

Fear in the City

by Meltem Ahiska

A metropolis is always more than itself: with an influence that is both national and international, it is perceived as a symbolic entity.

This characteristic determines the way a city's residents relate to it. Although a metropolis is a compound of ethnic, class, and gender differences, and made up of distinct regions and cultures, this symbolic and abstract perception has a certain reality; the 'individual' tries to situate herself mentally in this abstract conception of the city. What is significant is that in the urban condition people are not allowed places in a 'natural' order. For some early modernist thinkers, including Marx, this unnatural context once represented the potential of modernity; and city life, with its promise of adventure and real life, gave inspiration to many forms of modernist art and literature.

Today, however, city life has hellish connotations and is associated mostly with fear and insecurity: cities have failed to live up to the promise of early modernity. These dynamics of fear in urban life make possible certain mechanisms of social and political control. Frederic Jameson, in *The Seeds of Time*, argues that in many 'democratic' systems today there is a general, grudging consent - based on the universal rise in violence - that law and order must be the priority.

Totalitarian regimes are based on manifestly violent and fear-inducing mechanisms. Contemporary 'authoritarian' regimes, by contrast, remain unchallenged because of individuals' fear, which produces demands for security; the fear is fuelled by the opportunities the system itself offers: individuality, invisibility, and mobility. This insight throws interesting light on terror attacks in public transport systems or in crowded shopping centres: the attackers remain hidden and there is no apparent reason for targeting a particular object; the tragedy springs from an unknown source to affect ordinary people. This type of social

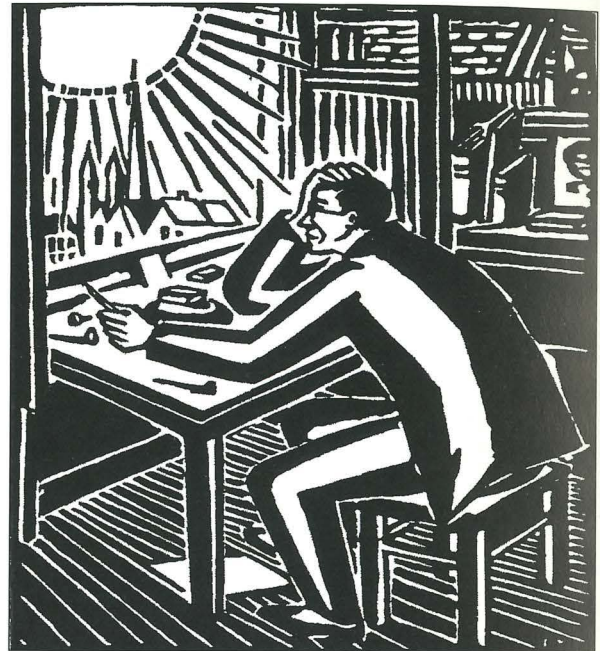
violence increases the demands for security, and gives those with political power a weapon for manipulating these demands. Such strategies of terror would not be efficient outside a metropolis.

Freedom in the metropolis is paradoxical: by being 'free' one falls prey to insecurity and fear. But why do people fear? Nature is not our enemy any more: the Enlightenment destroyed the superstitions and monstrous figures of mediaeval horror. A modern horror story is very different: you are walking in a crowded square in a big city, someone stabs or rapes you, and nobody stops to help. Today it is people who must be feared: human nature is conceived of as something aggressive: human beings are the main source of fear. This is an important reversal.

Metropolitan life today mobilises individuals and gives them sovereignty. At the same time, however, it dominates them in a way they cannot understand. This is because they do not perceive the totality as a product of their own activities. While individuals in the urban condition are highly interconnected - what each does may directly affect another - they still assume that they act alone. This is an important source of irrationality. Some trivial incidents in everyday life may trigger big tragedies: a train driver's nervous breakdown may cause many people to die. This is called an accident: there is no enemy to blame. In this irrational organisation of life reason is simply reversed: the limits of reason become apparent, making dubious the initial assumption that it is transcendental. The metropolitan culture is a depersonalised vampire that constantly demands victims and blood. In a community, excommunication is a big threat; in the city everybody is

excommunicated, and then, because of their need for order, accepted back into a network of communication. Life and horror start at this point.

When life becomes uncertain, and individuals lose their ability to comprehend and control the totality in which they live; when they don't know from where and whom danger is coming; when they have no sound identities or membership in a protective community; when the



most obvious enemy is other people: then the only antidote is aggression. Aggression gets rid of passivity and of the fear of the expected. It is an act of power. In most cases of aggression the object attacked remains irrelevant, and sometimes the reason for aggression may be very trivial.

