



Radical Violence and the Ontological Fragility of the Political

Tinto TD*

Doctoral Researcher, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Indore, Indore, India

***Corresponding author:** Tinto TD, Doctoral Researcher, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Indore, India, Email: phd1901261008@iiti.ac.in

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Abstract

This article argues that radical violence allows us to understand diffuse, opaque, and ontologically corrosive forms of violence that are not confined to event-centered, instrumental or legal-judicial conceptions of violence. Rather, radical violence is performed through a malign condition of structural, epistemic, bureaucratic and algorithmic forms of rule, and not in acts of coercive violence. Drawing on phenomenology, hermeneutics and post-foundationalism, the article shows how radical violence roots itself in the world-relation, resulting in disorientation, narrative rupture, unworlding and a state of almost permanent vulnerability. Radical violence also empties the grounds of worlding and relationality, even where institutions themselves are not destroyed. The book concludes with a theoretical account of the ontological fragility of the political, wherein political worlds are sustained through fragile practices of meaning, recognition, and judgment that render them at once possible and vulnerable to radical violence. It does not offer solutions, but rather expands the conceptual vocabulary through which contemporary harm is understood as a world-altering phenomenon.

Keywords: Radical violence; Ontological fragility; Vulnerability and precarity; Epistemic and algorithmic violence; Democratic erosion and depoliticization; Phenomenology and political ontology; Meaning, Narrative, Judgment

Introduction — Rethinking Violence in the Contemporary Condition

Although violence has been a longtime concern of political philosophy, social theory, and ethical thought, contemporary lived experience seems to outstrip existing vocabularies for conceptualizing violence. Classic accounts of violence are framed in terms of episodic and visible forms of intent like bodily harm, coercion, domination, or the planned use of force. While such accounts are absolutely necessary, they appear inadequate to the diffuse, ubiquitous, and ontologically corrosive character of violence in the

current historical moment. Constructions of violence today join, are entangled with, ordinary social life, are incorporated into institutions, technology, administrative practice, social relations. They do not rupture social life. Rather they extend and consolidate the conditions that make sense, recognition, and political subjectivity possible. This article proposes the concept of radical violence to name this transformation.

Many canonical theories of violence see it mainly as an action on bodies or institutions. Johan Galtung [1] went further and defined violence as not merely acting on bodies, but the systematic deprivation of human flourishing. Elaine



Scarry [2] examined how physical pain destroys language and world-relations. For Walter Benjamin [3], violence inheres in the law-making and law-preserving structures of durable societies and for Hannah Arendt [4], violence that constitutes a means of power is not genuine political action. Each of these unpacks aspects of the phenomenon of violence but in different ways assumes a fully formed world in which the distinctions between violence and nonviolence, normality and rupture, are conceptually available.

Contemporary conditions challenge those assumptions. In Veena Das's [5] analysis of how violence descends into the ordinary, for example, violence is not an event that intrudes on ordinary life from outside but rather an occurrence that gradually saturates the ordinary, eroding trust, language, and relationality. Achille Mbembe [6] applies this model of sovereign power, necropolitics: a modern regime of power that governs through exposure to death, abandonment, disposability. Roberto Esposito [7] and Giorgio Agamben [8] show how biopolitical and immunitary logics produce zones of exception and forms of life stripped of political meaning. These frameworks show that violence cannot simply be regarded as an event or a tool, but a transformation of conditions of subjectivity, vulnerability, and belonging.

They might be instrumentally calculative, administrative and ostensibly neutral. Foucault's [9] analyzes of normalization and security rationalities, Nikolas Rose's [10] analyzes of governmentality through risk or psychology and Thomas Lemke's [11] analyzes of biopolitics all indicate forms of governance that are not grounded in coercively sovereign means but are rather oriented around management, optimization and calculation. Now, theorists of the digital age, like Shoshana Zuboff [12] on surveillance capitalism and David Lyon [13] on datafication, show how algorithmic and predictive logics re-order visibility, exposure and control in social life. Violence is no longer spectacular and easy to capture as an "event", but becomes integral to infrastructures of knowledge, administration and technology.

These developments, then, cause violence to no longer be defined narrowly as either physical destruction or force, nor as purely metaphorical or abstract. Violence is understood as both physical and metaphorical, acting on both bodies and worlds. Meaning disintegration entails the loss of judgment and destabilization of the horizon, a rudimentary understanding of a social world that makes it possible to understand oneself and others. This is where phenomenological and existential thought help. The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty [14], the narration of identity and suffering evoked by Ricoeur [15], and the being-in-common of Jean-Luc Nancy [16] illustrate how violence opens up the discord of the structures whereby the world manifests itself as familiar, inhabitable, and common, so that,

in this sense, violence unworlds.

The concept of radical violence, the subject of this chapter, intends to delineate an acceleration and transformation of violence. 'Radical' does not mean extreme in terms of quantity or severity. It is not simply a question of force, nor even of intentionality; it is rather a question of the penetration through to the real foundations of world-relation, of the ontological, relational, and interpretive structures sustaining meaning, recognition, and political life. The dissolution of the conditions under which persons appear to one another as moral and political beings is central to radical violence. It is very hard to find in individual moments or agents but is there at the crossroads of institutions, technologies, cultures and affects; it is diffuse, saturating, ordinary yet devastating.

What is needed is a reconceptualization of violence that enables us to understand the role of violence in the contemporary condition without collapsing the distinction between violence and nonviolence or reducing the category of violence to the point of analytic uselessness. This is a project that starts from the recognition that contemporary forms of harm are often indirect, gradual and structural while still producing serious ontological and political harm. These examples show how many court systems, bureaucratic processing, data infrastructures, border regimes and humanitarian governance avoid violence as an explicit modality yet produce exposure, abandonment or erasure. As Didier Fassin [17] shows, humanitarian and moral economies may also become entangled in regimes of suffering and regimes of inequality.

In that sense, the overall ambition of this article is to show that radical violence is not solely a political instrument, but that it is a radical violence that destroys judgment, relationality, and plurality, eviscerating the capacities upon which political life depends, and must be evaluated in terms of how it transforms the horizons of the political. It produces forms of vulnerability that are not only material but also existential: it narrows the space in which one can appear, speak, and act as a political subject. This is how radical violence exposes the fragility of the political. It takes more than abstract institutions to sustain political existence: it takes the fragile capacities of meaning, recognition, and shared world-making.

It is thus the task of this article to critically reconstruct the limits of these conventional accounts of violence while acknowledging their lasting insights. Second, it develops a new, philosophical account of radical violence as a concept adequate to contemporary forms of harm. Meaning that, although it includes bodily harm, infrastructural abandonment, administrative normalization, epistemic erasure and technological exposure, it remains situated in

the material, represented, and relational fabric of human existence. The purpose of the proposed concept of violence is thus to show how violence today is not only something that happens in the world but something that reconfigures how the world is experienced and shared.

