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## Violence, Identity and Poverty\*

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The article discusses two main approaches to explaining violence in contemporary global society. Theories based on the culture of societies, among which the theory of the clash of civilizations is the most influential, attempt to explain violence by referring to antagonisms between collective identities. Theories of the political economy of power and inequality seek the sole cause of violence in economic factors. While each approach has some plausibility, both are inadequate on their own. When applied as sufficient explanations, they may distort our understanding in a way that undermines the possibility for both alleviating poverty and reducing conflict. The causal mechanisms are more complex than economic reductionism is capable of accounting for. Poverty and inequality are importantly linked to violence, but must be seen together with divisions between factors such as nationality, culture and religion. In turn, these factors must not be based on a false image of solitary identities and unavoidable antagonisms between cultural groups. The article suggests that the coupling between cultural identities and poverty increases the significance of inequality and may contribute to violence. Approaches to explaining violence should avoid isolationist programmes that explain violence solely in terms of social inequality and deprivation or in terms of identity and cultural factors.

Violence is omnipresent in the world around us. On the root causes of contemporary global violence, theories abound – as theories are prone to. However, two particular lines of theorizing have come to receive much more attention than most others: one approach concentrates on the culture of societies, and the other on the political economy of poverty and inequality. Each approach has some plausibility, at least in some forms, and yet both are, I would argue, ultimately inadequate and in need of supplementation. Indeed, neither works on its own, and we need to see the two sets of influences together, in an integrated way.

I begin with the cultural approach – or more accurately, cultural approaches. Different cultural theories have something in common – they tend to look at conflicts and violence as they relate to modes of living as well as religious beliefs and social customs. That line of reasoning can lead to many different theories, some less sophisticated than others. It is perhaps remarkable that the particular cultural theory that has become the most popular in the world today is perhaps also the crudest. This is the approach of seeing global violence as the result of something that is called ‘the clash of civilizations’. The approach defines some postulated entities that are called ‘civilizations’ in primarily religious terms, and it goes on to contrast what are respectively called ‘the Islamic world’, ‘the Judeo-Christian’ or ‘the Western world’, ‘the Buddhist world’, ‘the Hindu world’ and so on. Divisions among

\* Spring Lecture at the Norwegian Nobel Institute, Oslo, 21 May 2007. Parts of the argument presented here draw on my Nadine Gordimer Lecture given in Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa, in April 2007, and which will be published in *The Little Magazine* (Delhi).

civilizations make them prone, we are informed, to clash with each other.<sup>1</sup>

Underlying the approach of civilizational clash is an oddly artificial view of history, according to which these distinct civilizations have grown separately, like trees on different plots of land, with very little overlap and interaction. And today, as these disparate civilizations, with their divergent histories, face one another in the global world, they are firmly inclined, we are told, to clash with each other – a tale, indeed a gripping tale, of what can be, I suppose, called ‘hate at first sight’. This make-believe account has little use for the actual history of extensive – and persistent – interactions through history, and constructive movements of ideas and influences across the borders of countries, in so many different fields – literature, arts, music, mathematics, science, engineering, trade, commerce and other human engagements.

Theorists of civilizational clash also seem convinced that coming closer to each other as human beings must somehow *aggravate* the anxiety about foreigners, rather than helping to allay it. This is at odds with the rather ancient arguments of those who have tried, over millennia, to write about foreign countries, hoping to generate interest and understanding, rather than exacerbating distrust across the borders. This was part of the motivation of that remarkable Iranian traveller and mathematician, Al Beruni, who came to India in the late tenth century and wrote his classic Arabic book on India in the early years of the eleventh century, called *Tarikh al Hind* (‘The History of India’), noting that he wanted to contribute to overcoming the terrible influences of the fact that a ‘depreciation of foreigners not only prevails among us and [the Indians], but is common to all nations towards each other’ (Embre, 1971: 20). Other historical writers on world culture,

from Megasthenes and Faxian to Ibn Batuta and Marco Polo, had looked to more contact and understanding as ways of reducing prejudice and tension.

