

Sen and Žižek on the One-dimensional View of Pathological Subjective Violence

Marlon Jesspher De Vera

Abstract: This paper presents an argument synthesized from the works of Sen and Žižek on how the one-dimensional view of pathological subjective violence is a mystification of the idea of violence. First, the paper provides an elaboration of the concept of objective violence as opposed to (but nonetheless still in relation to) subjective violence. Second, the paper follows with a discussion of the dialectics of the colonized mind as an example of how the objective violence of past colonialism is linked to the instigation of subjective violence even in recent times. Third, the paper provides a brief description of symbolic violence as another category of violence that is distinct from subjective violence. Lastly, the paper asserts its main argument on the mystification of subjective violence and proposes an alternative and more nuanced view of the mechanisms and causes of violence.

Keywords: Sen, Žižek, violence, subjective violence, objective violence, mystification.

The discussions in this paper draw from the works of Amartya Sen and Slavoj Žižek, and focus on the preoccupation of the conventional understanding of violence as pathological subjective violence, which is a mystification that pertains to the mechanisms and causes of violence. Žižek defines subjective violence as the type of violence enacted by a clearly identifiable social agent, whether this agent is an individual, a group, or an institution (2008b, 10). The term pathological here pertains to something that is caused by a malfunction or an unintended defect in an otherwise seamless mechanism. Thus, in the context of violence, pathological subjective violence is violence that is perpetuated by a clearly identifiable agent and which arose out of something that went wrong with the particular agent which resulted in the agent becoming violent. The discussions in this paper attempt to show how this one-dimensional view of violence is a mystification.

Objective Violence

The starting point of the discussions in this paper is Žižek's distinction between subjective violence and objective or systemic violence, as well as Žižek's discussion of how these two types of violence are inextricably linked. Subjective violence, on one hand, is the readily observable manifestation of violence through its disruptions of the normal, orderly, peaceful, and stable state of things. Objective violence, on the other hand, is not as readily perceived because it is precisely what makes the normal, orderly, peaceful, and stable state of things

possible. Of course, Žižek's Marxist analysis situates objective violence as a necessary element of the totality of the mechanism of global capitalism.

Carl Packman provides additional perspective on the character of objective violence in his essay *Towards a Violent Absolute: Some Reflections on Žižekian Theology and Violence* (2009). Packman posits that what makes the character of objective violence ambiguous is not that it is mostly hidden and absent, that it is seen only when probed and exposed. Rather, what makes it ambiguous is that it is too present and exposed in the normal state of affairs that the subject has gotten too desensitized to it and does not notice it unless there is a radical change to it. Packman makes a further connection between objective violence and how ideology functions in current times, and thus, in effect, explicates clearly the ideological dimension of objective violence. In the same way that the contemporary subject is offended only by explicit ideology and not by the implicit ideology embedded in the normal state of affairs that has become, so to speak, too obvious and too present to be noticed, the contemporary subject likewise focuses too narrowly on subjective violence and fails to see the objective violence that has also become too ingrained in the normal state of affairs to be noticed.

To further illustrate, Packman links the ideological dimension of the phenomenon of objective violence with two of Žižek's specific critiques in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008b). First is Žižek's critique of what he calls 'liberal communists,' which are the extremely wealthy capitalists of the current time who present themselves as philanthropists first, businessmen second. They are able to do such ideological manipulation precisely because the contemporary subject perceives more strongly the explicitly presented ideology of benevolent charity and fails to readily appreciate the objectively violent underside of uncontrolled capitalism which has become, in effect, too obvious to be noticed. Second is Žižek's critique of Sam Harris' defense of torture through the thought experiment of the 'truth pill,' which is a hypothetical pill that, when taken by the subject to be tortured, would result in no external manifestations of suffering; instead, the extreme suffering of torture will only be manifested in the subject's internal experience. Žižek's critique of this thought experiment is that the idea of a 'truth pill' seems more tolerable than conventional torture only because it at least partially extinguishes the proximity of the tortured subject to the torturer. In such a way, the torturer would perceive an explicit ideology that is devoid of suffering, which would enable it to ignore the implicit but nonetheless all too obviously present suffering involved.