These intervals reshape the framework in question across several sites, to map the limits of the categories of the inadequate, the ontology of world-rupture, and the priority of radical violence as the reality of our contemporary existence.

The Limits of Conventional Theories of Violence

Theorizing violence has produced an extraordinarily rich and diverse literature across political philosophy, sociology, anthropology, critical theory, and phenomenology, classical and modern. These approaches have attempted to understand what violence is, what it does, and how it is to be distinguished from other forms of relation such as force, power, coercion, or law. The frameworks of these traditions are indispensable not only so far as they are advanced but so as they throw light on dimensions of harm, domination and injury that contemporary conceptual frameworks fall short of capturing. The present section will argue, without displacing their insights, that these conventions presuppose distinctions, boundaries, and normative horizons that have increasingly lost their certitude. Consequently, the contemporary condition requires going beyond an event-centered, instrumentalized, or juridical conception of violence toward something more ontologically sensitive.

First, there are explanations of violence based on its manifestations and methods, considering it to be the deliberate infliction of bodily damage, coercion, or destruction on a victim. Karl Jaspers [18] and Raymond Aron [19] have presented the problem mainly as an ethical and political problem, of responsibility and action. Max Weber [20] defined the state by its claim to the legitimate monopoly of the use of physical force. This tradition sees violence mainly as an isolated act or instrument, that can usually be ascribed to individual agents, and evaluated in moral terms. In *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt [4] takes a similar position, arguing that unlike political power, which is founded in collective action and consent, violence is instrumentally by nature, and thus only a means to an end. While Arendt admits violence can be effective, it cannot create legitimacy or political action.

But this model, although it gives us important conceptual resources, presupposes a certain understanding of violence as external to or outstanding for ordinary relations, interrupting those relations and not something which is produced in and through them. It presupposes a certain understanding of the

limits of power, coercion, and administration. In contemporary societies, in which coercive effects have been built into bureaucratic or technological routines, there is a distinction more blurred than Arendt intended.

A second influential theoretical approach extended direct and symbolic violence to include structural violence, as articulated in Johan Galtung's [1], where violence is conceptualized as social structures that prevent people from realizing their full human potential by causing avoidable deprivation, inequality, and premature death. Structural violence shows how violence can be exercised by an agentless arrangement that seems neutral, natural or preordained. The idea has had a major impact on contemporary engagement with global justice. Yet structural violence also tends to leave unexamined the phenomenological, lived, quotidian and interior experience of harm structured by these social arrangements. In many social contexts today, structures not only injure or marginalize such actors, but also shape the structures of subjectivity, attention, and meaning in ways other than those that are articulated by common-sense understandings of deprivation or inequality.

Finally, a third mainstream understands violence in terms of injury to embodiment, language and world-relation. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry [2] claims that pain destroys language, reducing the sufferer's world into immediate reality. According to Adriana Cavarero [21], horrorism is the destruction of humanity in the other together with their vulnerability. Susan Sontag [22] writes about how our sensibilities are shaped by the way suffering is represented. Violence is also hermeneutic, being essentially about distorting meaning, and the relation between self, body and world. These texts often remain tightly bound to acute or spectacular experiences of pain and trauma to the body, while many forms of contemporary harm happen gradually, silently, or dispersedly, though they produce similar fractures of meaning and relationality.

Anticolonial and postcolonial theorists have also understood violence as historical and psychic violence. Frantz Fanon [23], for example, wrote of colonial violence as a world-shaping event that structures space, consciousness and subjectivity. Rather than a singular event, violence is understood here as ontological; an inscribed experience of bodies, gestures, and social texture. Fanon's conception of violence as more than a single act was already apparent, but his account is tied to coloniality and revolution. Modern violence in the early 21st century may appear to be tied instead to liberal, humanitarian, or technocratic regimes that disavow open declarations of violence as an ideology.

Critical theory and philosophy of law have examined the relation between violence, sovereignty, legality and

normativity. Walter Benjamin's essay "Critique of Violence" [3] establishes a distinction between law-preserving and law-making violence, showing that violence is always internal to legal order. Michel Foucault's study of disciplinary power and biopolitics [9] reverses the order from prohibition to discipline and from spectacular punishment to microphysics, weakening the liberal perception that law can abate violence by exposing how legality produces its own violence. However, even these critiques are predicated on the common sense that violence always proceeds within the normative frames of sovereignty, discipline, or legality, and that we can meaningfully distinguish ordinary order from extraordinary force.

Anthropologists were among the first to study the ordinary, chronic and embedded forms of violence that run counter to event-based understandings in which such violence is understood to be "descended into the ordinary" of everyday experience, language and kinship relationships [5]. In a similar vein, Arthur Kleinman, et al. [24] speak of "social suffering", which is the way that violence and politics, institutions and individuals determine how violence is felt. Allen Feldman [25] explores the meanings of embodiment and memory for political violence as a protracted process rather than punctuated moments. Yet they tend to offer only ethnographic descriptions of violence, rather than a philosophical vocabulary for its ontology.

Sociologists and symbolic interactionists have also been attentive to the role of harm. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic violence' [26] shows how domination can be exercised, without coercion, through misrecognition, habitus, and everyday life. Judith Butler [27] considers the norms of grievability and recognition making some lives recognizably lives, and the working of violence through categories, norms and discourses, but also confusing its very specificity with the normativity sociality seems to transcend in one way or another: what is distinctive about the violence associated with these activities of classification, disciplining or recognition?

Together these traditions reveal the extraordinary conceptual richness of existing theories of violence that illuminate bodily pain, structural inequality, symbolic domination, legal coercion, colonial devastation, and ordinary suffering. But they also share, to varying degrees, some common assumptions: that violence can be distinguished from nonviolence, that violence is perpetrated by identifiable agents or structures, and that violence is observed as rupture, disruption, or transgression when set against a background of relative normality. Even when violence is chronic or systemic, it is understood against an implied horizon in which nonviolent life remains a thinkable, normative possibility.

This horizon is a specific one. Under contemporary conditions, many forms of violence may not be announced as such through administrative rationalities, welfare infrastructures, border regimes, algorithmic systems, or as a rupture in the continuum of normal life. It is not defined in terms of either coercion or domination or inequality, though it certainly strengthens all these as well. It might corrode the conditions through which worlds are inhabited, meanings are maintained, and relations are formed. Neither historical or sociological theories of violence nor leftist theories of violence can think ontologically about violence. Nor can they think of violence as world-transforming, ontologically corrosive, and saturating social or political life.

It is this theoretical gap that the next set of sections will seek to fill via a radical violence framework that builds from these traditions but seeks to extend beyond them in response to forms of harm that cannot be contained by them.

