ACCESS △

Violence, coloniality and a vision of nonviolence for education

Lesley Le Grange (iD)

Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Photo by Hasan Almasi on Unsplash

ABSTRACT

We see images of violence of all kinds in the media on a daily basis. Moreover, violence associated with extreme political/religious beliefs has increased in the twentieth century and is particularly disturbing. In this article the author points out that violence is not a biological tendency but the effect of ever-increasing organisation capacities. As a consequence, violence is committed by people across the political spectrum, including the radical left and the extreme right. Carriers of violence are highlighted in the article, including coloniality and its effects on society generally and education specifically. Given that there is a force field of violence, a vision for non-violence for education is argued for. Inspiration for such a vision could come from traditional indigenous values such as the African value of ubuntu.

Philosophers of the Enlightenment believed modernity to be the cure-all for violence and that reason would relegate war and violent actions to the margins of history. However, in the modern era we have seen a continuous increase in violence; and in the twentieth century, violence associated with extreme political/religious beliefs has become more frequent. Recent events such as the insurrection at the USA Capitol, violence perpetrated by Hindus on Muslims in India during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Taliban take over in Kabul that is threatening the lives of women, forcefully remind us of the latter. In his book, *The Rise of Organised Brutality*, Malešević (2017) argues that we have seen an alarming and continual increase in organised violence since pre-modern times. He avers that violence of the modern era is not a biological propensity but the effect of ever-increasing organisational capacities, be they performed by state apparatuses, social movements, political parties, private corporations or religious institutions. The role of organisation, together with ideology and small group solidarity, are the factors that explain surges in violence over the course of human history (Malešević, 2017). The triad of organisation, ideology and small group identity may explain why violence is committed by people across the political spectrum, including those of the radical left and the extreme right.

CONTACT Lesley Le Grange ✉ llg@sun.ac.za

The episodes of violence that we bear witness to through the media, including violence perpetrated by those holding extreme political/religious beliefs, are deeply disturbing but may only be the tip of the iceberg – manifestations of a deep-rooted problem. In his book entitled *Violence*, Slovenian philosopher Žižek (2009) tells an old story of a worker who is suspected of stealing. So every evening when he leaves the factory, the guards would inspect the wheelbarrow and find that it is empty, until the penny drops - the worker is stealing wheelbarrows. Žižek invokes this story to draw our attention to the carrier(s) of violence, which for him is capitalism. Žižek (2009) distinguishes between what he calls subjective and objective violence. Subjective violence is the disturbance of what seems to be the normal peaceful state of things; it is the violence that we typically witness in the media that shocks and appears to be random. For example, in South Africa, large scale destruction of property and looting which recently occurred in two provinces made headline news. The events hit South Africans by surprise; it seemed random and to come from nowhere. Objective violence is the violence that characterises this 'normal' state of things. For Žižek (2009, p. 9) objective violence represents: "more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence." The recent events in South Africa were complex. But as one of the most unequal societies in the world, the violent events are unsurprising.

I suggest that we might think of objective violence in terms of the violence of coloniality. Grosfoguel (2007) avers that the removal of colonial administrations produced the myth of a postcolonial world. And Mignolo (2007) also reminds us that that coloniality is the darker side of modernity. By this he means that there is no European modernity without coloniality. In other words, the darker side of modernity is the slave trade, imperialisms, violent genocides, racism, sexism, all forms of oppressions suffered by colonised peoples and the current neoliberal order. Some of the 'crimes' of the darker side modernity are: the murdering and displacement of pre-existing knowledges (epistemicide); the killing and displacement of the languages of colonised peoples (linguicide); and the killing and displacement of peoples' cultures (culturecide) (Ndlovu and Omanga 2020). And I add to this the killing and displacement of ecosystems (ecocide). Schools and universities are carriers of coloniality – the epistemic violence of Western disciplines, the normalising and homogenisation of curriculum variants of the Tylerian mould, the technology of performativity, standardised assessments, and so forth.

Judith Butler (2020) points out that because violence is ubiquitous – that there is a force field of violence – those on the political left argue that violence could be a tactical means if the end is justified. Libertarians argue that violence is justified for the purpose of self-defense. But Butler asks what the boundaries are of using violence as a tactical means and what are the boundaries of the self in self-defence – does the self extend to family, friends, those that look like us, etc.? Butler argues that violence inevitably begets violence and therefore a force of nonviolence ought to be cultivated. Wang (2014) correctly observes that nonviolence has received relatively little attention in the realm of education despite increasing consideration given to it in the social and political realms. Because there can be no conversations about non-violence without reference to violence, the pathway to a non-violent vision of education ought to include making violence part of the complicated conversations that happen in classrooms and lecture halls. Additionally, it should also involve drawing on cultural values known in their own various patches where educators perform their work. I shall refer to one such value known to those in the patches I am familiar with, the value of *ubuntu*.

Ubuntu is derived from proverbial expressions in several languages in Africa south of the Sahara, but has value beyond Africa and resonates with many other concepts in the indigenous world. It is not only a linguistic concept and a cultural practice but has a normative connotation embodying how we ought to relate the other – what our ethical obligation is towards the other. It promises an alternative to Decartes *cogito*, "I think therefore I am", which captures the dualism that characterizes much of Western thought and explains the privileging of epistemology in western education. Ubuntu – "Because we are, therefore I am" does not separate ontology, epistemology and axiology – the three are imbricated in one another. In short, it means humanness - that I am only

a human being because of other human beings. When I harm others, I am also harming myself. When I love others, then I am loved in return.

Notes on contributor

Lesley Le Grange is Distinguished Professor in the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. His recent research interests include: presenting the curriculum case for decolonisation; exploring resonances/dissonances between ubuntu and (post)human theories; decolonising Western science through decentring it; decolonising research methodologies and pedagogies.

ORCID

Lesley Le Grange ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7096-3609

References

Butler, J. (2020). *The force of nonviolence: An ethico-political bind*. Verso.

Grosfoguel, R. (2007). The Epistemic Decolonial Turn. *Cultural Studies, 21*(2-3), 211-223. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162514

Malešević, S. (2017). *The rise of organized brutality: A historical sociology of violence*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316155332

Mignolo, W. D. (2007). Delinking. *Cultural Studies, 21* (2-3), 449-514. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. G. & Omanga, D. (2020). Decolonisation, decoloniality and the future of African studies. https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/decolonization-decoloniality-and-the-future-of-african-studies/

Wang, H. (2014). A nonviolent perspective on internationalising curriculum studies. In W. F. Pinar (Ed.), *International handbook of curriculum research* (2nd ed., pp. 67–76). Taylor & Francis.

Žižek, S. (2009). *Violence*. Profile Books.