What is perhaps the most limiting feature of the civilizational approach – even more limiting than missing out a great deal of world history – is the mind-boggling shortcut it takes in trying to understand our sense of identity. Ignoring the immense richness of the multiple identities that human beings have, given their diversity of affiliations, attachments and affinities, the civilizational approach attempts to put each of us into a little box of a single sense of belonging, to wit, our alleged perception of oneness with our respective ‘civilization’. It is through this huge oversimplification that the job of understanding diverse human beings of the world is metamorphosed, in this impoverished approach to humanity, into looking only at the different civilizations: personal differences are then seen as being, in effect, parasitic on civilizational contrasts. Violence between persons is interpreted, in this high theory, as animosity between distinct civilizations. Thus, in addition to its dependence on an imaginary history of the world, the civilizational explanation of global violence is firmly moored on a particular ‘solitarist’ approach to human identity, which sees human beings as members of exactly one group defined by their native civilization, defined mainly in terms of religion (Sen, 2006).

A solitarist approach is, in general, a very efficient way of *misunderstanding* nearly everyone in the world. In our normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups – we belong to all of them. The same person can be, without any contradiction, a Norwegian citizen, of Asian origin, with Bangladeshi ancestry, a Muslim, a socialist, a woman, a vegetarian, a jazz musician, a doctor, a poet, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, and one who believes that many of the most important

<sup>1</sup> The fullest exposition of this theory can be found in Huntington (1996). For very different readings of world history, see for example Russett, Oneal & Cox (2000) and Sen (1997, 2002, 2006).

problems that Norway faces today could be resolved if Norwegians could be made to take an interest in the game of cricket. Each of these identities can be of significance to the person, depending on the problem at hand and the context of choice, and the priorities between them could be influenced by her own values as well as by social pressures. There is no reason to think that whatever civilizational identity a person has – religious, communal, regional, national or global – must invariably dominate over every other relation or affiliation he or she may have.

Trying to understand global violence through the lens of clashing civilizations does not bear much scrutiny, because the reasoning on which it is based is so extraordinarily crude. And yet, it must also be recognized that reductionist cultivation of singular identities has indeed been responsible for a good deal of what we can call 'engineered bloodshed' across the world. However, this results from the fomenting and cultivation of targeted differences, rather than being just a spontaneous outcome from an inescapable 'clash'. We may be suddenly informed by instigators that we are not just Yugoslavs but actually Serbs ('we absolutely don't like Albanians'), or that we are not just Randans or Kigalians or Africans, but specifically Hutus who must see Tutsis as enemies. I recollect from my own childhood, in immediately pre-independent India, how the Hindu-Muslim riots suddenly erupted in the 1940s, linked with the politics of partition, and also the speed with which the broad human beings of summer were suddenly transformed, through ruthless cultivation of segregation, into brutal Hindus and fierce Muslims of the winter. Hundreds of thousands perished at the hands of people who, led by the designers of carnage, killed others on behalf of – for the cause of – those who they abruptly identified as their 'own people'.

This too is a cultural theory – based on the vulnerability of human beings to propaganda

and instigation that make use of racial, ethnic, religious, or some other cultural themes that carry the potential of exploitability. However, we must note that the thesis of engineering bloodshed by playing up one divisive identity, excluding all others, is a very different theory from that of an inescapable clash of civilizations, based on the idea that civilizational identities must have an intrinsic priority.

