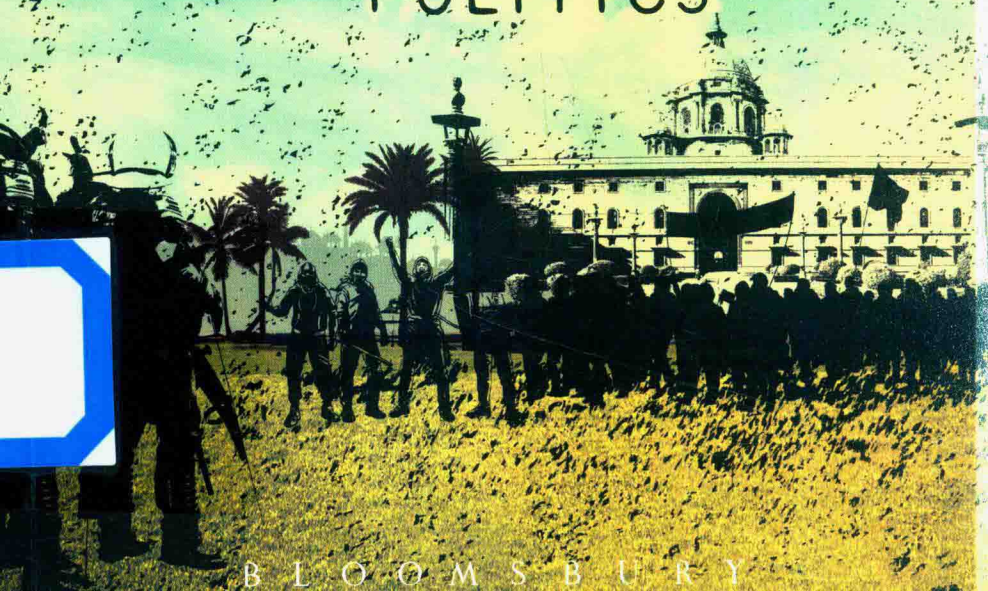


THEORY
FOR A
GLOBAL
AGE

NEERA CHANDHOKE

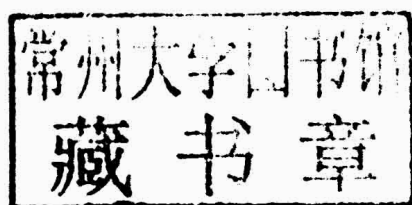
DEMOCRACY AND REVOLU TIONARY POLITICS



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Democracy and Revolutionary Politics

Neera Chandhoke



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Democracy and Revolutionary Politics

THEORY FOR GLOBAL AGE

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Series Foreword

Civil society was a key political concept at the close of the twentieth century associated, as it was, with social movements in Eastern Europe that heralded the end of the Soviet Union and the bipolar world that the 'cold war' had sustained. The twenty-first century, in turn, began with similar social movements, in other parts of the world, against monarchical regimes and authoritarian polities. From Nepal to Tunisia to Libya, people organized collectively and consistently for civil and political liberties and for democracy in various forms. While the relationship between civil society and democracy has long been charted, that between violent protest – or political violence – and democracy, less so. And yet, many of these collective mobilizations were also violent and not just contingently so.

In her important book *Democracy and Revolutionary Politics*, Neera Chandhoke argues for the necessity of examining the idea of violence, and the specificities of political or revolutionary violence, in the context of classical concerns with the main subjects of political theory – justice and the state. Since Weber, the latter has been directly associated with a claim to legitimacy for a monopoly over violence within a given territory, with democratic sovereignty the currently accepted basis of that claim to legitimacy. Given the impact of violence and, in particular, revolutionary violence, upon the shaping of democratic states, Chandhoke argues, it is not possible simply to dismiss non-state violence, or to look for single-issue explanations – justifications or condemnations – that either place it outside the dynamics of democratic politics or as hostile to it. Instead, the book is a meticulous working through of the complexities and ambiguities of political violence and an intimate examination of its relation to theoretical and actual contradictions of democratic politics.

