

## INTRODUCTION

### *The Problem with Violence*

WHEN YIGAL AMIR assassinated Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, he achieved a great deal. The eventual failure of the Oslo peace accords, stalled progress toward Palestinian sovereignty, and the subsequent expansion of Israeli settlements are in part attributable to his act. Bill Clinton remarked to M. J. Rosenberg that Amir is one of the few assassins in history who achieved his goal, because without Rabin, Arafat did not have a credible negotiating partner.<sup>1</sup> Not all assassinations are so effective, but this case attests to the fact that killing a single individual can achieve significant political objectives.

In 1970, American and South Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia and killed more than twelve thousand people, disrupting supply chains and destroying critical infrastructure. The offensive prevented major military operations from the North Vietnamese for over a year and was a significant military victory.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite overwhelming physical superiority in both this particular engagement and the war more generally, the United States could not prevent a communist government from taking power or stop the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Not all successful military campaigns are ineffective, but in this case the killing of many thousands of people failed to achieve the greater goal.

The problem with violence is that it is difficult to know why it sometimes works and why it sometimes does not. Most Western

political theorists, and the conventional wisdom, assume that violence generally does work. If we are willing to use enough of it, so the thinking goes, violence is reliable. Violence compels and destroys without requiring consent. Physically manipulating and attacking others frees us from dependence upon their opinions, reactions, responses, and desires. If others respond to violence with violence, one's material and moral capacities may be exhausted. However, even in that case, violence prevails. When violence confronts violence, violence produces the winner. Setting aside legal, social, or ethical qualms allows us to make the world we desire. It seems as though the material quality of violence ensures that violence always works for those who are willing to use a sufficient degree of it.

The special, reliable character of violence also apparently makes it indispensable to those who would not otherwise choose to use it. Even if we would not choose the method of our own accord, we must sometimes, temporarily, adopt violence in order to keep those who embrace it from running roughshod over everyone else. Also, since violence is a matter of physical superiority, temporarily adopting it must be more than just a half-measure. Putting on violence requires doing more violence than those who are truly committed to it. The world is full of difficult moral paradoxes. One of the more tragic, strange, and undeniable of these, so it would seem, is the necessity of using violence when one does not want to in order to stop those who insist upon it.

Pacifists often respond to such claims by arguing that the effectiveness and necessity of violence are conditioned by the nature of our objectives. Violence achieves nefarious goals, but not spiritual and moral goals. Violence sets aside common interests and objectives in favor of more narrow and immediate material ends. According to pacifists, responding to violence with violence only exacerbates the problem. Even reactive violence implies that we are overly concerned with particular worldly ends. In addition, a violent response is likely to lead to yet more violence on the part of the initiator. Practicing love and tolerance, and approaching disagreements with a spirit of compromise and determination guided by conscience, is the only way to make the world less violent. Following this line of thinking, violence is always counter-productive if we are committed to the right objectives.

Both the commonsense understanding of violence and much of the pacifist response to it are inadequate. Neither provides us with much assistance in solving the problem of why violence works or does not work in particular scenarios or contexts. Pacifists assert that violence cannot achieve worthwhile goals. Almost everyone else asserts that it can and does. In fact, despite vastly different understandings of the nature and appropriate use of violence, fascists, liberals, republicans, communists, pragmatists, postmodernists, and just war theorists share the assumption that violence achieves certain goals more reliably than other means, especially the goal of stopping the violence of others. This is true despite the fact that violence fails and succeeds in achieving all manner of objectives, defensive and offensive, moral and immoral, spiritual and material, personal and public. The difference between every other ideology and pacifism ought not turn on a disagreement about objectives. Instead, pacifism should distinguish itself by offering a careful and barefaced analysis of the character of violence.

This book explores why violence works or does not work and argues that it is no more or less effective than any other political method. The first obstacle to such an inquiry is that the nature of violence is so rarely the subject of sustained analysis. Violence is usually understood to be an especially effective form of political action in part because it seems to reside in another, more self-evident reality outside of politics proper. Violence appears everywhere in political theory but almost uniformly as the given or assumed for present purposes.<sup>3</sup> Even when thinkers argue strenuously for or against the necessity of violence, it can be difficult to know exactly what they mean by violence. Does it refer to incarceration as well as killing? Does it include the destruction of property as well as people? If killing is legitimate, moral, and constructive, is it still violence? Deciphering the character of violence in most political theory is a matter of sifting and culling, prodding and inferring, and almost never a matter of referring to clear, carefully developed concepts.<sup>4</sup>

There are numerous ways one might establish that the nature of violence is not self-evident. Perhaps the best way would be to trace the historical trajectory of usages of the word and words associated with it. Paying particular attention to political philosophy, we could begin with

an analysis of the contexts that accompany the appearance of *bia*, the Greek word for violence,<sup>5</sup> and then move to an analysis of Roman,<sup>6</sup> modern,<sup>7</sup> and contemporary<sup>8</sup> uses of the term. Such an undertaking is beyond the scope of what I want to do here. My approach is to denaturalize violence by showing how inconsistent and elusive its meaning is among even the most fastidious and influential political theorists. In the first four chapters, and chapters 2 and 4 in particular, I show that within and between prominent works of political philosophy, the meaning of violence is remarkably unstable.

