Violent conditions: The injustices of being

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ABSTRACT

Violent conditions burn in the background of daily life. Consider the slow wounds of ecological violence, the crumbling cityscapes of austerity, or the mental trauma inflicted by capitalism. In this paper, we provide an account for understanding violence in and through *conditions*, drawing on the work of Johan Galtung and Gilles Deleuze in particular. Violent conditions are not the property of individuals or monolithic structures: they are the existential climates by which localized subjects and worlds condense into being. In making this argument, we not only advance scholarship on the geographies of violence, but also make a sustained case for how and why condition is an important social, political, and ontological heuristic. Our examination is framed by unearthing the complex conditions and discontents of capitalism. Violent conditions forcefully constrain, traumatize, and poison the very resources of our becoming. Accordingly, we provide a map for exploring the geographies of violent conditions across four interrelated sections. (1) *The Virtual,* (2) *Truncated Life,* (3) *Time,* (4) *Common Sense.* Collectively, these explain how violence is embedded in the flesh and bones of our worlds. The paper finishes by discussing the injustices of being and the possibilities for peace.

Introduction

Violent conditions burn in the background of daily life. Consider the slow wounds of ecological violence (Nixon, 2011), the crumbling cityscapes of austerity, or the mental trauma inflicted by what Mark Fisher (2009) terms capitalist realism. In his classic 1845 study, *The Condition of the Working Class in England,* Friedrich Engels outlines his task as follows: to prove that English society routinely commits "social murder." Workers, he writes, are placed "under conditions in which they can neither retain health nor live long; that it undermines the vital force of these workers gradually, little by little, and so hurries them to the grave before their time" (Engels, 2009, p. 127). Moreover, "I have further to prove that society knows how injurious such conditions are to the health and the life of the workers, and yet does nothing to improve these conditions" (Engels, 2009, p. 128). Engels' vivid polemic highlighted the *injustices of being*: the violent conditions that pervaded, harassed, and choked Victorian workers in Manchester, sending them to early graves. And the conditions that Engels denounced so long ago have not disappeared.

The idea of social murder gained popularity in the wake of the tragic Grenfell Tower block fire of 2017. Many blamed government-imposed austerity for priming the conditions for the deadly inferno in London. The Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, said: "The decision not to build homes and to view housing as only for financial speculation rather than for meeting a basic human need by politicians over decades

murdered those families" (quoted in Syal, 2017). As David Madden (2017, np.) adds, "working class and poor communities were living and working in conditions that were conducive to disaster." Geography, of course, has long studied how various conditions are *worlded* (McCormack, 2017; Shaw, 2012). From economic conditions (Harvey, 1989), to ecological conditions (Bagelman & Wiebe, 2017), to psychological conditions (McGeachan, 2014), geography maps the inescapable *situatedness* of being. To put it simply: to exist is to be affected by conditions (see Anderson, 2014). But the idea of condition is only implicitly understood despite its ubiquitous use. Accordingly, our task in this paper is to conceptualize violence in and through conditions.

What are conditions? Conditions are the very *geographies of being*: the existential resources that nourish and sustain, but also harm and violate. Conditions are not the property of individuals or monolithic structures: they are the existential climates by which localized subjects and worlds are condensed into being. What we term *violent conditions* are those geographies of being that restrict the potential for life to flourish and actualize (see Tyner, 2016). This advances Galtung's (1969, p. 168) definition of violence as "*the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual*" in a world. Understanding violence in and through conditions discloses the insidious, atmospheric, and unjust *matters* and *senses* of existence.

To make these arguments, we build on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (1994) to define condition as a localized space of *formed* and *unformed* matters (see also Marston, Jones III, & Woodward, 2005;

Woodward, Jones III, & Marston, 2012). On the one hand, this enables us to understand violence through its *actualized* circumstances and forms, the "conditions lying outside and impinging on human life" (McCormack, 2017, p. 7). On the other hand, by conceptualizing the *virtual* nature of condition—its unformed matters, energies, and potentials—we provide an account of how conditions individuate subjects, transduce worlds, and constrain the possible in the fabric of being. Together, this enables us to locate "the material, self-organizing conditions through which situated politics emerge" (Woodward et al., 2012, p. 217).

Over the past decade, violence has been named, declared, classified, memorized and attested to across the discipline. In their recent special issue, Springer and Le Billon (2016) state that the geographies of violence is an important yet emerging area of disciplinary research. There has been research on military and state violence (Gregory and Pred, 2007), systemic violence (Laurie, 2015), intimate gendered violence (Pain, 2014, 2015), ecological violence (Bagelman & Wiebe, 2017), police and legal violence (Wall, 2016), and various forms of urban violence (Graham, 2010). Yet rarely is the term violence *itself* scrutinized. Perhaps this is because violence is "complex, mimetic and protean" (Springer & Le Billon, 2016, p. 1)—a "slippery concept … nonlinear, productive, destructive *and* reproductive" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004, p. 1). As such, the paper responds to multiple calls across political geography (Tyner, Inwood, & Alderman, 2014; Pain, 2014; Tyner & Inwood, 2014), to advance "a much larger and unfolding research agenda" in the field of geographies of violence (Springer & Le Billon, 2016, p. 3). Our aim in this paper is therefore twofold. First, we advance recent scholarship on the geographies of violence (Doel, 2017; Pain, 2014; Tyner, 2016; Tyner & Inwood, 2014). Second, we make a sustained case for why condition is an important social, political, and ontological heuristic.