This work of theory is undertaken through an examination of the armed struggle waged by Maoists in democratic India and asks

two interrelated questions: can revolutionary violence be justified in democratic contexts and in what circumstances can it be justified? Even if it can be justified, Chandhoke continues, is it a prudent way of doing politics in democracies? This ambiguity forms the central point of the argument. As Chandhoke perceptively notes, what is at issue here is the necessity, always, of being able to claim justice from the state, even if – and perhaps especially if – that state understands itself as democratic. While much of the book addresses violence through an empirical lens focused on the politics of the Maoists, the conclusion addresses the political thought of one of the most renowned proponents of non-violence, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

The book is a superb illustration of one of the key aims of the *Theory for a Global Age* series, namely, of seeking to understand what ‘theory’ might look like if we started from places other than Europe and from persons other than European thinkers. The focus on an episode from the history of the global South is illuminating about that episode, but actually does much more as well. It provides an excellent exposition of the possibilities of how the conceptual and political debates on violence, especially political violence, can be broadened and enriched by taking a global perspective.

Gurminder K. Bhambra

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‘revolutionary’ rather than the vocabulary of bland ‘political’ violence. My thanks to Sebastiano Maffetone and Valentina Gentile at LUISS for many kindnesses.

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Introduction

Protest politics in the twenty-first century

Civil society

The first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed the intensification of two starkly dissimilar forms of protest across the global south. From Nepal to Libya, huge crowds, driven by a distinctly anti-authoritarian mood, assembled and agitated in public spaces to demand an end to monarchical rule, dictatorships and individualized tyrannies. The mobilization of civil societies against undemocratic governments once again, after 1989, demonstrated the competence of the political public to participate in an activity the ancient Greeks had termed politics.

Collective action bred dramatic results, at least in some countries. In 2006, in Nepal, a massive anti-monarchy movement was transmuted in the course of the struggle into a pro-democracy movement. The movement brought an end to a monarchy that had once claimed divine right to rule, motivated the Maoists to lay aside their weapons and take part in elections to a constituent assembly and catapulted the transition of the Nepali people from subject to citizen. Over two years, 2007 and 2008, a pro-democracy movement, led by lawyers, shook up the then military-ruled Pakistan. The movement forced the military government under General Pervez Musharraf to its knees, and heralded yet again the return of democratic politics to the country.

The most fervent assertion of civil society occurred in a region that had been written off by many scholars as destined for authoritarian rule, the Arab world. A series of anti-government protests, uprisings and rebellions in early 2011 inaugurated what came to be known as the 'Arab Spring' that spread from Tunisia to Egypt, to Syria. The term 'Arab

Spring' is hotly contested, but roughly it captures the phenomenon of a political awakening, and vocal articulation of discontent. Relatively peaceful crowds, passionately pursuing liberty, fundamental rights, constitutional and accountable government and above all dignity occupied and agitated in public spaces. Even as the initial uprising in Tunisia exerted a domino effect in the rest of the region, the development evoked reminiscences of 'Velvet Revolutions' in East Europe in 1989 that heralded the demise of Stalinist states and initiated electoral democracy and market economies. Since 1989, some very powerful states have collapsed like the proverbial house of cards before civil societies single-mindedly pursuing the agenda of democracy.

Certainly, there is more to civil society than just mobilization against tyrannical regimes. The concept abstracts from, describes and conceptualizes particular sorts of politics, such as civic activism and collective action. It is normative in so far as it specifies that associational life in a metaphorical space between the household, the market and the state is valuable. Associational life neutralizes the individualism, the atomism and the anomie that modernity brings in its wake. Social associations enable pursuit of multiple projects, and thereby engender solidarity. The projects themselves range from developing popular consciousness about climate change, to discussing and dissecting popular culture, to supporting needy children, to organizing neighbourhood activities, to monitoring the state. Above all, the concept recognizes that even democratic states are likely to be imperfect. Democracy is a project that has to be realized through sustained engagement with holders of power. Citizen activism, public vigilance, informed public opinion, a free media and a multiplicity of social associations are necessary preconditions for this task.¹

But it was the minimal avatar of civil society, that of mobilization against authoritarian regimes that denied, as dictatorships are wont to do, civil and political liberties to the people, which moved thousands of people across the globe to stand up and speak back to a history not of their making. The wheel had turned full circle. In 1971, Solidarity in Poland had reinvented the concept of civil society. This reinvented

concept spread to other parts of eastern and central Europe. It swept to Brazil where urban professional classes, youth and women's movements, trade unions and social associations took on the military regime, and to other parts of South America. And the concept enthused individuals and groups in South Asia and the Arab world to demand what is their rightful due.