Let me, for the moment, leave the cultural approaches there. What about the other approach, the one of political economy? This line of reasoning sees poverty and inequality as the root cause of violence, and it certainly is – or at least seems like – a momentous approach that rivals cultural explanations of violence. It is not hard to see that the injustice of inequality can generate intolerance and that the suffering of poverty can provoke anger and fury. That connection has been pointed out extensively in the social approach to understanding the prevalence of violence and disorder. There have been some statistical attempts to bring out the factual basis of this 'economic reductionism', but the connection has appeared to be so obviously credible that the paucity of definitive empirical evidence has not discouraged the frequent invoking of this way of understanding the recurrence of violent crime in countries with much poverty and inequality.

And there is indeed considerable plausibility in seeing a connection between violence and poverty.<sup>2</sup> For example, many countries have experienced – and continue to experience – the simultaneous presence of economic destitution and political strife. From Afghanistan and Sudan to Somalia and Haiti, there are plenty of examples of the dual adversities of deprivation and violence faced by people in different parts of the world. To look at a different set of events, it would be hard to think that the outbursts of

<sup>2</sup> Some of these connections have indeed been empirically investigated; see for example Collier (2007) and the references cited there.

political violence in France in the fall of 2005 had nothing to do with the economic and social deprivation of some people living in parts of the country, often living in the outskirts of Paris and other cities, who felt badly treated and neglected. Given the co-existence of violence and poverty, it is not at all unnatural to ask whether poverty kills twice – first through *economic privation*, and second through *political carnage*.

Poverty can certainly make a person outraged and desperate, and a sense of injustice, related particularly to gross inequality, can be a good ground for rebellion – even bloody rebellion. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to presume that an enlightened attitude to war and peace must go beyond the immediate and to seek instead ‘deeper’ causes. In looking for such underlying causes, the economics of deprivation and inequity has a very plausible claim to attention. The belief that the roots of discontent and disorder have to be sought in economic destitution has, thus, been fairly widely favoured by social analysts who try to look beyond the apparent and the obvious.

The straightforward thesis linking poverty with violence has another significant appeal: it is available for use in the humane political and moral advocacy of concerted public action to end poverty. Those trying to eradicate poverty in the world are, naturally enough, tempted to seek support from the apparent causal connection that ties violence to poverty, to seek the support of even those who are not moved by poverty itself. There has, in fact, been an increasing tendency in recent years to argue in favour of policies of poverty removal on the ground that this is the surest way to prevent political strife and turmoil. Basing public policy – international as well as domestic – on such an understanding has some evident attractions. It provides a politically powerful argument for allocating more public resources and efforts to poverty removal because of its presumed political

rewards, taking us much beyond the direct moral case for doing this.

Since generic physical violence seems to be more widely loathed and feared, especially by well-placed people, than social inequity and the deprivation – even extreme deprivation – of others, it is indeed tempting to be able to tell all, including the rich and those well placed in society, that terrible poverty will generate terrifying violence, threatening the lives of all. Given the visibility and public anxiety about wars and disorders, the indirect justification of poverty removal – not for its own sake but for pursuing peace and quiet – has become, in recent years, a dominant part of the rhetoric of fighting poverty.

While the temptation to go in this direction is easy to appreciate, one of the difficulties here lies in the possibility that if the causal connection proves to be not quite robust, then economic reductionism would not only have impaired real knowledge and understanding of the world (a serious loss in itself, for science and objectivity have importance of their own), but it would also tend to undermine the social ethics of public commitment to remove poverty. This is a particularly serious concern, since poverty and massive inequality are terrible enough in themselves to provide more than ample reason for working for their removal – even if they did not have any further ill effects through indirect links. Just as virtue is its own reward, poverty is at least its own punishment. To look for some ulterior reason for fighting poverty through its effects on violence and conflict may make the argument broader with a larger reach, but it can also make the reasoning much more fragile.

To see this danger is not the same as denying that poverty and inequality can – and do – have far-reaching connections with conflict and strife (more on this presently), but these connections have to be investigated and assessed with empirical strongmindedness. The temptation to summon economic

reductionism may sometimes be effective in helping what we may see as a right cause, particularly in getting support even from the ethically obtuse who are unmoved by the poverty of others but are scared of bloody violence affecting their own lives as well. It can, however, be an unsound way to proceed and can indeed be seriously counterproductive for political ethics, if the empirical picture is, in fact, rather murky.