Furthermore, Packman situates Žižek's reflections on violence within what he calls the theological turn in Žižek's general philosophical project. This so-called theological turn is characterized by Žižek's explicit attempts to connect contemporary political analysis with their theological or religious philosophical roots, in many of his recent works since 1999. Packman argues that, although Žižek did not explicitly frame his analyses of violence in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* in theological or religious terms, he opened the door for further

explication through his numerous references to religious violence, divine violence, and the connections between violence and the notion of the neighbor or the other, to the point of asserting in one instance that ethics is the gap that separates Judaism and Christianity. My own reading is that theological and religious elements are definitely present in some of Žižek's reflections on violence, but that they only further enrich the comprehensiveness and complexity of the reflections by drawing attention to these important elements of the analysis.

But what is of primary interest to the discussions in this paper is Žižek's Hegelian assertion of how an excess of objective violence is necessarily accompanied by an excess of subjective violence. In other words, it is as if subjective violence is the inevitable consequence of objective violence (Žižek 2008b, 9-14). Immediately, it can be seen how this is a more expansive notion of the mechanisms and causes of violence that goes beyond the one-dimensional view of pathological subjective violence. Žižek's assertion can be linked to one possible caution against invoking the idea of objective violence, namely that the notion can make the conception of violence too broad to the dangerous extent that the idea of objective violence can already be used to justify the use of more subjective violence with the argument that it will be used to fight or undermine greater objective or systemic violence. In response to this caution, it can be argued that such invocations of the idea of objective violence to justify the use of more subjective violence is problematic when viewed through Žižek's account of objective violence. This is because, in Žižek's account, such use of more subjective violence is not a justified solution to greater objective or systemic violence. Rather, it is a constitutive symptom or indicator of the greater objective or systemic violence. Žižek's balanced response to such claims, to justify the use of more subjective violence through the idea of objective violence, is to object and fight against such claims, while not losing sight of the connection of such claims to the underlying objective or systemic violence that is present.

Sen does not make a direct similar discussion on the distinction between objective and subjective violence in his text but, nonetheless, he makes an analytical assessment of how certain features of the contemporary globalized market economy reinforce violence. The three examples that Sen cites, referring specifically to the persistent state of violence in Africa, are: 1) the continuous trade of arms from developed countries to African countries, which contributes to the perpetuation of totalitarianism and political militarism; 2) the structural injustices and inequities of international policies on patents, which prevent inexpensive access to life-saving medicines, particularly for HIV; and 3) the highly restrictive export policies from developing countries to developed countries (Sen 2006, 95-96). Conceivably, Žižek would argue that these attributes of global capitalism in relation to Africa, which could be thought of as examples of covert underlying objective violence that ultimately gets manifested into subjective violence, are not contingent but rather necessary elements of the logic of capitalism and Africa's inclusion into its totality. Sen, on the other hand, argues

that structural changes can be made in the current globalized market economy, particularly in terms of revisions to relevant international policies, to radically change the current situation in Africa.