A reinvented civil society that drew upon De Tocqueville more than Hegel or Gramsci gave to the world a new vocabulary: of participation, of civic and associational life, of the right of citizens to hold governments responsible and of human rights. The vocabulary contributed a great deal to the spread of the *idea* of democracy even if the institutionalization of democracy in large parts of the world remains an incomplete venture, a dream but partly realized. The language of civil society also gave to inhabitants of non-democracies and imperfect democracies hopes that the future would bring them rights and dignity, that democracy would be realized and that the capacity of ordinary human beings to realize themselves through collective action and social movements would be recognized and valued.

Political violence

This is not, however, the end of the story of people's resistance to excessive and arbitrary power wielded by state elites. The task of civil society is to monitor and protest against elite capture of institutions and of resources, and against unwarranted state control over lives. That is why civil society is an essential precondition of democracy. But in country after country, civil society lost momentum in the face of inflexible states, or descended into proactive and/or reactive violence as in Egypt. At the very time that the phrase 'civil society' came onto the political tongues of newspaper readers, the social media, and television audiences, we also witnessed an explosion of politics in the mode of violence, in other words political violence.

Protest and resistance in the mode of violence is, of course, not new to human kind. The twentieth century can rightly be called the

'age of violence', given the immense destruction wrought by two world wars, numerous proxy wars, colonial despotism, anti-colonial guerrilla struggles and civil wars in the post-colony. Colonial rulers left countries they had plundered in states of devastation and were quickly replaced by a new, appropriative ruling class in the post-colony.

The persistence of injustice, exploitation, oppression and marginalization in the post-colony bred expected results in the form of violent resistance. Anti-colonial struggles subsided after fulfilling the objective of winning independence. The political space they vacated was occupied by new sorts of armed struggle within the post-colony, over the right of a particular ethnic group to rule, for control of resources, for takeover of state power or for a state of one's own. Formal colonialism came to an end, but colonialism was recast as economic imperialism that intensified deprivation and misery for the poor in the global south and generated multiple mutinies. An impoverished peasantry took to arms against institutionalized injustice within the post-colony; and private armies of aspirant elites sought to imprint the body politic with partisan and avaricious agendas.

The first two decades of the twenty-first century proved no exception to this trend of violent politics. Some non-state groups continue to use immense violence to assert claims to state power, others use violence to oppose the monopoly of power by political elites and yet other groups use violence to make a statement, to assert the power of the group and to create a generalized atmosphere of fear and trepidation. The last is best captured in the phrase 'global terrorism', which with a degree of impunity destroys lives and infrastructure at will.

Above all, post-colonies experienced unprecedented violence because some or the other group within the country staked a claim for a state of its own. The laws of secession or attempted secessions in the post-colonial world are frankly the laws of war – laws of the jungle. The reason why secessions are so messy in the post-colonial world, compared to, for example, the wished-for secessions in Scotland and Catalonia from parent countries, is fairly obvious. For countries that

wrested independence from colonial powers in the second half of the twentieth century, secession signifies a dramatic failure, a failure to consolidate the territory of the nation state.

The nation state is highly overrated, and in our part of the world, South Asia, it appears as one of the major mistakes of history. Even so, the global community continues to hold fast to the belief that the only state worth its name is a nation state and continues to believe that the 'nation' should form an essential prefix to the state, as in the axiom the 'nation-state'. In the global order, states that cannot hold their territory together are castigated as failed states, as crisis states and as fragile states, by western governments, donors, rating agencies and western academics for whom research on 'failed states' has become a profitable industry. The terminology produces anxiety, political knees quake and spines of ruling elite quiver. For any one of these dubious titles casts a particularly dark shadow on state capacity. The tale of terrible vengeance wreaked on insurgency by states could have been foretold.