However, the treatment of violence I offer is mostly constructive, not deconstructive. In my attempt to build a clear and workable definition of violence, it has been necessary to build two. Part I examines the most painful possibilities of our physical condition, leading to a conception of physical violence. Chapter 1 begins with Hobbes's claim that our bodies are fragile and able. Almost every individual has the capacity to destroy and be destroyed by every other individual. Using the notion of fragility and ability as a jumping off point, I identify aspects and valences of our physical vulnerabilities in various concepts: Marx's alienated labor, Hegel's slavery, Foucault's discipline and punishment, Elaine Scarry's torture, Sharon Marcus's rape, Carl von Clausewitz's war, and Sartre's objectification. I show that each of these thinkers relies on certain implicit understandings about the character of our bodies. We can kill and be killed, deprive and be deprived, hold in fear and be held in fear of our lives. Our bodies can be raped, drawn, whipped, beaten, dismembered, beheaded, timed, placed, coordinated, trained, observed, and we can do the same to like bodies. We can elicit and sustain pain and have pain elicited and sustained in us. Taken together, these various analyses give us a stark picture of our physical condition.

That all of these various aspects of our physical fragility and ability appear in different texts and contexts shows the need for an overarching conception of physical violence. I begin chapter 2 by demonstrating that Hobbes, Foucault, Benjamin, and Locke use the term *violence* in unsatisfactory, contradictory, overly wide-ranging, and, then again, overly narrow ways. The work of another thinker is more promising. By adapting and modifying Clausewitz's theory of war, I posit that physical violence is the use or destruction of another's body in order to subdue

or destroy their will. This definition of violence draws together a wide array of related phenomena and excludes much of what nebulous or overdrawn conceptions include. It gives us a useful standard by which to assess, for instance, when environmental degradation and the destruction of property are violent or not. It also helps us distinguish between purposeful, aesthetic, and erotic violence.

However, the idea that we can change others by physically manipulating and destroying them requires further explanation. Why exactly do we want to change one another? What is so upsetting about living with others in the first place? Part II examines the most painful aspects of our social interactions and leads to a conception of what I call “intersubjective violence.” Chapter 3 is an exploration some of the nonphysical ways we cause one another to suffer. To show the importance of these problems even in the midst of physical violence, I turn to two incidents recounted by Italian chemist and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi in his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*. In the look of a German chemist and the brief touch of a *Kapo*, Levi is subject to profoundly disturbing interactions, which he suggests animate the physical violence that surrounds him. Building on and challenging Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Levinas, I argue that Levi’s experiences are particularly instructive and devastating examples of the problems of recognition and the challenges of freedom. Levi shows us that the potential for misrecognizing others is sufficiently profound that for all practical purposes we can be both visible and invisible in the same interaction. Also, the fact that we are free beings means that even if we do fully recognize one another, we can carry ourselves in ways that are utterly anathema to another’s way of being.

In chapter 4, I draw a conception of intersubjective violence from these problems. Perhaps surprisingly, the most extensive and sustained analyses of violence often understand it as a kind of interaction or a nonphysically destructive activity. For Dewey, Benjamin, and Derrida violence involves not only enforcing or breaking the law by physically acting on others, but the existence and breaking of the law in and of itself. For Pierre Bourdieu, certain gift-giving practices involve what he calls symbolic violence. For phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Levinas, our most basic faculties and capacities, such as perception, choice, and freedom retain an element of violence. However,

these analyses are both overly expansive and too narrow, suggesting that almost every interaction is violent and at the same time failing to identify a common thread among the particular examples each provides. By synthesizing and strictly delimiting these conceptions I argue that intersubjective violence involves the experience of profoundly discordant dispositions, or encounters with individuals or groups that severely compromise or make our own way of being impossible.