Sen makes a more elaborate assessment of the relationship between markets and freedom, particularly on how markets can both promote and undermine human freedoms, in his essay *Markets and Freedoms: Achievements and Limitations of the Market Mechanism in Promoting Individual Freedoms* (1993). Sen starts his assessment by reformulating the problem of evaluating the achievements and limitations of the competitive market mechanism beyond the conventional welfarist assessment, wherein the merits of the market economy are evaluated based on the achievement of individual and collective welfares rather than based on the promotion of human freedoms. Sen then invokes the distinction between the process aspect and the opportunity aspect of freedom and proceeds to raise the problem of evaluating the achievements and limitations of the competitive market mechanism in the context of each. In the realm of the process aspect of freedom, Sen acknowledges that the market mechanism indeed has merits in expanding the available processes of free choice for human beings and can thus be said to be enhancing process-freedoms. On the other hand, in the area of the opportunity aspect of freedom, the evaluation is more complex. While the competitive market economy can be instrumental towards the expansion of actual functioning opportunities that people can choose, value, and have reasons to value, and, consequently, can potentially expand human capabilities, the major problem that arises in the dynamics of opportunity-freedoms and the market economy is the problem of equitable distribution of substantive opportunity-freedoms among individuals. Thus, Sen identifies that the primary problematic limitation of the competitive market mechanism in promoting opportunity-freedoms has a lot to do with the problem of equity. Sen further asserts that while the problem of equity is already clearly pointed out in the conventional welfarist configuration of the problem of evaluating the merits of the competitive market mechanism, the problem of equity becomes more pronounced and compelling in the freedom-centric configuration. Sen's balanced assessment of the achievements and limitations of the competitive market mechanism in promoting human freedoms is consistent with his general position that recognizes how the market economy can potentially both undermine and perpetuate violence.

Evaluating the dynamics between the competitive market mechanism and human individual freedoms has been an ongoing long-term endeavor of inquiry for Sen. This is already apparent in Sen's earlier works, particularly in his 1970 landmark essay *The Impossibility of a Paretian Liberal* (1970). In this essay, Sen demonstrated that, at the basic level of logic, the ideals of social efficiency and individual freedoms are inherently in conflict with each other. Sen first defined the ideals of social efficiency and individual freedoms by formulating weak logical conditions of Pareto optimality and liberalism, respectively. He then formulated a logical theorem that, in a minimally sensible collective, no social decision function

can satisfy the minimal logical conditions of Pareto optimality and liberalism simultaneously, and subsequently provides a logical proof for the theorem. Although this logical conclusion understandably has limited immediate application, it has very important implications on the broader social and political problem of optimizing both social efficiency and individual liberty. It also greatly challenges the conventional assertion that the competitive market mechanism necessarily promotes individual freedoms as well. The basic position presented is that social decisions can be directed towards the promotion of either social efficiency or individual liberties, but never both, i.e., there will always be a trade-off between the two. The seminal ideas presented in this essay connect neatly with Sen's subsequent elaborative evaluations of the relationships between human individual freedoms and the competitive market mechanism.

The Dialectics of the Colonized Mind

Along a similar but distinct line of discussion, there is an important point of convergence between Sen and Žižek in their discussions on the central role of resentment and a sense of inferiority, particularly in the context of the colonial experience, as driving forces that instigate subjective violence. Based on my reading, both resentment and a sense of inferiority can be thought of as intermediate by-products of objective violence which catalyze the ultimate translation into subjective violence.

Žižek's analysis on resentment and a sense of inferiority focuses on so-called fundamentalists, and how it is compounded rather than undermined by the culturalist or politically correct approach of contemporary liberalism.

The problem with fundamentalists is not that we consider them inferior to us, but rather that they themselves secretly consider themselves inferior. This is why our condescending, politically correct assurances that we feel no superiority towards them only make them more furious and feeds their resentment. The problem is not cultural difference (their effort to preserve their identity), but the opposite fact that the fundamentalists are already like us, that secretly they have already internalized our standards and measure themselves by them. (2008b, 86)

Sen follows the same line of analysis, but primarily focuses on how colonialism is linked with the mechanisms of violence, in an almost similarly Hegelian manner as Žižek, in characterizing and asserting that "the dialectics of the colonized mind includes both admiration and disaffection." (Sen 2006, 84) Sen then proceeds to develop this argument in a way that is rooted in his analysis of the mystifications of the idea of identity as manifested in identity-based thinking of colonized people. Sen refers to the sense of resentment and inferiority resulting from colonial humiliation (on top of the actual economic and political oppression imposed by the colonizer onto the colonized) as the 'reactive self-perception' of colonized people, which, when superimposed into identity-based thinking, results in identity-based alienation and its concrete negative repercussions.