States in the global south have responded by accelerating 'nation-building' through coercive means. There are a great many tragedies waiting to happen in, for example South Asia, simply because state making has not been preceded by 'nation making' as was the case in Italy and France. Post-colonial states simply cannot come to terms with loss of territory. They resort to every means available: torture, encounter deaths, firing on peaceful protests, imprisonment at will, draconian legislation, displacement and suspension of civil and political liberties, to repress secession.

The dramatic expansion in the number of groups demanding a state of one's own dates to the collapse of actually existing socialist societies at the turn of the 1990s. This inaugurated an era of violent ethno-nationalist movements, especially in the region of the Balkans and the Caucasus. The consequences of the upsurge were, somewhat, serious. Countries dissolved, federal systems melted away and a number of new states emerged out of the debris of old ones often through processes of

armed struggle, ethnic cleansing and genocide. Not surprisingly, a new lease of life was infused into hitherto dormant separatist movements. Among some examples of these movements are the Kashmiri's, the Naga's and the Bodo's in India; the Chechens in Russia; separatist movements in Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabach) and Moldova (Trans-Dniester); Baluchistan in Pakistan; West Papua in Indonesia; the Oromos and the Somalis in Ethiopia; the Kurds in Turkey; till May 2009 the Tamils in Sri Lanka; South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia; and parts of the Ukraine.

Political violence in the global south

In some cases, secessionist movements have proved victorious. But wresting a state of one's own out of unwilling hands has hardly managed to resolve problems of ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities.² Consider Georgia and Ukraine that gained independence with the meltdown of the former superpower, the USSR. Both these countries have been wracked by separatist violence that has proved successful in some regions – notably Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Crimea became independent vide a referendum held in the shadow of an army massed at the border. Separatism has succeeded but will the formation of yet another state, or, as in the case of Crimea, integration into another state unscramble the basic problems that bedevilled earlier avatars of state formation? Recollect that in South Sudan, violence exploded between the two main ethnic communities almost immediately after it achieved independence in July 2011.

Afghanistan since 2013 has entered a new phase of civil war, marked by escalating violence between insurgents and the Afghan National Security Forces. The retreat of international security forces and the rapid decline in the capacity of the Afghan government to control the situation have led to generalized terrorism that affects neighbouring countries. Even as the insurgents assemble bigger formation for assaults,³ Afghanistan provides but one case of what Praveen Swami

calls ‘epic wars unleashed by Mr Bush in the wake of 9/11’. Islamist armies more powerful than before ‘have swept aside Iraq’s military in Mosul, Tikrit, and Bayji; in Syria, too, they control large swathes of territory. Yemen has all but disintegrated. Pakistan is in apparently terminal meltdown. Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two largest regional powers, have been eyeing each other warily – each wondering when the ethnic-religious fires raging across the region will ignite a full-blown war between them.’⁴ Other horrifying cases of political violence continue to make for dismal newspaper reading every morning: Darfur, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eastern Burma, Eastern Chad, Iraq, Syria, Somalia and Sri Lanka. These regions stand as signifiers of brutality and terror, of man’s inhumanity to man.

There seems to be no end to the spiral of civil wars and political violence in the foreseeable future (I am not speaking of global terrorism for this phenomenon demands a separate argument). Private armies augment arsenals, recruit civilians and often little children to fight their wars and assault the state. States fortify their walls against offensives that mercilessly batter their ramparts. And ordinary citizens are caught in the crossfire. The consequences are disastrous: loss of livelihood and lives, displacement and banishment to refugee camps, where relocated people are vulnerable to disease, malnutrition and general ill-being.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees reports that for the first time since the Second World War the number of people driven from their homes by conflict and crisis touched 51.2 million by the end of 2013. Syria is the hardest hit. ‘We are seeing here the immense costs of not ending wars, of failing to resolve or prevent conflict’, said the UNHCR chief Antonio Guterres. Without political solutions, he continued, ‘alarming levels of conflict and the mass suffering that is reflected in these figures will continue.’⁵ The intensification of extreme violence in Iraq and Syria by the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) has worsened the plight of ordinary people.