Deane Curtin and Robert Litke

Most people deplore violence, some people embrace violence (perhaps reluctantly), and a few people renounce violence. But through all these postures there runs a certain obscurity: it is never entirely clear just what violence is.

Newton Garver, “What Violence Is”

Violence, as Garver notes, is almost universally condemned, yet we find it everywhere. Despite our spirited condemnations, it is a key ingredient in how we entertain ourselves—in the stories we tell our children, in great literature as well as pulp fiction, and in television and cinema. It is also an essential feature of many of our most hallowed social institutions: in family life, in religious affairs, and in political history. Yet despite its pervasive­ness violence evades definition.

Etymologically, “violence” means “to carry force toward” something. While helpful, this is too broad. There are endless ways in which force can be carried toward something or someone. Virtually every human action could be described in that way. Further, we generally recognize a distinction between force, which may be morally justified, and violence. We think, for example, the police are sometimes justified in using force to maintain public safety. But, as the Rodney King incident demonstrated, police sometimes act violently and without justification. The concept will be useful only if it can be defined more narrowly.

Suppose we look to the dictionary. The first two entries in the unabridged edition of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* bring to light three distinct elements: (1) the idea of intensity (as in a storm); (2) the idea of injury (as in death by accident); (3) the idea of physical force. It is worth noting this dictionary does not commit itself to the view that the injury must always result from physical force for “violence” to be the appropriate word. The sixth entry allows for injuries through distortion of meaning and fact (as in “the translation did violence to the original”). These meanings and nuances provide the ingredients for different philosophical views of what violence is.

For example, Robert Audi makes use of the first two meanings and proposes that violence is a vigorous attack or abuse of persons in physical or psychological ways. He supports his proposal by showing that we can carry force against people in a variety of physically and psychologically devast­asting ways. More common in the philosophical literature, however, are narrower views of violence requiring all three elements: violence is causing injury through the use of vigorous physical force. And sometimes a fourth element is required, namely, the injury must be intended or foreseen.

A different set of philosophical views emerges if one is willing, as Garver and Robert Holmes suggest, to extend the meaning of violence by
focusing on the idea of violating persons. Since persons can be violated in both physical and psychological ways, initially these views look like Audi’s account. However, violations of persons may be a matter of subtle rather than vigorous abusive treatment so the cases will be somewhat different from those captured by Audi. Violence, when construed as a matter of violating persons, requires a shift in perspective. Instead of thinking of violence in terms of the force being exerted and on the agent exerting the force, one is focused on the effects of such force on the recipient or the victim.

In “What Violence Is,” Garver provides the taxonomy of violence that is most useful as the starting point for this volume. He says,

[Violence] occurs in several markedly different forms, and can be usefully classified into four different kinds based on two criteria, whether the violence is personal or institutionalized, or whether the violence is overt or covert and quiet.

The easiest form of violence to recognize, particularly given the liberal individualist assumptions of Western societies, is overt personal violence. Mugging, murder—these are cases of one-on-one physical violence that are routine features of the evening news.

In recent years we have become more sensitive to the second form of violence: covert personal violence. Child abuse or spousal abuse is sometimes overt, physical violence, and sometimes covert, as in quiet psychological abuse. Being covert does not lessen its damage. Because covert violence is often difficult to discern it may be more problematic both philosophically and practically. A teacher’s suspicions may be aroused immediately by a child’s bruised body, but prolonged contact may be required before one suspects psychological violence that damages a child’s self-respect.

Garver’s third and fourth forms of violence are perhaps the least widely recognized in our culture. Violence can be institutional as well as individual. The military, the police force, the church, and the educational system are cultural institutions that, most believe, occasionally use force, which can be justified as a public good. However, these institutions may go beyond force to violence that undermines the public good.

Some institutional violence is overt. Though the justification for use of military force is widely debated, it seems possible to distinguish between force justified for self-defense and military violence that cannot be justified as legitimate force. The victorious army that rapes and pillages is committing overt institutional violence.

As with covert personal violence, covert institutional violence may be difficult to identify. Yet, its damage is no less real. If a pervasive assumption is made within a school district that boys, but not girls, should take additional years of science or mathematics, this is covert institutional violence. If a firefighters public exam makes unjustified assumptions that only men can be firefighters, this is covert institutional violence. If a retail store
hires only Caucasian clerks because it operates on the assumption that its customers will not feel comfortable being waited on by persons of color, this is covert institutional violence.