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...the nature of this 'reactive self-perception' has had far-reaching effects on contemporary affairs. This includes (1) the encouragement it has given to needless hostility to many global ideas (such as democracy and personal liberty) under the mistaken impression that these are 'Western' ideas, (2) the contribution it has made to a distorted reading of the intellectual and scientific history of the world (including what is quintessentially 'Western' and what has mixed heritage), and (3) the support it has tended to give to the growth of religious fundamentalism and even to international terrorism. (2006, 89)

Thus, the dialectics of the colonized mind leads to violence when the sense of resentment and inferiority of the colonized is translated into a sort of identity-based thinking wherein the colonized defines its identity as essentially the other apart from the colonizer. Some examples that Sen cites are: 1) the Indian anticolonial nationalistic view, which purports a dualistic distinction between the West as material and India as spiritual; 2) the mistrust in Western science, which contributed to the spread of AIDS in Africa as posited by Mamphela Ramphele; and 3) the formulation of 'Asian values' and the 'Lee thesis,' to differentiate a more totalitarian and disciplined social and political system as distinctly Asian as compared to Western liberalism and democracy (2006, 90-93).

Sen further analyses how the 'reactive self-perception' of the colonized may not necessarily manifest immediately as violence. He makes an empirical observation on how times of extreme oppression, suffering, and poverty are usually accompanied by periods of peace and silence. Nonetheless, Sen asserts that the resentment and sense of inferiority will not be easily forgotten and instigators of violence can eventually instrumentalize the dialectics of the colonized mind for the purpose of violence (2006, 143).

Inferences from the analyses of both Sen and Žižek could likewise provide a potential characterization of the form of the violence that could arise either as the necessary compliment of objective violence or as the consequence of the dialectics of the colonized mind. Since both causes or mechanisms ultimately draw force from a depoliticized, particularist, and to some extent, irrational origin, it is likely that the resulting violence would also take a similar form. Žižek's analysis on what he calls violence as phatic communication shows this. The example that Žižek cites are the riots in suburban Paris in 2005, popularly presented as a form of racial and ethnic conflict (and thus, culturalized). However, upon closer reading, the riots could be seen as a mere explosion of irrational violence with no clear political agenda, clearly identified predicaments, or proposed solutions, but simply carried out to assert visibility, to demand to get noticed (Žižek 2008b, 76-77).

Symbolic Violence

Apart from subjective violence and objective or systemic violence, Žižek also identifies another category of violence which is symbolic violence, which is the violence in language itself, in its very symbolization of reality. Žižek makes a

Hegelian claim that the symbolization of reality itself is violent because the imposition of reality into the symbolic field of language is tantamount to reality's mortification (2008b, 61). Žižek, in his essay *Language, Violence and Non-Violence* (2008a), also discusses the paradoxical character of language as the locus of both violence and non-violence. While language is the medium of understanding, reconciliation, and convergence through discourse, it is also already inherently violent in its symbolization of reality. Thus, Žižek speculates that perhaps human beings have greater propensity towards violence precisely because of our capability to employ language (2008a). Despite its initial ambiguity, this notion could be an important starting point towards responding to the question Sen poses – why is the illusion of singular identity so effective in instigating violence (Sen 2006, 175)? Sen's motivation in posing this question is that, in his reckoning and most likely in common reckoning as well, the recognition that a person has multiple and diverse identities and that identity-based thinking must be accompanied by rationality and choice are both unremarkable recognitions. So how then do instigators of violence effectively make people ignore these unremarkable recognitions? Sen's response is that instigators of violence identify a singular identity affiliation that is part of the real identity of a person and then redefine the demands of this singular identity into a violent and belligerent form (Sen 2006, 176). Of course, this is a valid and sensible response, but I believe that this response itself could be explained further using Žižek's notion of symbolic violence. What the instigators of violence do could be seen as a violent symbolization of the reality of identity, imposing a narrow and extremely mortifying symbolic field on a person's identity-based thinking, such that the somewhat necessary consequence is the manifestation of this violently symbolized identity into its readily perceived form, which is subjective violence.