Ontological Dimensions of Violence: World, Meaning, and Being-in-Common

If it is no longer possible to think violence explicitly as an act or an instrument, nor even as a (disruptive) rupture in the condition of the world, we must then think its ontological effects. This includes whatever violence might wreak in the conditions of worldhood as such, however the conditions of worldhood as such shape and determine the conditions of emergence of the world and the experience of the world. Violence is a disruption to the conditions of worldhood as such. The phenomenological, existential, and post-foundational traditions can help conceptualize this dimension, not by replacing metaphysics with politics but disclosing the fragility of the relational and interpretive structures that make political life possible.

Phenomenology has always taught that human existence is never a consciousness confronting the other but a being-in-the-world, a represented, perceptual, practical relationship to the world. Thus, in *Being and Time* [28], Heidegger taught that the world is not a collection of entities, but a meaningful horizon in which beings, others, and possibilities are manifest. The world as lived, familiar, inhabitable, and shared is prior to any thematization. Merleau-Ponty [14] reiterates this claim through a phenomenology of perception and embodiment, showing how experience is anchored within a pre-reflective field of meaning that makes action and communication possible. In short, to be in the world is always to be already caught up in a network of relations, expectations, and interpretations.

For this ontological understanding, violence does not interrupt world; it has the potential to fracture the very possibility of world-relation, since existence itself, for Jean-

Luc Nancy [16], is always already “being-with”. Existence is co-existence, an inter-implication to be thought of as co-exposure, but this implies not the fusion or identification of self and other, but their finite plurality. Violence does not just hurt individuals. It hurts the finitude of the spacing in which plurality comes into being. It destroys the ability to appear to one another as co-participants in a shared world. Violence shows how the political is grounded in ontologically fragile conditions of exposure, relation, and shared sense.

This ontological fragility is especially obvious in violence that creates disorientation, estrangement, and “unworlding”. The world is defined by Hannah Arendt [28] as the web of relations that human beings create among each other through action and speech. When the world is destroyed by totalitarian domination or some other form of mass violence, people not only suffer physically but are deprived of the conditions under which they perceive, assess, express (or in another’s terms figure out) the world as a horizon. Veena Das [5] likewise shows how language fails and lived experience is troubled after violence as the horizon of sense of ordinary life becomes saturated by its residue. In this sense, violence is not an event, but alters the horizon of possibilities for sense-making, for what becomes meaningful and what can be shared around this.

As Paul Ricoeur goes on to explain [15], narrative identity and suffering emerge when human beings relate much of our experience in narrative terms which mediate continuity, agency, and intelligibility. Violence disrupts the processes by which people narrate experience, damaging their identity as agents, and the narratives that mediate their past and present as the story of who they are. Suffering is thus rendered hermeneutic: it is rupture of the ability to express one’s world and one’s place in it. And this is where violence intersects with the moral and political power that narrative and symbolic forms have on the tissue of life.

Levinas’s ethical phenomenology stresses the fragility of the self in the face of the Other’s face: according to Levinas [29], subjectivity is founded upon a primordial responsibility for the Other’s fragility that emerges in their encounter. From this perspective, violence is not merely the infliction of harm, but the refusal of ethical subjectivity: the reduction of the Other to an object or category. Although Levinas does not develop this mainly in political terms, his thought opens up a number of ways in which to think through the politics of violence, rendering the very openness to alterity that builds the pre-political conditions for community and justice impossible.

Post-foundationalist theorists radicalize this claim, arguing that the world is never fully secured or grounded, but is always contingent, unfinished and exposed to rupture. Nancy’s account of being-in-common, Derrida’s [30]

discussions of hospitality and the undecidable, and Bonnie Honig’s [31] defense of agonistic plurality, all elaborate the constitutive fragility of political and social life. Yet this fragility is more than simply a challenge to be overcome. It is the very condition of plurality and freedom, then, and so violence as such can strike at the very heart of political life, not just institutions and laws, but at the fragile webs of sense, which make subjects political among themselves.

Thus, violence is not simply oppression or coercion, nor even domination, but a rupture of worldhood: the disruption of the tacit background of trust, expectation, and shared orientation that makes agency and judgment even possible. An ontological injury can render the world uncanny, unfamiliar, uninhabitable, without leaving any visible or material bodily damage. Such an injury has no place in theories of violence that view it as singular or episodic, but nevertheless is one of the most serious and persistent forms of violence.

Recognizing the existence of these ontological registers does not obviate the distinction between violence and nonviolence, nor does it suggest that all modalities of disruption are violent. Rather, it suggests that violence may be practiced in the bodily, institutional, symbolic, and ontological registers, among others. What sets apart radical violence, as the argument proceeds, is precisely its ability to reach into these ontological depths and corrode the frail conditions of world-relation, relationality, and being-in-common that support the possibility of political life.

In the next section, I will unpack this claim in more systematic form by first unbundling the concept of radical violence itself, delineating its theoretical contours, distinguishing it from related concepts, and identifying its relationship to the study of contemporary forms of harm that play out across the administrative, technological, and social domains.

Radical Violence: Conceptual Definition and Distinctive Features

Previous sections showed how existing discourses illuminate aspects of harm, but presume distinctions between violence and nonviolence, normality and rupture, and legality and force. Such distinctions have eroded in contemporary contexts. This section presents a reflexive conception of radical violence to account for emerging forms of diffuse, normalized, and ontologically corrosive harm. Radical violence is not some quantitatively deeper, more extreme, or intrinsically more vicious form of violence. The ‘radical’ of radical violence is not a quantitative term but a deepening. It is corrosive of the ontological, relational, and interpretive conditions upon which meaning, recognition, and political life rest.

Radical violence should thus be understood as more than the (often deliberate) infliction of physical damage or the overt use of pressure or coercion. It is expressed in spectacular brutality but also in more routine, indirect or impersonal forms. Yet these modes, despite their differences, share the capacity to disorganize the terms on which individuals experience themselves and each other as moral and political subjects. Violence is radical not because it exceeds any prior precedent in scale, but because it shifts the horizons of experience in which suffering, agency, and relationality are thinkable.

Diffusion, opacity, and ontological reach are the three features that give the idea philosophical coherence.

Diffusion: From Event to Condition

While conventional accounts of violence understand it as taking place in an otherwise stable world as a rupture, interruption or transgression, radical violence is understood as a condition that permeates everyday life. It does not manifest as a rupture, but is wedged into social relationships and institutions and the social forms of subjectivity.

Anthropologists of chronic and ordinary violence have already gestured towards this, as Das [5] puts it: it becomes ordinary when it “descends into the ordinary” through language, memory and kinship. As Kleinman, Das, and Lock [24] illustrate, the effects of social suffering can persist long after events have taken place. Violence then becomes immanent to the ordinary, shaping even the banal expectations, affects, and modes of attention that comprise ordinary existence.

