then that when we use this deficient framework, we get a very distorted view of reality. When we apply this framework to interpreting reality, we squeeze reality into the Procrustean bed of our extremely limited vision and thus commit an act of violence.

Our interactions with reality involve two principal operations: assimilation and adaptation. Assimilation is an operation that integrates objects of reality into internal functional schemata of the organism. This operation reduces the multiple and diverse world to the internal functions of our organism. Assimilation deprives objects of their autonomy and subordinates them to the functions of the organism. It is a very violent operation that is best exemplified by the devouring of one organism by another.

By contrast, adaptation involves recognition of the autonomy of reality and its objects. It essentially adjusts the functions of the organism to these autonomous objects. For example, due to adaptation, the child begins to modify the mode of prehension depending on the object's shape and texture. Due to adaptation, the organism can establish a more balanced relationship with reality. It creates a possibility for knowing reality as it is rather than reducing it to the functions of the organism. As an operation, adaptation plays an exceptional role in the origin and evolution of human intelligence and knowledge.²⁴

In his studies of intelligence Piaget shows that both operations are closely interrelated and play a very important role in the origin and evolution of human consciousness and symbolic thought. When we use a deficient framework for interpreting reality, when we reduce reality to our mental functions, we essentially limit ourselves to performing only one operation—assimilation. Unrestrained by adaptation, assimilation severely limits our capacity for understanding the multiple and diverse world; it does not recognize the autonomy of this reality; it subordinates reality to our own internally generated schemes. The result is a one-sided and self-centered representation of reality

Human reason (consciousness) regulates our interactions with reality. When our consciousness excludes the process of construction from its field of vision, it creates an inadequate and flawed interpretation of reality. This violence is not exclusively symbolic—that is, producing merely an inadequate knowledge of reality. It has real physical effects.

As a product of the evolution, our consciousness has much in common with the rest of nature. One of the most fundamental processes that operate in our

²⁴ Piaget, *Behavior and Evolution* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

consciousness, as it does in the rest of nature, is conservation. When our consciousness excludes the process of construction from its field of vision, it excludes the most important part of reality. With the process of construction out of the frame, our consciousness can only focus on the disconnected products of this process—the subject or the object—rather than the process itself. As a result, it tends to conserve the products rather than the process; it fetishizes and absolutizes those products and regards them as the only true reality, thus disrupting the process of construction and limiting its creative capacity. As the process of construction evolves and the old products are subjected to the pressure of change, a one-sided consciousness experiences this process of change as a loss of reality.

There are few traumatic experiences that can compare to loss of reality, that is, situations when people get a feeling that they can no longer understand reality or interpret it correctly. For a consciousness that experience such situation, reality becomes a void, an abyss devoid of any meaning, or worse, filled with negative meaning. In words of Shakespeare, time gets “out of joint.” Such consciousness develops a sense of disorientation, confusion, and fear; and violence is a very common corollary of fear. To make things worse, the capacity of such severely limited consciousness to cope with this condition is reduced to only one cognitive operation—assimilation. Such consciousness is incapable of critically examining itself; it simply cannot see the internal sources of its predicament. Rather than address the real source of its fear within itself, this consciousness tends to look for the cause of the fear outside itself: it develops the need to construct the enemy, to create a scapegoat on whom it can project its fears.²⁵ Since fear causes violent reactions, the enemy becomes the object of this violence and the destruction of the enemy becomes an obsessive but also elusive goal—elusive because the true cause of fear is never addressed.

Freud clearly understood the internal mechanism of the need to construct the enemy when he made a perceptive remark in reference to the Bolshevik revolution: “When Bolsheviks destroy all the capitalists, what are they going to do?” No destruction could possibly assuage the Bolshevik or Nazi anxiety, their fear, and consequently their need to construct and pursue the imaginary “enemy.” No matter how many victims they sacrificed to their “jealous god,” it continued to demand more sacrifices.

Despite numerous failures and much criticism, there are no signs that we will abandon the project of modernity any time soon. Its fundamental message retains a powerful appeal for many of us. As useful as it may be, criticism does not offer

²⁵ For an interesting discussion of the phenomenon of demonization and scapegoating see Ducharme and Fine 1995.

alternatives. And there are no alternatives for humans other than relying on reason—our most powerful tool in dealing with reality. What other means do we have? What else is powerful enough to give us a hope for a better future? Our consciousness has an infinite combinatorial capacity for constructing new operations. It is by far the most powerful form of organization of matter. There is nothing in the universe that can even come close to its power. Yet, an indisputable fact remains that so far our reason has not been able to cope with violence. Despite all our efforts violence continues to survive. It hides in numerous interstices of our complex society and rears its ugly head at any opportunity.