And murky the picture certainly is, at least at the level of immediacy that is sometimes presumed in these causal reasonings. The claim that poverty is responsible for group violence draws on an oversimplification of empirical connections that are far from universal. The relationship is also contingent on many other factors, including political, social and cultural circumstances, which make the world in which we live far more complex.

Let me give an example. When recently I gave the Lewis Mumford Lecture at the City College of New York, entitled 'The Urbanity of Calcutta', I had the opportunity to comment on the rather remarkable fact that Kolkata – as the name of that city is now spelled in English in order to sound closer to the Bengali word for it – is not only one of poorest cities in India, and indeed in the world, but it also has an exceptionally low rate of violent crime – absolutely the lowest violent crime rate of all Indian cities. This applies by a long margin to the incidence of homicide or murder. The average incidence of murder in Indian cities (including all the 35 cities that are counted in that category) is 2.7 per 100,000 people – 2.9 for Delhi. The rate is 0.3 in Kolkata.<sup>3</sup> The same low level of violent crime can be seen in looking at the total number of all violations of the Indian Penal Code put together. It also applies to crimes against women, the incidence of which is very substantially lower in

Kolkata than in all other major cities in India.

It also emerges that, while Kolkata is by a wide margin the city with the lowest homicide rate in India, Indian cities in general are strikingly low in the incidence of violent crime by world standards, and are beaten only by much richer and more well-placed cities like Hong Kong and Singapore. Here are some numbers, relating to 2005 or the closest year for which we could get data: Paris has a homicide rate of 2.3, London 2.4, Dhaka 3.6, New York 5.0, Buenos Aires 6.4, Los Angeles 8.8, Mexico City 17.0, Johannesburg 21.5, Sao Paulo 24.0, and Rio de Janeiro an astonishing 34.9.<sup>4</sup> In India, only Patna, in the troubled state of Bihar, is in the big league with a figure of 14.0 as the homicide rate – no other Indian city reaches even half that number, and the average of Indian cities is, as mentioned earlier, only 2.7. Even the famously low-crime Japanese cities have more than three times the murder rate of Kolkata, with 1.0 per 100,000 for Tokyo and 1.8 for Osaka, and only Hong Kong and Singapore come close to Kolkata (though still more than 60% higher), at 0.5 per 100,000 compared with Kolkata's 0.3.

If all this appears to us to be an unfathomable conundrum, given Kolkata's poverty, that may be a reflection of the limitation of our thought, rather than a paradox of nature. Kolkata does, of course, have a long distance to go to eradicate poverty and to put its material house in order. It is important to remember that the low crime rate does not make those nasty problems go away. And yet there is something also to celebrate in the fact that poverty

<sup>3</sup> The data are taken from National Crime Record Bureau (2006) of India.

<sup>4</sup> The data for the different cities have been collected from the respective municipal and national publications and official sources. I am very grateful to my research assistant, Pedro Ramos Pinto, for undertaking the rather exacting task of getting and placing in a comparable framework, the information from the different cities. I also take this opportunity of thanking him for his general advice and help in this work.



does not inescapably produce violence, independently of political movements as well as social and cultural interactions.

Explanation of crime is not an easy subject for empirical generalizations, but there are some possible connections that seem suggestive. While there have been some attempts recently to understanding the nature and incidence of crime in terms of the characteristics of the respective neighbourhoods, it is quite clear that there is still a long way to go for a fuller understanding of the picture (see, e.g., Wilkstrom & Sampson, 2006).