Radical violence is not to be found in any individual act, but in the cumulative effects of long-term exposure. In the unraveling of trust, the slow consumption of resources, the normalization of endangerment. It is cumulative rather than episodic, and its effects are not to be found in moments of spectacular crisis but in the slow thinning of worlds of meaning.

Opacity: Violence without Visibility

Radical violence’s second defining feature is its opacity. Violence typically appears intelligible when it is visible: a blow, a wound, a weapon, a command. Contemporary harms increasingly occur through administrative, technological, and algorithmic mechanisms, which can mask agency and obscure causal relationships.

Foucault [9] had already shown that modern power does not only work through prohibitions, but also through normalization and security rationalities. Later studies of

risk governance and psychological self-regulation Rose [10] showed how such power can take more therapeutic, protective, or pastoral forms rather than being directly repressive. Algorithmic profiling, predictive modelling and data extraction shape exposure, visibility and control as new and increasingly passive infrastructures or service technologies [12,13].

In such cases, the exercise of violence by a perpetrator is not always apparent, but is instead conveyed through procedure, assessment, eligibility criteria, scoring systems or resource allocation by means of dispersed, automated or bureaucratically mediated decisions: the victim is dispossessed, excluded or otherwise rendered existentially insecure, but no clearly identifiable perpetrator exists.

Opacity also comes from the moral vocabularies that frame these practices: humanitarian, welfare or security discourses may legitimate harm as a necessity, an act of compassion, or a wise choice [17]. In this sense, violence is indistinguishable from care, management or protection, performed through rationalities that disavow their own violent effects. Radical violence is, thus, not concealed; its availability and performance are misrepresented as non-violent, kind or the only option available.

Ontological Reach: Injury to World-Relation

What makes violence radical, therefore, is the fact that, through its ontology, it tends not only to destroy bodies or rights, but also the worldhood, sense, and relationality upon which political being relies. As discussed in the previous section, there is a sense in phenomenological and post-foundational thought that being-in-the-world and being-in-common are fragile [14,16]. Radical violence exploits this fragility. It produces disorientation, estrangement, and unworlding, in which the everyday becomes uncanny, speech falters and fades, and the ability to judge is impaired [5,28]. It weakens narrative articulation [15], ethical responsiveness to the other [29], and the commonality on which plurality and recognition can emerge.

Ontological reach distinguishes radical violence from structural violence or symbolic violence: whereas structural violence might confine people to certain opportunities or resources, and symbolic violence might make unequal social relations feel natural, radical violence is a worsening of these harms.

Radical violence shatters the conditions under which persons can appear as subjects at all, as beings who speak, and act, and are recognized in a shared world. That is why violence is radical.

Radical Violence as Saturation Rather than Expansion

Radical violence could be equated with an extension of violence to other forms of harm, although this would confuse the concept of violence, and other things would be violence simply because they are harmful.

Rather than being wide-ranging, radical violence is intensive. It does not assert that everything is violent, but that elements of contemporary harm unfold across multiple registers - the material, the institutional, the symbolic, the affective and the ontological. What makes them distinctive is not that they are included within this increasingly lengthy chain of categories, but that they tie these registers into a web of exposure.

Thus, far from suspending social order, radical violence can be immanent in the conditions of its existence, and can be played out not only in times of lawfulness and 'normality', but in the very institutions of welfare, border policing, credit and debt, risk and security - not rupture, but background, the taken-for-granted environment within which lives are lived and worlds are experienced.

Radical Violence and the Question of Agency

One of the most challenging aspects of this conceptualization is the question of agency and responsibility: if radical violence is diffuse, opaque, and condition like, how can we hold anyone responsible? It does not absolve any actor of responsibility but complicates its distribution.

That agency is diffused through infrastructures, policies, technical systems and professional practices does not mean that violence is any less real. On the contrary, it shows that contemporary forms of governance operate through relays of action and mediated decisions to produce violence in particular places and contexts. Benjamin [3] on law and violence and Agamben [8] on the state of exception suggest violence is intrinsic to normative orders but radical violence makes this obvious and shows that the ordering of normative violence can become a routine ontological condition.

A Working Definition

Based on these characteristics, radical violence may be provisionally defined as: "There are material, institutional, symbolic, and ontological forms of diffuse and often opaque harm that erode the worldly, the relational, and the critical capacities of appearance, judgment, and recognition on which political life rests". It is not intended to replace existing accounts of violence but to make visible forms of injury that are neither spectacular nor easily locatable though they

radically reshape the horizons of experience and belonging.

The following sections show how the modalities of radical violence - structural, epistemic, bureaucratic, and algorithmic - inform and speak to the diffusion, opacity, and ontological reach of radical violence in the concrete regimes of governance and social organization in which it is enacted.

Structural, Epistemic, and Algorithmic Violence: Modalities of Radical Harm

If radical violence is characterized by diffusion, opacity and ontological reach, the question is how to articulate the concrete modalities through which these aspects are actually realized in experience today. The following focuses on three interrelated conditions of structural, epistemic and algorithmic violence-not separate entities but overlapping modes through which violence is normalized, depoliticized and saturated in the conditions of ordinary life. While each of these modalities has been theorized in separate intellectual traditions, together they show how modern violence is more often mediated through rationalized practices, classificatory regimes, and technological infrastructures than through spectacular displays of violence.

Structural Violence: Slow Harm and Ordinary Exposure

Other usages of the phrase structural violence can refer to more subtle structural processes by which people are harmed through social structures. From this more indirect perspective, for example, it can be understood as active in social structures that limit aspirations and conditions for flourishing [1]. Subsequent work has described the operation of structural violence through economic disparity, racial hierarchies, and global divisions of labor [30,31] to illustrate how institutions and policies that seem neutral, rational or inevitable produce suffering.

Structural violence may also be a type of slow death, a term identified by Lauren Berlant [32] as attritional harm over time, through fatigue, precarity, and the slow collapse of not just bodies but also worlds. Slow death is in the quotidian, through insecure, low-quality housing, through chronic insecurity, environmental hazards and toxins, through bureaucratic or infrastructural neglect. As a result, these forms of violence are difficult to see, because they do not burst forth, but rather they continue as a background condition, as fatigue, as abandonment, as reduced horizons of possibility.

Accordingly, structural violence is a diffusion of radical violence, and not simply an explanation of inequality or deprivation, that with structural violence, it appears as a

form of subjectivity that modifies expectations, desires, and forms of attachment to the world. In this way, the conditions of exposure are figures of normalization rather than crisis. They do not diminish or reduce the extent of harm. They strengthen and reiterate, rather, the ontological effects of violence across the texture of everyday life.