In the remainder of this paper we sketch a map for navigating the ontopolitics of violence. Our overriding concern is how injustice embeds itself in the flesh and bones of the world—a world that is never above or below the human subject but threaded into its very fibres. In what follows, we review existing scholarship on violence in and beyond geography. We then turn to the philosophies of condition in the work of Hannah Arendt (2013), Gilles Deleuze (1994), Felix Guattari (1989), and also Deleuze and Guattari (2004). This examination is framed by unearthing the complex conditions and discontents of capitalism. As David Harvey (1989, p. 336) noted in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, "It is never easy, of course, to construct a critical assessment of a condition that is overwhelmingly present." After that, we unite both violence and conditions to produce a geography of violent conditions. This cartography is drawn over four interrelated sections: (1) *The Virtual,* (2) *Truncated Life,* (3) *Time,* and (4) *Common Sense.* We close the paper with a summary of our main arguments—oriented by the theme of injustice—and chart pathways to more peaceful conditions.

On violence

In this section, we establish foundational philosophical and geographical approaches to understanding violence. Hannah Arendt (1969, p. 82) argues that violence belongs to "the political realms of human affairs." A similar rejection of violence as a natural condition is forwarded by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004). They sketch the *sociocultural* conditions for constructing violent subjects. As they argue: "We *are* social creatures. … We reject the view that violence is fundamentally a question of hard-wiring, genes or hormones … *brute* force is a misnomer … Sadly, most violence is not 'senseless' at all" (2004, p. 3). There is a political imperative for the rejection of violence as an intrinsic, genomic facet of human existence. As this paper explores, there is an intimate relationship between violence and capital. There is a risk that when we collectively naturalize or fetishize violence we "forever serve the interests of those who seek to profit through oppressive and exploitative practices" (Tyner & Inwood, 2014, p. 11). Moreover,

rejecting the normalization of violence is the first step in imagining more peaceful subjectivities and crafting more peaceful worlds (Koopman, 2011). We reach for peace by first grasping violence as a concept (Inwood, Alderman, & Barron, 2016). It is unsurprising then, that we first turn to the founder of *Peace Studies*, Johan Galtung, for "everything now hinges on making a definition of violence" (1969, p. 168).

Through his sustained intellectual engagement with the very concept of violence, Galtung has offered us a typology of violence, what he terms a "(vicious) violent triangle" (1990, p. 294) comprised of *direct*, *structural*, and *cultural* violence. As such, Galtung called for a capacious definition of violence: one that moves beyond the direct, physical violence perpetrated by an identifiable actor, towards *structural* and institutional forms of violence. This is the type of diffuse violence that stunts an individual's ability to develop and realize their full potential. This is not a utopian potential, but perfectly realizable. Accordingly, Galtung (1969, p. 168) defines violence "*as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is.*" Violence inhabits this gulf. Crucially, Galtung understands violence as *both* that which increases the gulf and, more potently, that which *fails to close the gulf.* This shifts away from a comprehension of violence as an *intentional act* towards a constraint-based ontology of violence: where doing nothing is a cause of harm, the "ontological rupture between 'killing' and 'letting die'" (Tyner, 2016, p. 276).

Similarly, Žižek (2008) splits violence between its subjective and objective manifestations. For Žižek, society's fixation on the subjective violence (such as terrorist attacks) emerges as a very deliberate distraction from the objective violence that greases the wheels of capitalism. Indeed, this focus on subjective or direct violence not only commands popular interpretations of violence, but, as Pain (2015) argues, dominates academic enquiry. This direct violence is depicted as a "sporadic, singular episode or set of such episodes … as the exception to the norm" (Lawrence & Karim, 2007, p. 11). Alternatively, Galtung recognises the violence built *within* systems. Such structural violence is not partitioned spatially or temporarily. And the perpetrator of violence is not clearly recognizable (Galtung & Höivik, 1971): it can be bureaucratic (Cooper & Whyte, 2017; Gupta, 2012), anonymous, and abstract (Laurie, 2015). In many instances, death through structural violence is a result of a series of social and political process that make life killable *prior* to any act (Butler, 2004; Lopez & Gillespie, 2015).

Beyond the binary

Many have (re)turned to Galtung for his initial provocations on *structural* (over direct) violence. Yet Galtung (1990) augments this understanding by detailing how direct *and* structural violence both require the auxiliary role of *cultural violence* to function. Cultural violence, "preaches, teaches, admonishes, eggs on, and dulls us into seeing exploitation and/or repression as normal and natural, or into not seeing them … [as] 'right' or at least not 'wrong'" (1990, p. 291). Cultural violence hides the spectacular violence within the "symbolic sphere of existence" Galtung (1990). Violence is rendered banal and everyday through its repeated exposure and representation. As Lawrence and Karim (2007, p. 5) write, at "its first eruption, violence is always experienced as unique. If given time and repetition, however, it becomes routine, part of the air and one learns how to breathe it without being asphyxiated. One no longer seeks to eliminate it, more even to understand it." Of course, this mutation from the spectacular to the banal has a racialized, gendered, and uneven geography to it, whereby deaths in certain spaces, or deaths of certain populations, are barely even marked (Butler, 2004; Pratt, 2005).

There is important work within feminist geopolitics and gender studies that recognises such "bodies at the sharp end" (Dixon & Marston, 2011, p. 445; see also recent special section "Embodying Violence" in *Gender, Place and Culture* edited by; Fluri & Piedalue, 2017). For feminists, of course, the personal has *always* been political.