So violence cannot be considered extreme or trivial. Its roots are in the urban condition and it is potentially everywhere. It functions as a means of compensating for fear, as a way of asserting one's individuality - futilely - in a social network. The boundaries between our individuality and the urban totality, between the inside and the outside, dissolve. In this state, fear and anxiety float, seeking new objects. 'Such a void and the arbitrariness of the play are the truest equivalents of fear.' (Kristeva)

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Reflections on Violence

by John Keane

Among the paradoxes of this long century of violence is the paucity of reflections in contemporary political theory on the causes, effects, and ethico-political implications of violence, understood (crudely) as any uninvited but intentional or half-intentional act of physically violating the body of a person who had previously lived 'in peace'.

There are striking exceptions to this rule, and the interesting fact that, in a heavily male-dominated profession, the topic has been disproportionately treated by women political theorists - Hannah Arendt's reflections on violence are exemplary - confirms it. Informal attempts to discuss the meaning or significance of past theories of violence quickly become bogged in swamps of semantic confusion or political indifference or strong academic preferences for analyzing theories of justice, communitarianism or the history of half-dead political languages. While there are certainly plenty of case studies of wars, civil wars and other violent conflicts, political reflection has lagged far behind empirical events. Of course, the sheer quantity of violence heaped by the twentieth century upon itself is enough to make the most cheerful philosopher pessimistic, and since 'optimists write badly' (Valery) and pessimists tend not to write, the silence of those parts of the political theory profession which have been shocked by this century's cruelty is understandable. Elsewhere in the profession, the silence is simply inexcusable, for it is as if professional political theory is incapable of learning to think in pain or even that it has forgotten the experience of pain, that it has succeeded in doing what people normally cannot bring themselves to do: to overcome the animal pity that grips those who witness or hear about the physical suffering of others.

The reasons for this frozen political imagination about violence are manifold and could certainly constitute an essay in itself, if only because the glorification of violence

as end in itself, which was entirely absent from European political thought before the bellicose outbursts of the Christian Holy Wars or Crusades, is paradoxically in decline, and because the consequent glum silence about violence rests upon a confused and confusing melange of unspoken prejudices and significant assumptions.

A few still believe that there is no problem of violence exactly because the territorially defined state should, or does in fact, monopolise its means. Sometimes it is said bluntly that the subject of violence properly resides in the specialist provinces of criminology or psychiatry or women's studies or war studies, as if the concern with violence in the field of political reflection for at least two millennia could somehow be surpassed by modularization. Still other political theorists, especially those living and working in the post imperial democracies, tacitly accept a scandalous rule of democratic politics since Vietnam: the embarrassed reluctance or outright refusal of most politicians, except in rare situations and out of self-interest, to speak publicly of killing zones like Kurdistan, Somalia, Rwanda, or Bosnia-Herzegovina, let alone to drum up public support for military intervention and counterviolence against cruelty in these so-called 'far-off' countries.

Then there are those theorists who frankly admit to their unreflected belief in the inevitability of violence as a necessary feature of the human condition. Violence is clothed in an aura of strangeness: its causes and consequences are said either to be understood insufficiently to be amenable to a course of treatment or beyond realistic hope of remedy, especially in extreme circumstances such as revolutions and the jostling and confrontation among armed states. This belief that violence is inevitable is rarely understood as historically specific, which it most certainly is. Marx's thesis, outlined in *Das Kapital*, that 'in actual history conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in brief violence, notoriously play the great part', and his dictum that 'violence is the midwife of every old society pregnant

with a new one' are exemplary of a conviction, peculiar to all phases of modernity so far, that violence in some form or another is ineluctably present in human affairs. This modern conviction that 'you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs' (Lenin) or that 'political power grows out of the barrel of a gun' (Mao) may be seen as the secularised offspring of Christian Holy War doctrines, which explains why it was virtually absent from political thought before the eleventh century, after which time the old 'just war', with its insistence that violence must be strictly instrumental, a means that is always in need of an end to justify and place limitations on it, began to crumble.

Finally, there are political theorists who cling to the opposite, equally modern, originally religious presumption that violence is anathema because it violates the principle of the sanctity of human life, a presumption that in practice often dovetails with the belief that as far as possible violence should be hidden away from human eyes, and even sometimes with the conviction (expressed in the theory of democratic zones of peace) that the advanced societies are no longer seriously troubled by violence and that theories of violence are perforce losing their *raison d'être*. Perhaps this later attitude helps to explain why memories of certain modern classics on the subject seem to be fading. Who today reads Georges Sorel's syndicalist defence of the worker's movement in *Reflexions sur la Violence* (1908); Walter Benjamin's fine essay on law, justice and violence, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* (1921); or Hannah Arendt's attempt to distinguish violence and power in *On Violence* (1961)? Who reads Frantz Fanon's stirring attack on whitewashing colonialism, *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961), with its insistence that the 'powerless are entitled to kill their oppressors because to do so is to kill two birds with one stone: the oppressor within and the oppressor without?

John Keane is the Director of CSD. This is an extract from his forthcoming *Reflections on Violence (Verso)*.