Epistemic Violence: Erasure, Misrecognition, and the Politics of Knowledge

The second mode of radical violence is epistemic violence, by which I mean the violence of erasure, silencing or misrepresentation, and the imposition of interpretive frameworks that do not recognize or make intelligible what they destroy. The classic formulation is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's [33]: subaltern subjects are rendered inaudible by colonial regimes of knowledge that speak for them, without allowing them to speak for themselves. According to Miranda Fricker [34], prejudicial credibility assessments in the form of testimonial injustice deprive subjects of being engaged knowers by virtue of sharing the meaning-making practice. Charles Mills [35,36] describes racial liberalism as an epistemic and moral order that maintains ignorance and misrecognition, which perpetuates structure-embedded inequality via epistemic occlusion.

Beyond representational distortion, epistemic violence has ontological consequences. To be left unintelligible, misrecognized, or excluded from a dominant vocabulary can leave one existentially diminished. Judith Butler [27] includes these processes of rendering subjects recognizable and legible under the term norms of recognizability. Norms of recognizability are the threshold conditions of lives that count and those that are grievable or countable as lives at all. In such situations, violence is enacted not only through deprivation, but through the denial of appearance.

While it may not seem particularly coercive in a physical sense, violence of this type can be equally devastating. Rather than physical coercion, epistemic violence is coercion effected through language, classification, and discursive practices. It can limit the range of possible meanings for the self, for other selves, and for worldhood itself. It thereby contributes to the ontological reach of radical violence by weakening that which makes up the worldhood and worldly relationships of the self and other selves.

Algorithmic Violence: Data, Automation, and Administered Exposure

Algorithmically and technically mediated governance is the third - and increasingly common - modality of radical violence. When digital infrastructures become sites of judgment, deciding who is entitled to state welfare, credit, or

jobs, or when data is used for policing, migration enforcement, or prediction, what seem to be impersonal techniques can nonetheless harm. Shoshana Zuboff [12] describes the harvesting of behavioral data and reconstructions of subjectivity by surveillance capitalism, while David Lyon [13] and Antoinette Rouvroy [37] examine the emergence of algorithmic profiling and predictive governance.

These algorithmic systems classify, exclude, and expose without being salient to human designers, operators, and decision-makers. These systems produce consequences (e.g. denying social benefits, strengthening policing, increasing suspicion), which can be experienced as dispossession or existential insecurity. Because harm is actually transacted through a technical process between socio-technical stakes, it cannot be held accountable for any particular injury and operates with a relatively greater opacity. Ultimately, this makes algorithmic violence difficult to perceive and challenge.

But algorithmic violence is not only a form of discrimination, or red tape. It is also an ontological reconfiguration of the ways that people can be rendered knowable, turning the narrative identity into data profiles and probabilistic risk scores. Thus, as Rouvroy [37] explains, these correlation-based systems reproduce forms of "algorithmic governmentality" that bypass interpretation and subjectivity, allowing for a radical extension of violence's ontological reach because they displace even the conditions for appearance and recognition, treating persons as data aggregates rather than as represented, relational, and interdependent beings.

Intersections and Reinforcements

These three modalities, then, are not separate or additive. They may instantiate together in various ways, and can also be mutually reinforcing or entangled. Structural deprivation can be justified through epistemic frames that naturalize inequality, and algorithmic infrastructures can encode discriminations. All of these, in turn, help explain how violence is:

- diffuse rather than episodic,
- mediated rather than direct,
- normalized rather than extraordinary,
- ontologically consequential rather than merely instrumental.

Violence becomes no longer separate from governance, administration or rationality, but is rather a social technology structured through relational networks, symbolic orders and technological infrastructures that shape social and material reality in terms of how subjects appear, act, and are known.

It is not to say that such entanglement renders violence conceptually indeterminate. It is to say that radical violence

names the intensification of harm when these modalities intermingle, corroding not only material well-being but the fragile structures of worldhood, recognition, and being-in-common.

The following section explores the experienced and existential implications of this condition, examining how radical violence alters vulnerability, exposure and, by extension, political life itself.

Violence and the Production of Vulnerability: Exposure, Abandonment, and Precarious Life

If radical violence is both diffuse and opaque, and also ontologically penetrating, then one of the most important effects of radical violence is vulnerability. Vulnerability is not a natural or biological condition. It is politically organized, socially distributed, and historically produced. To be human is to be vulnerable in virtue of our embodiment and our finitude, but vulnerability is not evenly distributed. Instead, it is dispersed throughout multiple institutional, economic, epistemic, and technological locales. Radical violence works by strengthening the gap between exposures, rupturing protective relations between and among subjects.

Vulnerability is defined in terms of represented interdependence and exposure that are intrinsic to human existence. Judith Butler [27,38] describes it as the ethical and political importance of life with others, not just the possibility of being hurt. Likewise, Jean-Luc Nancy [16] contemplates existence to “be exposed”, an ontological openness that volunteers neither with guarantee. Thus, to be vulnerable is not to lack anything, but rather to be plural, to be responsible, to be other, and to mean. Thus, this constitutive exposure is the very site where the other is most deeply penetrated by violence. Radical violence weaponizes the vulnerability of relational openness to make it a precarious dependency, an insecurity, an abandonment.

The Production of Precarious Life

Where there is structural, epistemic or algorithmic harm, vulnerability is produced. As Butler [27] notes in her notion of “precarious life”, lived experience is a condition of the economic, racial and geopolitical arrangements of whose lives are protected, whose losses are grievable and whose exposure is tolerated or normalized. Precarity in this sense is more than just poverty or risk; it is a structuring of populations in such a way that they are made available to harm by default, structurally.

As Achille Mbembe argues [6], necropolitics can also describe technologies of governance that operate

through abandonment, exposure, or slow death, where vulnerability, rather than being directly consumed or destroyed, is a meaningful means by which life is produced and managed. In such regimes of power, populations are controlled through a withdrawal of protection for those living through abandonment, precarity, or exploitation. Through the lens of Didier Fassin [17], one could say that humanitarianism and welfare, by creating and regulating vulnerable subjects, perpetuate their dependence and social hierarchies. Therefore, radical violence becomes possible in these extraordinary spaces of humanitarian welfare, care and selective abandonment, which only reproduce the vulnerabilities to which they are subjected.

Precarity thus names not only an empirical fact, but also a political relation that is stratified, hardened, and delimited by the legal status, the welfare system, the labor market, the border regime, and the security apparatus. Precarity designates the condition of those who, in addition to material deprivation, find themselves deprived of the status of appearing, speaking, and acting as political subjects in a common world.

Inclusion through Exclusion: Immunity, Exception, and Exposure

Radical violence works through mechanisms that only include subjects by excluding them: i.e. by including them in political and administrative orders in ways that expose, discipline and make them disposable. Roberto Esposito’s [7] analysis of immunity shows how modern political orders protect communities by producing internal forms of exclusion that are internal to inclusion. Rather, the subject is included as a potential threat to be regulated. Giorgio Agamben’s [8] analysis of the state of exception also suggests that certain forms of life lose their political status after being assigned to zones where law is enacted through its suspension.