In my Mumford Lecture, I have tried to argue that Kolkata has, among other causal factors, benefited from the fact that it has had a long history of being a thoroughly mixed city, where neighbourhoods have not had the feature of ethnic separation that exists in some cities – in India as well as elsewhere. There are also many other social and cultural features that are undoubtedly relevant in understanding the relation between poverty and crime. For example, in trying to understand the high rate of violent crime in South Africa, where I spoke, *inter alia*, about some of these issues in my Nadine Gordimer Lecture in April 2007, it would be hard to overlook the connection between the high incidence of urban violent crime and the legacy of the apartheid. The linkage involves not only the inheritance of racial confrontation, but also the terrible effects of separated neighbourhoods and families that were split up for the economic arrangements that went with apartheid policies. But it would not be easy to explain why the belated attempts to generate mixed communities have also had the immediate effect of fostering crime committed *within* the newly mixed neighbourhoods; perhaps the legacy of history is harder to wipe out than we hope it might be.

I do not think we know enough about the empirical relations to be confident of what the exact causal connections are, and I am acutely aware that there is need for humility

here that social sciences invariably invite and frequently do not get. It does, however, seem fairly clear that the tendency to see a universal and immediate link between poverty and violence would be very hard to sustain. There is certainly a more complex picture that lies beyond the alleged straightforwardness of the poverty–violence relationship.

More specifically, if we look, in particular, at violence related to religion, ethnicity and community (the direction to which we are dispatched by many cultural theorists), the role of conscious politics as a barrier also demands a fuller recognition. For example, the prevailing politics of Kolkata and of West Bengal, which is very substantially left of centre (West Bengal has the longest history in the world of elected communist governments, based on free multiparty elections – for 28 years now), has tended to concentrate on deprivation related to class and, more recently, gender. That altered focus, which is very distinct from religion and religion-based community, has made it much harder to exploit religious differences for instigating riots against minorities, as has happened, with much brutality, in some Indian cities, for example Mumbai (or Bombay) and Ahmedabad. Kolkata did have its share of Hindu–Muslim riots related to the partition of India, which were rampant across the sub-continent. But since then, over more than four decades, there have been no such riots in this large city, unlike in many other urban conglomerates in India. Indeed, the whole sectarian agenda of cultivating communal divisiveness seems to have been substantially overturned by the new political and social priorities that dominate the city.

And in this political development, the focus on economic poverty and inequality seems to have played a constructive role in bringing out the ultimate triviality of religious differences in preventing social harmony. In the recognition of plural human identities, the increased concentration on

class and other sources of economic disparity has made it very hard to excite communal passions and violence in Kolkata along the lines of a religious divide – a previously cultivated device that has increasingly looked strangely primitive and raw. The minorities, mainly Muslims and Sikhs, have had a sense of security in Kolkata that has not been possible in Mumbai, Ahmedabad or Delhi.

If identities related to left-wing politics and class have had the effect of vastly weakening violence based on religious divisions and community contrasts in the Indian part of Bengal, a similar constructive influence can be seen on the other side of the border in Bangladesh, coming from the power of identities of language, literature and music, which do not divide Muslims and Hindus into different – and exploitably hostile – camps. The more general point here is that an understanding of multiplicity of our identities can be a huge force in combating the instigation of violence based on a singular identity, particularly religious identity, which is the dominant form of cultivated singularity in our disturbed world today.

To return to economic reductionism, it may be not be quite as crude and gross as an approach as the thesis of the clash of civilizations, and yet it too is far too simple, isolated and deceptive. We do need a fuller and more integrated picture. For example, the violent history of Afghanistan cannot be unrelated to poverty and indigence that the population have experienced, and yet to reduce the causation of violence there entirely to this singular economic observation would be to miss out the role of the Taliban and the politics of religious fundamentalism. It would also leave out the part played by the history of Western military support – and incitement – to strengthen religious militants in Afghanistan against the Russians at a time when the Western leaders saw the Soviet Union as a single-handed ‘axis of evil’. And, at the same time, to dissociate

the rise of fundamentalism and sectarian violence from all economic connections would also be a mistake. We must try to understand the different interconnections that work together, and often kill together. We need some investigative sophistication to understand what part is played by the economic components in the larger structure of interactions here.