Individual and institutional violence often shade into one another. Institutional prejudice within the police force may facilitate acts of individual violence such as occurred with Rodney King. Sexism within the military makes gendered violence against individual women more likely, as in the Tailhook Scandal. One can ask, “How do we decide precisely when spousal abuse is purely ‘personal,’ and when it is violence facilitated by sexism or the law?” The search for a single distinction may be futile, and this may be due to the tendency of pervasive societal institutions to establish conditions that facilitate violence on several levels.

Institutional violence not only facilitates certain kinds of violence, it also creates new categories of violence. The violence in the Tailhook Scandal did not just happen to be directed only against women. Sexism within the military operates on categories of persons. It identifies women as suitable recipients of violence. As Sally J. Scholz argues in “The Challenge of Systemic Oppression,” “oppression” is used to indicate a state of affairs suffered by a group of human beings sharing some social identity. For Scholz, then, “[i]ndividuals are oppressed only insofar as they are members of a group.” If only personal or individual violence existed there would be no oppression in the systemic sense.

When institutional violence becomes the status quo, it generally moves from overt forms to covert forms. As Garver noted in 1968, very little overt violence is needed to sustain a system of deprivation in the ghettos of American cities. The riots in Los Angeles and other large cities are rare occasions of overt violence. Most of the systematic exclusion from important life options occurs in much more subtle and covert ways: in inferior school systems, in pervasive suspicions about the intentions of police, and in exclusion from economic opportunities.

Colonialism often began with a period of overt military violence, but, as was the history of British colonialism in India, it triumphed when it became covert. The military prepared the way, but it was Macauley’s system of education for the colonies that won the minds and hearts of an indigenous elite. In the words of Ranajit Guha, “Macauley…prescribed [education] as a nutritive for native minds that had subsisted far too long on a poor diet of indigenous superstitions.”

When institutional violence takes on the character of the status quo as it did in colonial India, the institutions that create and facilitate violence become synonymous with “justice.” Resistance to institutional violence is often defined, paradoxically, as “unjust.” Before the elimination of apartheid in South Africa, racist legal institutions were so pervasive that “justice” was equated with racist oppression. Opposition to this exclusion was often outlawed.
In Western political thought, there is a tendency to think in narrowly individualistic terms about ethical issues. Perhaps the critical question for liberal individualism is the assignment of individual moral responsibility. Yet when violence is institutional, and especially when it becomes the covert status quo, no individual may be responsible. One of the common responses to affirmative action programs is, “Why should I suffer? I was not involved in past injustices and I never individually willed any form of discrimination on the basis of race or gender.” If the only question were individual responsibility for individual violence, arguments for affirmative action would be impossible to defend. Put another way, if we focus solely on individual violence as liberal individualism encourages us to do, we cannot understand what being systemically oppressed means.

Finally, as we turn to the contributions to this volume, we find that one additional distinction may be helpful in understanding violence. Garver makes a fundamental point in distinguishing individual and institutional violence. We suggest that institutional violence should be distinguished from systemic violence. Institutional violence is violence made possible and facilitated by social organizations having relatively explicit rules and formal status within a culture. Examples are the educational system, the military, the police force, and the judicial system. When such institutions promote violence, however, they often do so within a broader social context of systemic violence. Here, the rules are more vague, and there may be no identifiable social institutions that facilitate violence.

Racism, sexism, and colonialism are systemic patterns of thinking and cultural organization that often result in the creation of institutionalized forms of violence. For example, colonialism as a systemic form of violence required the British to export a formal educational system designed to create a loyal elite among their subjects. Similarly, racism as a form of systemic violence may lead a legislature to create a racially biased legal system in the name of “justice.” That is, systemic violence may create an atmosphere conducive to the creation of violent institutions. Again, there may be gradations between systemic and institutional violence that make the search for a precise definition futile. The taxonomy of violence suggested can be schematized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Overt</th>
<th>Covert</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>muggings, murder</td>
<td>personal threats, character assassination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>police brutality, terrorism</td>
<td>slavery, apartheid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systemic</td>
<td>domestic violence, genocidal violence, land disenfranchisement</td>
<td>sexism, racism, colonialism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are problems with naming in a taxonomy like this. "Colonialism," for example, may refer either to a systemic set of attitudes, or to an actual set of institutions created to support and foster the basic attitudes. Similarly, a murder may be simply an act of one-on-one violence, but it may also be a direct result of institutional violence. We find the fact that these verbal shifts are possible philosophically interesting. This suggests that we may still not understand very well what violence is. We offer the taxonomy as a way of critically engaging the articles that follow. We do not assume that the authors included in this book agree with us.

Notes

10. Ibid.