Such arrangements typically take milder forms than a state of exception, appearing as conditional forms of legal status, provisional legal rights, discretionary bureaucratic actions, or algorithmic risk scoring. These produce gradients of belonging, where some subjects are included or have rights in legal and political systems, but these regimes of inclusion are experienced as fragile, revocable, or hollow. This vulnerability is produced by institutionalized uncertainty about the permanence of belonging, and by exposure to the threat of expulsion.

It is neither total integration nor total exclusion. It is a form of managed marginality, the government of uncertain expectations, deferral, expected future outcomes, and dependencies. In this sense, radical violence is ontological violence because it is a violence against political subjectivity,

against one's capacity to orient oneself in a world that is in common, stable, and minimally intelligible.

Ordinary Exposure and the Erosion of Protective Worlds

Anthropological descriptions of the ordinary in conditions of chronic violence can render how vulnerability becomes incorporated into normality: the ethnographer Veena Das, for example, speaks of how violence "enters the recesses of the ordinary" in terms of speech and relationships, as well as concepts of time well after its occurrence. This exposure remains, in the space of non-crisis, as the fragility of the everyday, as silence, or the unnameable, indefinable, atmosphere of anxiety.

For protective worlds - families, neighborhoods, social networks, institutions of care - become tenuous or unreliable. Such an impoverishment is not just social, but also ontological. This weakens the background of trust and shared expectation upon which our very worldhood depends. This means that people never have any durable frames of meaning, recognition or support and are always exposed. Violence thus becomes a condition of being-in-the-world rather than a momentary rupture.

Such exposure can occur without overt coercion and grotesque violence, through austerity, welfare cuts, lack of job security, administrative neglect or algorithmic sorting. Everyday life is structured according to procedures, which perhaps understood in isolation conform with common sense, but collectively create a new sense of exposure. Yet radical violence is not represented as direct blows delivered to the body, but rather through attrition, insecurity, and the thinning of relational worlds.

Vulnerability, Shame, and the Internalization of Harm

The psychological and affective dimension in the production of vulnerability is illustrated by Pierre Bourdieu's [39] concept of symbolic domination, and by Sara Ahmed's [40] reflections on the nature of affect, both of which show individuals internalizing structural and epistemic harms as shame, self-blame, or unworthiness. This may result in a political imposition of vulnerability, or an internalization in which one's own vulnerability or marginalization becomes conceived of not as a collectivity's political fault but as a personal fault.

When internalized, the affective dimension expands the ontological scope of radical violence. For, when violence is internalized, it breaks the capacity to imagine alternative futures or to articulate injustice. The self becomes the

subjection-fated self, and the vulnerable self becomes the horizon of expectation. In this sense, radical violence produces subjects of precarity: not only exposed to violence, but they are also structured by a form of precarity, which makes them susceptible to the world through experiences of uncertainty, dependence and devaluation.

Vulnerability and the Weakening of Political Capacity

The political implications of the production of vulnerability are far-reaching: precarity weakens the very capabilities of political existence - voice, judgment, trust, solidarity, participation. When negotiations of exposure and uncertainty are undertaken on a constant basis, energy goes into simply staying alive, meeting rules, avoiding risk, and political expression receives less and less time and space to unfold.

When understood in its individual, psychologized sense, vulnerability scales the structural harm to a level of psychological injury, a personal burden of care, depoliticizing violence. The diffuse, condition-like character of this harm makes it invisible to politicians who address it solely in the personal domain. Radical violence thus does not only destroy bodies and institutions; it impoverishes the very conditions for political existence.

From this standpoint, vulnerability is not a timeless and universal condition of human existence, but a social space for the action and production of violence. Radical violence consists of the systematic organization of exposure, abandonment and precarious recognition that pulverize the already weak ontological and relational conditions that underlie the constitution of political subjectivity.

It then examines how these processes leave the subject with a deeper crisis of meaning and worldhood, exploring the relation between radical violence and the collapse of interpretive, narrative and symbolic horizons.

Radical Violence and the Collapse of Meaning: Language, Narrative, and World-Rupture

When radical violence works through the production of vulnerability and exposure, its deepest effects are not material (in the sense of causing injury) or institutional (through a reduction in the state's capacity), but hermeneutic and existential: it works by breaking apart the ordinary symbolic, narrative and interpretive frameworks through which we experience (and make sense of) the world. To suffer radical violence is to be injured in this broader sense: to be disoriented, to experience a loss of the world, a weakening

of language, a fragilization of the grounds of judgment, orientation, and sense-making. It is to realize the stakes of meaning's disintegration. The following section discusses the world-rupturing nature of radical violence by exploring phenomenological, hermeneutic, and existential accounts of the ontological importance of the erosion of meaning in contemporary life.

Meaning as a Condition of Worldhood

Phenomenological thinking has always known that we live not so much in the surrounding space as within a world of meaning. Worldhood, for instance, appears to Heidegger as the pre-theoretical background of importance within which entities show up as usable, familiar, or relevant to relevant actions and concerns. Merleau-Ponty [14] also shows how perception is not just a mirror of the outside world, but a represented orientation to the meaningful field of the world, whereby the world appears not as an outside object but as the horizon of experience.

From this perspective, meaning is no longer a second-order interpretive layer over reality. Rather, it is a first-order reality. A lack of meaning is a break in worldhood, a severing of the relational and interpretive web that holds together the self, the other and the world as a whole. The point at which political violence, far from just becoming an assault on human beings or public buildings, becomes an intrusion into the very architecture of sense and understanding, into the already corroded horizons through which sense is made possible, is the point at which radical violence can no longer be tolerated.

Violence as Unworlding

An example could be provided by Hannah Arendt. She stated, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [41], that political violence was defined, not by the annihilation of human bodies, but by the destruction of the world, the common space of experience, judgment, and action that was left behind. Rather, totalitarian violence does not just silence speech but also strips individuals of a reality world in which their words could appear as meaningful at all. As Arendt shows, violence is radical when it weakens the conditions of common reality.

This is developed further by Veena Das [5] who contends that in some cases violence can descend into the most ordinary of events in such a way that it fractures the continuity of experience without ever really announcing itself as rupture. The world is not collapsing, but becoming estranged, fragmented, or ambiguous. Life continues, but along other ontological lines, in which silence, hesitation, and the feeling that something cannot be spoken take the place of comprehension.

These are examples of unworlding: when the predictable background characterizing life disappears, and one is left with discombobulation, distrust, or hermeneutic stasis. Radical violence does not simply nullify the possibility of meaning; it rather suspends subjectivity between worlds, which, while still alive and still acting, no longer have a horizon of coherence.