In the context of discussing the low crime rate in Kolkata, I commented on the constructive role of radical politics that concentrates on class, gender and poverty. Poverty can be connected with low violence for a very different reason as well, namely, the effect of extreme impoverishment in making people too debilitated even to protest and rebel. Indeed, destitution can be accompanied not only by economic debility, but also by political impotence.

Severe famines have, in fact, occurred without there being much rebellion or strife or warfare. For example, the famine years in the 1840s in Ireland were among the most peaceful, and there was little attempt by the hungry masses to intervene even as ship after ship sailed down the river Shannon laden with food, carrying it away from starving Ireland to well-fed England, by the pull of market forces (the English had more money to buy meat, poultry, butter and other food items than the blighted Irish had). As it happens, the Irish do not have a great reputation for excessive docility, and yet the famine years were, by and large, years of law and order and peace. London not only got away with extreme misgovernance of Ireland, they did not even have to face, then, the violence of Irish mobs, who were busy looking for ways and means of escaping hunger. As Calgacus, the rebellious Scottish chief, said about Roman rule of first-century Britain (as reported by Tacitus): ‘They make a wilderness and they call it peace.’

This does not, however, indicate that the poverty, starvation and inequity of the Irish



famines had no long-run effects on violence in Ireland. Indeed, the memory of injustice and neglect had the effect of severely alienating the Irish from Britain, and contributed greatly to the violence that characterized Anglo-Irish relations over more than one and a half centuries. Economic destitution may not lead to an immediate rebellion, but it would be wrong to presume from this that there is no connection between poverty, on the one hand, and violence, on the other. There is an important need here to look at connections over time, often a very long time. It is also important to understand how the grievances of deprivation and maltreatment get merged with other factors, including, in the Irish case, a championing of national identity that seeks distancing from the English. The offensive nature of English caricatures of the Irish, going back all the way to Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in the 16th century, would be strongly reinforced by the experience of the famines of the 1840s under British rule, generating deep resentment against Ireland's more powerful neighbours who did so little to stop the starvation, and in many ways, even helped to aggravate it.

Let me consider another example, this time from the Middle East today. There are, of course, many influences that make the situation as terrible as it is there right now, including the apparent inability of the US administration to think clearly – not to mention wisely and humanely – on the subject. But among the many connections, it is hard to ignore the memory of ill treatment of the Middle East by Western powers during colonial times, when the new masters could subdue one nation after another and draw and redraw the boundaries between countries in ancient lands just as the colonial superpowers wanted. That abuse of power did not cause many riots then and there in the 19th century, but the silence of the vanquished – the peace of the trampled – did not indicate

that the subject matter was gone forever, and would not leave behind a terrible memory of ill-treatment. Even the new episodes of trampling and pulverization today – in Iraq and Palestine and elsewhere – will not, I fear, be easily forgotten for a long time in the future.

The general message here is to accept that poverty and inequality are importantly linked with violence and lack of peace, but they have to be seen together with divisions in which other factors, such as nationality, culture, religion, community, language and literature, play their parts. Deprivation is not a 'lone ranger' – to use that well-known character from Western movies – in generating violence. The influence of poverty and inequality has to be understood not through an exclusive concentration on deprivation and destitution in isolation from society and culture, but through looking for a larger and much more extensive framework with interactive roles of poverty and other features of society. The linking of poverty and injustice to violence does indeed have some plausibility, but there is neither any immediacy nor any inevitability there.