CONCLUSION

As this paper has argued, the continued survival of violence is not a proof that its power is superior to that of reason. Violence is associated with only one operation in the arsenal of tools available to us for dealing with reality. As important as assimilation is for the functioning of the organism, its power cannot even come close in comparison to the infinitely more powerful combination of assimilation and adaptation.

This paper has also argued that the remarkable survival of violence is due primarily to the fact that reason has allowed violence to subsist on the powers of reason. Unwittingly and unintentionally we limited the power of our consciousness by excluding the process of construction from its frame of vision and thus profoundly disturbing the required delicate balance between assimilation and adaptation. Thus reason yields to violence by failing to embrace its true reality and the source of its enormous power—the process of construction. This process lies at the very core of reality and its evolution. Our consciousness inherited it in the course of the biological evolution. It is a product of this process. It uses this process to create new forms of organization of reality and propel the evolution. The power of our consciousness in creating new forms is infinite. There is nothing that can prevent it from constructing yet another level of organization.²⁶ Only when our consciousness fails to embrace its true reality, the power of reason turns into a source of its powerlessness. Its remarkable capacity to create reality turns into destructive violence against reality. Indeed, “the sleep of reason produces monsters.”²⁷

In order to cope with violence, reason has to renew itself. Our consciousness has to embrace the source of its power—the process of construction. If we consciously

²⁶ See Gennady Shkliarevsky, “The Paradox of Observing, Autopoiesis, and the Future of Social Sciences,” vol. 24, issue 3 (May/June 2007), pp. 323-332.

²⁷ The phrase is borrowed from the title of one of Francisco Goya’s series of etchings *Los Caprichos*.

embrace and understand the process of construction and its fundamental relation to our consciousness, we will no longer have to experience uncontrollable fear of losing reality. The confusion and disorientation that accompanies the emergence of new levels of organization of reality will lose much of its traumatic impact if we understand that we are not losing reality in these moments of transition; rather, they bring us into a very close and intimate contact with the process that is the source of our existence—our true reality. We will no longer have to experience fear during such transitions. If we understand the inner source of our discomfort and are capable of using our critical powers for controlling it, we will no longer have a need to resort to violence against imaginary external “enemy” as a way of dealing with our fears; we will no longer have to engage in a ceaseless and totally futile effort of coping with this fear. Violence will no longer run amok in its senseless destruction.

This is not to argue for an idealistic and utopian vision. Violence is a natural phenomenon. It is a product of an operation that is very important for the evolution of reality. Without assimilation reality would never be able to evolve. As important as adaptation is, it cannot sustain the evolution by itself. Adaptation has to work in close interrelationship and balance with assimilation. However, the importance of assimilation does not imply that violence cannot be contained. Adaptation is capable of ameliorating the detrimental aspects of assimilation. Working together and in balance assimilation and adaptation are capable of providing constructive channels and productive outlets for our creative energies in our pursuit of new and ever more powerful levels of organization of reality.

We live in an age of disbelief and skepticism, if not cynicism. Some critics may be tempted to see in this essay only an inflated ego and megalomaniac illusions. Skepticism is a safe game in our age. It does not really have to provide solutions. Yet when skillfully performed, the work of a skeptic may place him or her into a hallowed position of truth-maker when in fact no truth is being made.

This essay does not appeal to faith. On the contrary, it calls for serious engagement and intense introspection. Only an inveterate idealist can believe that one can easily get rid of political practices, institutions, and social habits that promote and foster violence. Certainly, the elimination of violence will require concerted, consistent, and well-coordinated efforts by many dedicated individuals—activists, professionals, political and religious leaders, and public figures. A theoretical insight is only a step to a solution. Rather than seeking to recruit followers in a faith effort, this paper tries to encourage a liberating critical re-examination of our most fundamental, most dearly held beliefs about reality in the name and in fulfillment of the promise

made several centuries ago at the dawn of the modern age—the promise of the Enlightenment.

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