Narrative Fracture and the Disruption of Temporality

According to Paul Ricoeur [15] subjects construct self and world through narrative. This narrative identity, by placing events in the continuity of memory and projection, enables subjects to locate themselves within the past, within the present and within the perspective of a possible future. Such violence thus shatters this structure and makes past events unintelligible and fragmentary because it cuts off the future as a field of meaningful possibility.

Radical violence increases this rupture: it is slow, dispersed and condition-like. Its incisions do not divide narrative at a certain moment. They create the indeterminacy, chronic exposure, and attrition of possibilities. The subject is not cut off from an event that traumatizes him, but the temporal horizon within which it is possible to transcribe these events is gradually denied. The present becomes saturated by contingency. The future becomes a matter of risk rather than promise. In the phenomenological tradition, violence disrupts the constitution of inner time consciousness underlying meaningful duration.

Such a break in time also has political consequences, as it makes narrative, a foundation of Arendt's understanding of the political, impossible. To judge, one must be able to place, connect, and interpret events. This is to say that radical violence suspends the symbolic and temporal orders of meaning where judgment can meaningfully take place.

Language Under Pressure

Language mediates meaning, worldhood and experience. Elaine Scarry [2] *The Body in Pain* shows how intense physical pain resists verbal representation and the coordination of language. Scarry thus highlights one of pain's paradigmatic features: its absolute privacy and bodily immediacy. Language stretches thin in contexts of radical violence in another, distinctly different way. Words do not maintain stable meaning, because speech does not only falter where the experience of pain is concerned: the world to which language refers has itself become unstable.

Experiences of chronic precarity, administrative opacity, and epistemic erasure can effectively render existing

vocabularies unable to name the experiences of harm that individuals are living through, leaving injustice to take the form of technical failure or mere misfortune. Lack of language is not merely a matter of not being able to express oneself. It is a manifestation of world-rupture: when words cease to be anchored in the experiential world, communication becomes tenuous and the possibility of being a speaking subject is weakened.

At this point, violence becomes hermeneutic. It is not directed against bodies or institutions, but against the symbolic order, the medium of the production of meaning. Radical violence thus becomes essentially a process of alienation of language, or an illness of speech in which the subject is suspended between speech and silence, between the intelligible and the opaque.

Ethical and Ontological Consequences: The Diminishing of Appearance

Levinas's ethical philosophy, however, elaborates another impression of this loss of meaning: ethical relation [29] is determined in the face of the Other met, by exposure before understanding, which makes understanding possible. Radical violence disturbs this ethical orientation by reducing the Other to a case, to a risk object. When epistemic and algorithmic systems mediate recognition, the Other disappears from this ethical proximity, reduced to the status of data, a case-file in an administrative category.

There is therefore a reduction: the world is no longer a space of encounter, but a space of management and evaluation. Subjectivity appears not as irreducible beings-in-relation but as variables within systems of risk, productivity or security. The collapse of meaning is inextricably linked to the loss of appearance, the disappearing space of encounter through which persons touch one another as moral and political beings.

This visible attenuates, also plurality attenuates: a common world is absent for encountering difference and judging difference, plurality exists only as an experience regarding isolation or antagonism, at best. Radical violence is a form of suffering. It nullifies the political itself. It nullifies the fragile space of shared meaning, judgment, and action.

Radical Violence as Metaphysical Attenuation

The destruction of meaning through radical violence is not metaphysical in the doctrinal sense of metaphysics, but metaphysical in the sense of the experience of a world that loses its thickness, coherence and depth. This experience is called the "shaken world" by Jan Patočka [42]: a world whose basic certainties are shaken by war and crisis. In those circumstances, meaning no longer grants existence,

but trembles in the open, abyssal structure of human life laid upon it.

Radical violence, within this trembling, does not deliver a final nihilistic death to meaning or a grand reconstitution, but only prolongs some attenuated form of worldhood, something like sense that survives in a scarce, brittle form. This attenuation is not only destructive, but ambivalent, a matter of endurance and exhaustion, of adaptation and despair.

It is not to aestheticize the suffering that such an account will lead, but rather to show the ontological cost of contemporary forms of violence, the loss of the flimsy conditions of sense that make ethical relation, political judgment, and world-making possible.

From this vantage point, radical violence is not simply a technique of power, it is a process, a system of meaning and organization, which constructs and deconstructs from the inside, in the middle of the everyday, when worldhood begins to shake, narratives start to trip over themselves, when language reaches its limits.

The second explores the implications for the experience of politics, and especially the ways in which radical violence changes the nature of agency, judgment, and collective life.

The Political Consequences of Radical Violence: Democratic Erosion, Civic Exhaustion, and Depoliticization

If radical violence thus weakens worldhood, fractures meaning, and produces vulnerability as a mode of existence, its most important effects take place, I argue, at the level of the political as such, understood not as institutional design or formal governance, but as the fragile space of appearance, judgment, plurality, and collective action in which democratic life becomes possible. Radical violence does not destroy this space through repression or authoritarian suspension, but erodes democracy, exhausts civic life, and depoliticizes through quieter processes. Radical violence depletes the conditions for political life itself, reshaping the imagination, practicing, and sustaining political life.

From Democratic Participation to Democratic Erosion

Classical treatments break down democracy and tend to focus on institutions that decay, elections that manipulate, or leaders who authorize, but these accounts have difficulty capturing how erosion can take hold during situations of radical violence. Democracy's decline rarely explodes in a single moment. Now, it often happens through the slow hollowing of public commitment, trust, and participation.

Scholar Wendy Brown [43] argues that neoliberal rationality recasts citizens as subjects of entrepreneurship, market-rationalizes institutions of democracy, and maintains democratic norms at the expense of abiding moral and symbolic force. Radical violence thus produces populations that exist permanently exposed, administratively dependent or epistemically misrecognized by state institutions even long after the violence ceases. This is not merely the problem of the institutions' exclusionary practices, but a lack of ontological security that prevents individuals from appearing and acting politically in public.

The costs of a life under conditions of precarity include the way risk, instability, and bureaucratic uncertainty redirect time, energy, and attention away from public life and into survival. Democracy is weakened not by its exclusion, but by the general weakening of the relational and interpretative capacities that sustain, nourish, and support the practice of collective life.

Thus, democratic erosion in the age of radical violence is not only institutional: it is also about the absence of a shared space in which agency exists, and where one's voice matters, the future can be imagined, and action not simply tied to the mitigation of immediate need.

Civic Exhaustion and the Fatigue of Political Life

Radical violence therefore often, politically, takes the form of civic exhaustion, where political participation drains the already sparse and diluted emotional and ontological resources of the busy life, rather than acting as a form of freedom. One way of explaining this is Lauren Berlant's concept of 'crisis ordinariness': a world of precarity, and the constant requirement to adapt, yet no alternative.