The two conceptions I develop, one physical and one nonphysical, constitute a theory of violence. The theory contends that physical violence springs from and is animated by intersubjective violence. We usually destroy and manipulate others' bodies as a consequence of unbearably painful interactions with them. Living with others can be extraordinarily frustrating, and killing them or forcing them to be other than they are can relieve this frustration and ameliorate the pain, at least temporarily. Intersubjective violence can include instances of physical violence, but the deeper and unending source of conflict is the simple fact that we are free and unique beings. Institutions, cultures, social structures, and ethical mores set expectations, order the material world, and necessarily compromise new and different ideas and developments (and vice versa). Essential individual and group interests and identities sometimes have a zero-sum relationship to those of others. When these problems reach a certain degree of severity, we often resort to physical violence.

This theory of violence includes the very worst forms of suffering we inflict upon one another but does not rely on many of the assumptions contained in other explanations for conflict. It makes no claims about the relative merits of particular purposes and offers no assessment of intentions. Nor does it presume that there is something inherently evil (or inherently good) about the human personality or the human body. It insists that both physical and intersubjective violence are embodied, but demonstrates that the demands and needs of the body are not exclusively, or even primarily, the cause of conflict. The theory also betrays no prejudice for or against public or private violence, or violence as understood by a particular ideology. Physical and intersubjective violence appear in interactions between individuals or groups of any size and are just as likely to be inflicted by legitimate institutions as outlaws and rebels.

With this theory of violence in hand, we can then ask, what is the role of violence in politics? Part III consists of three meditations on power, action, and thoughtfulness, which lay out the principles of a credible pacifism. The core of the argument is the idea that all forms of action are roughly equivalent. Neither the assassination of a single individual nor the killing of thousands can produce results more reliably than any other political method. Speeches, diplomacy, demonstrations, foreign aid, civil disobedience, the signing of treaties, the passing of laws, and physical violence all fail and all succeed, depending on the circumstances. In fact, speeches, diplomacy, and civil disobedience can change the meaning of physical violence. Not only is physical violence no more reliable than other political methods in general, but it is no more reliable than other political methods in direct confrontations with acts of physical violence.

This might seem like a strange assertion. Even if we notice that violence does not always work, it is easy to assume that it will work better, in some situations, than other political means. However, the factors that determine the success and failure of violence are not very different from those that affect every other action, and primary among these is power. Chapter 5 draws on the thought of Hannah Arendt to establish that power and violence are distinguishable. For Arendt, power involves people acting in concert with one another and is sustained by the freedom and plurality that characterizes intersubjectivity. I argue that the most important implication of this view is that power is self-sufficient in the sense that it can be sustained and nourished without the support of violence. Arendt's assessment of the relationship between violence and power is not without problems. She underestimates the role that violence can play in forming power and sometimes overestimates the extent to which physical violence defies the constraints of "normal" political action. However, by distinguishing power and violence, she pushes us toward the idea that violence is dispensable. Power is self-sufficient and the lifeblood of politics. Violence is a marginal phenomenon that depends upon power and is subject to all of the usual constraints and frustrations of other kinds of political action.

The dominant role of power in politics, however, is not sufficient to establish that physical violence is unnecessary. Physical violence might

still be the most reliable response to violence and, therefore, periodically required. Chapter 6 argues that Gandhi's method of *satyagraha* (holding fast to the truth) fairs just as much chance of success as physical violence in confrontations with even the most extreme forms of physical violence, though not exactly for the reasons Gandhi suggests. Gandhi's most important political insight, usually overshadowed by his moral claims, is that physical violence is *always* political or susceptible to being politicized, even in the very moment it is being practiced. Factors such as fear and love, apathy and desire, material interests and group identities, determine whether those who resist violence or those who perpetrate it will hold sway over the meaning of a particular confrontation. The meaning others take from the interaction will determine who succeeds and fails, and none of these factors suggests that violence has an inherent advantage over *satyagraha*. Physical violence is political all the way down. To show that this is the case, I take up the perennial example of the rise of Nazism. I argue that the crucial factor in the undoing of Hitler's regime was not so much the type of action the Allies took, but the coordinated exercise of power itself. While neither violent nor nonviolent resistance may have fared very well, *satyagraha* also stood just as much of a chance of slowing or stopping the Holocaust as violence.

By arguing that intersubjective violence undergirds physical violence and by politicizing both physical violence and *satyagraha*, a credible pacifism blurs many familiar moral distinctions. Gandhi's methods cannot solve conflicts of conscience, and he sometimes underplays the extent to which pacifism itself is implicated in intersubjective violence. Conscious suffering uses guilt and shame to change the meaning of violence. Strikes and boycotts incite fear in the hearts of politicians and owners who are invested in extant systems of justice and whose material interests rely on retaining legitimacy. The exercise of power without physical violence is the exercise of power nonetheless. The equivalence of action suggests that our usual assumption that *satyagraha* is always morally preferable to power that employs physical violence may not be correct. However, *satyagraha* still retains an advantage over physical violence. At the end of chapter 6, I argue that *satyagraha* functions like Socrates's method of inquiry put into action. Refraining from killing others ensures that we remain perpetually open to correction. While



not ensuring ethical action, Socrates' words and Gandhi's deeds at least make possible and even encourage future discussion about the ethical ramifications of the exercise of power.

