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Activists do what they do because of a sense of disquiet about the world we live in: something about it has to change. A thorough understanding of violence helps us to explore what it is we are trying to counter. Violence is often misunderstood as a simple action, as something that only occurs when, for example, bombs start to fall on a country, or two people start to fight. Violence is much more subtle, and much more deeply embedded in our cultures and in our lives than this. Violence is articulated in several different forms that we need to be able to detect and understand. A more thorough analysis can help us to understand the world, and our social interactions, and find more effective points of intervention.

Johan Galtung, a peace researcher, introduced the triple concept of 'direct' violence, 'structural' violence, and 'cultural' violence, to try and explain the connection between our social behaviour and attitudes and the physical acts that cause so much (actual) pain and death. This typology of violence, which we could think of as an iceberg, with direct violence 'visible' above the water and 'structural' and 'cultural' forms hidden below, helps us to understand that violence and destruction don't occur in a vacuum, in the same way the tip of an iceberg couldn't possibly float on the water unaided. We know the rest of the iceberg is there, below the water, even if we can't see it, and the forms of violence that are 'hidden' can cause as much actual pain and suffering as the 'visible' types above.

## **Direct, structural, and cultural violence**

Imagine a missile at the point it is released from the undercarriage of a military aircraft. Looking at that missile, we can see the three types of violence that Galtung identified, and how they interrelate.

**Direct violence** is the inevitable explosion, killing and maiming people thousands of feet below, once the bomb is dropped. Direct violence is 'actual', visible war, or physical fighting. We know who pulled the trigger, and the victims are identifiable in a direct, causal chain.

**Structural violence** can be thought of all the systems and structures that make that direct violence inevitable. Think of all that needs to happen to allow a bomb to fall: the missile factories and workers, the economic investment, the academic research programmes, the government legal structures, the military training. Without this 'structure' supporting the bomb, the direct violence it is capable of would be impossible.

Structural violence can also be structures that cause suffering, even if no clearly visible acts of direct violence occur; think of systems like Apartheid. There were of course huge acts of direct violence in Apartheid South Africa, but the discrimination and deprivation experienced by black people, by the (legally mandated) racist structures in access to health, education, resources, housing, and so many other areas of life were no less violent either. Indeed, many of the structures and systems causing such structural violence in Apartheid South Africa are still waiting to be dismantled. When we analyse such forms of deadly injustices or structural violence we can show the links and explain the violent effects on people's lives, but it is very difficult to point to the perpetrator.

**Cultural violence** is even more insidious, and so sits at the bottom of our iceberg. Cultural violence is the ideas, norms and beliefs that makes the direct and structural violence appear legitimate, natural, clean, or even as not violence. In our bomb-laden-fighter-jet example, cultural violence is what 'allows' investment in the arms trade to be considered legitimate business activity, recruitment into the military as an acceptable career choice, that silo's the decision of the pilot to release a bomb from all of the other actors that made such a choice possible. After all, *billions* of dollars are spent each year on the arms trade, most of it legally, and most by people who will never experience the impact of war, the horror of what a fighter jet is capable of. Cultural violence is the violence of shares and profits, of belief and stories, of media and narrative. Cultural violence renders orders to bomb civilians a “duty”, transforms our military dead into “victims”, “martyrs” or “heroes”, while those of our adversary remain “enemies”. “casualties”, “collateral damage”, or just statistics.

Another example of cultural violence can be seen in the transatlantic slave trade, which European slave owners justified to themselves through hideous notions that Africans were inferior, of less value in comparison to Caucasian Europeans. This idea was maintained in the minds of those who participated and benefited from the slave trade by propagandists, by pseudo-science, and a willingness not to venture beyond the restrictive cultural norms.

## Violence and social change

We have discussed violence in detail because it helps us to understand what radical social change means, and why it differs from the work of mainstream NGOs, of state aid, or other 'sticking plaster' solutions. To meet need and respond to violence at its most direct – when the bomb starts to fall, as the child starves, as the tree is chopped down – is critical, and our critique isn't of these efforts per se. But to respond to these things with no or little sense of the system that built the bomb, that deprived the child of food, or brought the chainsaw to the forest is to forget the part of the iceberg that lies below the waterline. Without such a deep understanding of the violent systems that produce direct violence, we will never truly be effective in our campaigns to counter violence.

War Resisters' International describes itself as an “anti-militarist” organisation, because militarism is a term to describe a whole host of different structural and cultural violences, that come together to cause the direct violence of war. From this antimilitarist perspective, we can see the violence of youth militarisation, of investment in the arms trade, of conscription to military service, the militarisation of borders, militarised responses to climate change, and a whole host of other issues that quickly move us away from being simply “anti-war”. “Militarism” describes the structural and cultural pillars that support the act of war, making it more likely to occur.

The Brazilian archbishop Dom Helder Camera famously said “When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” Giving food to the poor isn't a bad thing, it is responding to a real need that will of course save lives, but neither does it do anything to counter the structures that led to the person (or community, or whole country) starving in the first place. Camera's point was that criticism of these structures is often seen as too radical, too argumentative; activists thinking about structural and cultural violence are often accused of not wanting to deal with the problem at hand.

More critically, some argue that the development industry is heavily dependent on the same violent structures for its people and resources as cause the direct violence it is hoping to respond to, and can even be thought of as assuaging the guilt of many in the minority (rich) world; that by donating their time or money to such projects they are 'doing something' that counters their over-consumptive, destructive lifestyles. This final example could be considered an example of cultural violence; we tell ourselves we can ignore the imposition of neo-liberal austerity on an already broken economy leading many to starve, so long as we continue to give our monthly donations to a charities providing a subsistence diet to those most impacted.

So to believe in a different, more peaceful, less violent world isn't simply to imagine a world where people don't starve and bombs don't fall. It is to imagine a world where the forms of structural and cultural violence

that make those things inevitable are undermined, and replaced with structures and cultures that are more equitable and just, and don't reproduce direct violence like war or hunger. Our movements need to be both directly confronting the systems that perpetuate such gross violences while simultaneously daring to imagine and experiment with the alternatives. We can see opportunities for this in the two sides of the resistance/constructive programme coin.

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