We also have to appreciate how ideas of identity and culture add to the reach of political economy, rather than competing with its influence in an 'either this, or that' form. The categories around which the provoked violence may proceed would have cultural and social relevance of their own (linked with ethnicity, nationality or social background), but the possibility of instigating anger can be dramatically increased and magnified by historical association with economic and political inequity and poverty. Indeed, even the brutality of the Hutu activists against the Tutsis made effective use of the fact that Tutsis had a more privileged position in Rwanda than the Hutus typically had. This would not, of course, have done anything whatsoever to justify what happened, but the existence of that historical connection is relevant for empirical studies of violence.

Similarly, while the fierce nastiness of Al-Qaeda against Western targets cannot be justified by any invoking of history, the fact that those in whose name the terrorists act have had unequal treatment in the past from Western colonialists makes the invitation to barbarity that much easier to sell. The absence of an ethical justification of such a linkage does not eliminate the fact that it can, nevertheless, have much power in moving people to blind rage. The tolerance of terrorism by an otherwise peaceful population is another peculiar phenomenon in some parts of the contemporary world, where many people feel that they were very badly treated in the past: the violence that is tolerated is often seen as some kind of a retaliation for past injustices.

There is no inevitability here, but the conquest of potential violence does demand a powerful vision. Indeed, but for the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and others in working for the acceptance of what Nadine Gordimer (1995) calls the 'common pursuit that doesn't have to be acknowledged in any treaty',<sup>5</sup> it would be hard to imagine a multi-religious India that is so radically different today from the rioting days of the 1940s, despite the ceaseless efforts of some sectarians to stir up passions against minorities, which the Indian voters firmly rejected in the general elections of 2004. In the context of the familiar British colonial thesis of an irreparable division between Indian communities, which played such a big role in the colonial policy of divide and rule, it would have been hard to expect that with its more than 80% Hindu population, the country could still choose, as it has, non-Hindus for all three principal positions in the country in charge of Indian political

affairs: a Muslim President (Abdul Kalam), a Sikh Prime Minister (Manmohan Singh), and a Christian leader of the ruling party (Sonia Gandhi).<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, but for the political vision that inspired South Africa's anti-apartheid movement led by Nelson Mandela, South Africa today would be full of violent revenge against what had been one of the crudest and most brutal segregationist regimes in the world. Those prospects have been successfully avoided, in a way that was barely imaginable when the whole world was worried not only about injustice in South Africa, but also about what seemed the likelihood of an inescapable blood-bath when the chains binding the blacks would ultimately break.

That understanding has implications for other issues as well that worry us. If there is still far too much violence of a more 'ordinary' kind in any country in the world (including South Africa), a discernment of its causal connections must call for a serious integration of political, social and cultural analysis with investigations of the hard realities of economic deprivation. Disparity and deprivation do, of course, demand urgent and concentrated attention, for they are terrible curses on their own, but the need for that urgency does not have to be justified by the further claim that they are inescapable and straightforward generators of crime and violence. It would be, I think, a huge mistake to see economic inequality and poverty as being automatically responsible for violence – indeed, it would be just as serious a mistake as the assumption that inequality and poverty have nothing to do with the possibility of violence.

So what are my general conclusions? First, economic, social and cultural issues related to violence demand serious efforts at integration, an exercise that is spurned both by the fatalistic

<sup>5</sup> Gordimer (1995) is talking here, in her essay called 'Zaabalawi: The Concealed Side', about three great writers, Naguib Mahfouz, Chinua Achebe and Amos Oz, respectively from Egypt, Nigeria and Israel: they 'do not expound the obvious, divided by race, country and religion, they enter by their separate ways territory unknown, in a common pursuit that doesn't have to be acknowledged in any treaty'.

<sup>6</sup> Since this lecture was given in May 2007, the term of President Kalam expired, and a new President has now been chosen, a Hindu woman (Pratibha Devisingh Patil).

theorists of civilizational clash and by the hurried advocates of economic reductionism. Cultural and social factors, as well as features of political economy, are all quite important in understanding violence in the world today. But they do not work in isolation from each other, and we have to resist the tempting shortcuts that claim to deliver insight through their single-minded concentration on some one factor or another, ignoring other central features of an integrated picture.