Conclusion

Given the lines of analysis and discussions presented in this paper on the mystification of the one-dimensional view of pathological subjective violence, some of the theses that can be arrived at are the following. First, the one-dimensional view of pathological subjective violence can be situated within the broader mystification of the culturalization and depoliticization of violence, as this view particularizes the pathology of the subject as the primary mechanism or cause of violence. Second, despite Sen's and Žižek's differences in terms of the philosophical traditions where they come from, it can be said that they both recognize that there are objective or systemic mechanisms or causes of violence beyond subjective pathology. Third, both Sen and Žižek recognize the significant force of the resentment and sense of inferiority of the oppressed, which can be thought of as an intermediate between objective violence and subjective violence. Lastly, the notion of symbolic violence could be employed towards a plausible explanation of the effectiveness of utilizing the illusion of singular identity to instigate subjective violence.

This paper elaborated on the complex and interlinked aspects of the mechanisms and causes of violence. The discussions in this paper challenged exclusively subject-centered conceptions of violence by introducing the notions of objective and symbolic violence. The particular mystifying notion that was critiqued in this paper is the idea that violence has to be recognized through the subject's perception and experience, and further that violence has to be some sort of intentional infliction by or undesirable intrusion to the subject. On the contrary, objective or systemic violence, in a seemingly paradoxical sense, is the kind of violence that perpetuates the normal and balanced status quo, which is already in itself violent, as it privileges a particular hegemonic political interest. Therefore, objective or systemic violence is often neglected not because it is mostly absent or hidden, but because it is too present and commonplace that the subjective view often fails to notice it.

The discussions on the dialectics of the colonized mind also showed how objective violence can potentially feed into a vicious cycle of resentment which, in a likely historically phased manner, could eventually lead to an explosion of subjective or other forms of violence. On the other hand, the discussions on symbolic violence attempted to more clearly characterize this seemingly ambiguous notion. Language, in its symbolization of the field of reality, is already inherently violent and it is this violence of symbolization that is often leveraged by instigators of violence to mystify notions of identity towards the instigation and perpetuation of violence. Nonetheless, language is also the most prominent locus of potential reconciliation and understanding through expression, compassion, and discourse. This paper also emphasized how the various potential forms, mechanisms, and causes of violence are inextricably linked in such a way that an excess in one form of violence would likely lead to an excess in the other forms of violence. This observation on the inextricable link among various potential forms, mechanisms, and causes of violence re-emphasizes the potent political dimension of the phenomenon of violence. Thus, these various forms, mechanisms, and causes must also be freely, rationally, and critically analyzed.

Lastly, this paper suggested that what can be considered as phenomena of violence can also be most likely considered as phenomena of unfreedom (considering a broad notion of freedom that takes both the process and opportunity aspects into account) or phenomena of irrationality (again, considering the broad sense of rationality or reasonability invoked in the discussions of this paper), and, vice versa, phenomena of unfreedom or irrationality can also be most likely considered as phenomena of violence. Since freedom and rationality, broadly construed, both have objective/analytical and subjective/humanist components, such a conception of violence based on the promotion of freedom and rationality as the zero or base point can be analyzed in a more comprehensive manner across the various forms, mechanisms, and causes of violence – whether subjective (since, among other things, the subjective choices and actions of the agent, as well as the internal experiences and perceptions of the

subject, are both important considerations in the discourse of freedom and rationality), objective (since, among other things, the ample consideration of the objective and systemic social and political dimensions are constitutive to examinations of the process and opportunity aspects of freedom as well as of individual and collective rationality or reasonability), or symbolic (since, among other things, linguistic analyses are central to the analysis of freedom as capabilities and rationality through discourse).

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