With this in mind, chapter 7 formulates an ethic of thoughtfulness. Extreme violence constitutes not only a physical challenge to would-be pacifists but a challenge to all attempts to formulate a humane ethic. Arendt argues that placing too much emphasis on suffering is a dangerous response to the Holocaust. While suffering and thoughtlessness make the death camps possible, they are essentially banal. The last bastion against evil when whole societies lose their way is a form of Socratic thoughtfulness. People who actively converse with themselves and determine that they do not want to be murderers can hold out against a world devoid of common sense.

I argue that by turning definitively away from the issue of suffering, Arendt's analysis is incomplete. In the poem that opens *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi asks us to consider: Are those who experience extraordinary suffering human? By posing this paradoxical and troubling question, Levi avoids essentializing suffering and yet demands we pay attention to it. Levi's poem and his memoirs more generally suggest that anyone who has a stake in human community must actively consider whether or not they share in that community with those who suffer. Thoughtfulness alone is an insufficient guide to political action, but actions that demand and are inspired by thoughtfulness about the relationship between the comfortable and the suffering are more promising.

From the standpoint of politics, Yigal Amir's successes and the United States government's failures in Vietnam are best explained in terms of power dynamics. How people respond to violence, or any other action, determines its success or failure. Effective political action rallies people to one's side or wins tacit consent by convincing others that it is in their material interest or consistent with their moral sensibilities to support the action. Ineffective political action fails to inspire, falls on deaf ears, or produces active resistance. Without power, neither violence nor any other action has a chance of success. With power, nonviolent actions can defeat even the most extraordinary violence. This holds true even when the most powerful actors employ physical violence. Action either facilitates or destroys power; harming and destroying other people can both strengthen and weaken the capacity

to act effectively. Violence has been the clarion call of new empires and the death knell for those whose power was slipping away.

The brand of pacifism developed here strongly tempers the claim that acts of violence and so-called nonviolent means have a one-to-one relationship with injustice and justice. Power that does not employ physical violence is still potentially destructive and unjust. And even if physical violence always retains an aspect of immorality, Primo Levi's account of Auschwitz shows us that sometimes our nonphysical interactions are worse than physical harm. The concept of intersubjective violence also troubles the relationship between violence and ethics because moral standards themselves can cause intersubjective violence. Ethical standards prohibit ways of life and can fundamentally compromise the identity and interests of others. Finally, many unethical or immoral actions fall outside of this theory of violence. Lying and cheating may not amount to intersubjective violence but may still be immoral. Environmental degradation or the destruction of property are not always instances of physical violence but may still be morally reprehensible. Physical violence, and refraining from it, is not the be all and end all of ethical standards.

However, a credible pacifism can still distinguish itself by adopting a particular political orientation. The primary concern of a political pacifism is the amelioration of suffering, both physical and intersubjective—but this commitment is combined with an understanding of how and why suffering is so intractable. Pacifist methods demand discussion and thoughtfulness about our relationship to the suffering of others. Pacifism points the way toward a politics that refuses to diminish or reify suffering. Gandhi's ascetic sensibilities and his soaring rhetoric of spiritual conviction that rejects all material ends, sometimes overshadow the more practical aspect of his philosophy, which acknowledges our limited ability to know what to do and the difficulty of attending to the physical and material suffering of others. A realistic pacifism acknowledges that taking action may involve doing intersubjective violence and, at times, injustice. Most importantly, it continually points us back toward deliberation about our actions. Speech, diplomacy, and civil disobedience, for instance, all ensure that others can at least express that the exercise of nonviolent power is unjust. Politics is the hard work of addressing the problems that arise

among free beings. Pacifists are committed to solving these problems, even in the midst of physical violence.

A credible pacifism faces up to the most horrific possibilities of life with others. Physical and intersubjective violence are deeply intertwined with and present a formidable challenge for politics. Pacifism cannot hope to overcome all of the forms of suffering we cause one another and may not be able to eradicate the use of physical violence. Pacifism suggests that political maturity involves a willingness to acknowledge the fact that living an active life will always cause and involve taking on some degree of suffering. However, pacifism gives us a good chance, and the best chance, of sustaining politics and tempering suffering. The possibilities of politics are immense because power is self-sufficient and all forms of action are equivalent. Words and deeds, informed by thoughtfulness about the relationship between the comfortable and the suffering, are up to the task of confronting physical violence. By encouraging discussion and proliferating power, pacifism also holds the promise of revivifying political society.