Second, while identity politics can certainly be mobilized very powerfully in the cause of violence, that violence can also be effectively resisted through a broader understanding of the richness of human identities. Our disparate associations may divide us in particular ways, and yet there are other identities, other affiliations, that encourage us to defy the isolationist demands of any singular division, no matter how lionized that division might be in some particular versions of identity politics. A Hutu who is recruited in the cause of chastising a Tutsi is, in fact, also a Rwandan, and an African, possibly a Kigalian, and indubitably a human being – identities that the Tutsis also share. The process of such cultivated violence cannot be readily translated into the unfolding of something like human destiny.

Third, even as far as identity divisions are concerned, no matter how momentous the religious differences may appear to be in the context of warfare today, there are other divisions that also have the potential for creating strife and carnage. The violence of solitarist identity can have a tremendously varying reach. Indeed, the obsession with religions and so-called civilizations has been so strong in contemporary global politics that there is a tendency to forget how other lines of identity divisions have been exploited in the past – indeed, not so long ago – to generate very different types of violence and war, causing millions of deaths.

For example, appeals to country and nationality played an intoxicating role in the immensely bloody war in Europe between 1914 and 1918, and a shared Western or European background of Christianity did nothing to stop the Germans, the British and the French from tearing each other apart. The identities that were championed then were those of nationalities, with the patriotic fervour that they generated. Before the horrors of the First World War took the life of Wilfred Owen, he wrote his own protest about values that glorify violent combat in the cause of one's identity with one's nation and fatherland:

My friend, you will not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old lie: Dulce et Decorum est  
Pro Patria Mori.

Horace's ringing endorsement of the honour of death for (or *allegedly* for) one's country could be seen as catering to the violence of nationalism, and it was this invocation against which Wilfred Owen was emphatically protesting.

Europeans today may not easily appreciate Owen's profound sense of frustration, pessimism and protest. The Germans, the French and the British work with each other today in peace and tranquillity and sit together to decide what to do in their continent without reaching for their guns. This would have seemed highly implausible when Owen was writing his poem of protest. A similar vulnerability is present in many other divisions of identities that may, at one level, be made to look like an unstoppable march of violence based on its unique claim of importance, but which, at another broader level, may be nothing other than an artificially fostered avowal that can be disputed and displaced by a great many other solidarities and loyalties associated with different identities, including, of course, the broad commonality of our shared humanity.

Fourth, some of the divisions between people linked with distinct racial or ethnic or other non-economic identities are made more tangible and serious through their association with poverty and inequality. It is mainly through those associations that economic deprivation and social humiliation can become a lethal cause of violence. It is important for us to probe closely how the connection of poverty and inequality with violence works, and why non-economic features of social description have to be brought in to explain the working of the process.

Purely economic measures of inequality, such as the Gini coefficient or the ratio of incomes of top and bottom groups, do not bring out the social dimensions of the disparity involved. For example, when the people in the bottom income groups also have different non-economic characteristics, in terms of race (such as being black rather than white), or in immigration status (such as being recent arrivals rather than older residents), then the significance of the economic inequality is substantially magnified by its 'coupling' with other divisions, linked to non-economic identity groups. It would be hard, for instance, to have an adequate understanding of the turmoil in the suburbs of Paris and other French cities in the autumn of 2005 only in terms of poverty and deprivation, without bringing in race and immigration. It would be similarly unsatisfactory to try to base a causal explanation only on race and immigration, without bringing in inequality and economic disparity.

I conclude by emphasizing the need for avoiding isolationist programmes of explaining violence only through concerns of economic and social inequality and deprivation, or exclusively in terms of identity and cultural factors. None of these individual influences, important as they very often are in a fuller picture, can

provide an adequate understanding of the causation of widespread violence and the absence of societal peace. The interconnections are as important as the elements that have to be connected.

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