Here, exhaustion is not indifference but a political mood, born out of the amassed effects of chronic exposure, administrative opacity, or insecure recognition, and a world that feels fragile, unpredictable, and saturated by uncertainty. As a result, the interests of politics themselves feel futile, dangerous, or simply overwhelming. What follows may not be best called apathy but rather a more general withdrawal from depletion.

Yet the new communicative and technological contexts in which crises, moral outrage or polarized discourses circulate only reinforce the saturation of this ideal of self-optimization without ever leading to sustainable grounds for action. As Byung-Chul Han argues [44] the exhausted society is one in which the ideal of self-optimization can never be attained and is thus internalized as a form of self-responsibility. At the same time, civic life becomes another site of exhaustion, another jurisdiction to be endured rather than an open arena

of shared possibility.

Civic exhaustion therefore does not simply reduce participation, but restructures political subjectivity. The self becomes oriented towards avoiding perceived threats or towards resignation and defensive withdrawal. The imagination of futures becomes stunted. Politics remains as an institution. Its experiential and affective substrates have also deteriorated.

Depoliticization as a Mode of Governance

Parallel to democratic decay and citizen fatigue, radical violence produces forms of depoliticization that do not engage repressive orders, but an ordering of representation through administrative translation, and a reformatting of questions of mainly ethical and political relevance (of inequality, exclusion, abandonment, exposure) into questions of administration, optimization of risk, and technical correction.

Foucault [45] on governmentalities and Nikolas Rose [10] on psychopolitics and the subject, are useful for thinking through how subjects are governed in their suffering, asked to think of it in terms of individual capability, resilience, or self-governance. Structural harm becomes individual pathology, and political issues come to be framed in therapeutic terms. Radical violence is rendered epistemically invisible since its effects are not interpretable as political injustices to be fought against any longer.

Algorithmic and data-driven decision systems exacerbate this depoliticization. For example, welfare distribution, border control, and risk assessments can all be delegated to automated systems that conceal the controversial nature of the decision. Accountability is obscured, political struggle is replaced with questions of efficiency, safety, or predictive accuracy, and violence enacted through these systems is detached from its moral and political importance.

Depoliticization is then not just an ideological transformation. It is an ontological one, a reworking of the experience of what it is to be the subject of collective life. The political here is not a site of struggle and deliberation but a system of procedures, where it becomes one of compliance, eligibility, and adaptation. This is where, indeed, radical violence abounds, when and where it cannot be named.

The Narrowing of Judgment and the Fragility of Plurality

Democratic life, however, depends not merely on participation through institutional channels, but on the capacity to judge, to interpret experience, to assess, to meet others in a common world of meaning [46]. The rupture of

the channels of judgment by radical violence consists in the destruction of the symbolic-narrative frame of judgment. When meaning collapses, when language falters, when worlds become fragmented, judgment becomes precarious.

However, the weakening of judgment also weakens plurality. Plurality presupposes a world in which differences may appear, be expressed, and opposed without being collapsed into mere enmity or indifference. Radical violence displaces plurality with the isolation, polarization, or mutual unintelligibility against co-actors. They do not participate in the world anymore. They meet as strangers in separate horizons instead.

Here, people do not so much war with words, but fall silent, estrange, abstract from meaningful engagement. For even where democratic spaces and institutions endure, the world that inscribes them as the sites of common judgment and action has grown thin. The erosion of plurality is therefore not only a sociological phenomenon but also an ontological one, because plurality is what makes possible the occurrence of politics.

Radical Violence and the Hollowing of the Public World

Democratic erosion, civic exhaustion, and depoliticization, when seen together, illustrate how radical violence hollows out the public world from within. The institutions remain, elections are held, public discourse goes on. Yet its grounding in experientiality, relationality, and ontology as a collective life weakens.

The public world becomes:

- less a space of shared appearance
- more a field of compliance and navigation
- less a domain of action and judgment,
- more a terrain of endurance and exposure.

In other words, the hollowing takes place not just because of repression from above, but because of processes which:

- normalize vulnerability
- obscure harm through administrative rationalities
- displace political questions into technical or moral vocabularies
- erode meaning and worldhood over time

It is thus the effects of radical violence, not the spectacular moment of confrontation, that render it politically meaningful over time.

The ontological fragility of the political becomes visible in this erosion. The political does not disappear with the prohibition; it wanes when the world that is its condition of possibility as a space of appearance, plurality, judgment, and common meaning becomes increasingly difficult to inhabit.

The following section, then, brings these strands together by elaborating a more explicit conception of this fragility and what it means for understanding the conditions of political life.

Toward a Theory of the Ontological Fragility of the Political

These analyzes also suggest that the violence of the contemporary situation cannot be understood anymore as force, coercion, or a moment of structural deprivation. Instead, radical violence takes the form of lost worldhood, weakened meaning, and vulnerability as a mode of existence. It transforms the very horizons within which political life becomes thinkable. Its diffusion, opacity, and ontological reach reveal a conception of the political that cannot be reduced to institutions or exhausted in normative terms: the political as a fragile configuration of appearance, plurality, judgment, and shared world-making. In this section I bring together the theoretical elements sketched so far with a proposed understanding of the ontological vulnerability of the political, not as a weakness to be overcome, but as a constitutive characteristic of human plurality, enabling but also dangerously exposing the political to radical violence.

The Political as World-Making

Political life presupposes more than formal structures or procedural arrangements; it presupposes a world in common, a space of appearance in which individuals encounter one another, speak, act and contest meaning. Arendt [28] describes this space not as an external object but as a web of relations that arises through action and speech. In line with this, Nancy [16] insists that being is always being-with, and that community is not a substance but a relation of exposure among singular beings. In all their work, these thinkers understand the political to be the always-in-process emerging of meaning, recognition, and pluralization that makes the world.

But the world is never fully given, as its practices are not grounded in metaphysical foundations or fixed essences, but formed through practices of judgment, communication and co-existence. Derrida [47] and Honig [48] highlight that if something is plural, it opens, contests, and makes things undecidable. The political world does not unify on its own. Instead, someone constructs it so it can always be disturbed or transformed. That exists as fragile and not by accident.

Fragility as a Condition, not a Deficit

To speak of the ontological fragility of the political is not to speak of the failure or shortcoming of the political but rather of the constitutive features of human existence:

finitude, plurality, embodiment, and exposure. Living and being in the world vulnerable to, and in interdependence with others, interpreting, misrecognizing, and contesting each other, the political never resides in certainty or closure. It depends on fragile capacities of appearing, speaking, judging and listening that can never be guaranteed or fully secured. They are always at risk.

The double-edged fragility, then, is both that of freedom and plurality. If something is not fragile, one does not open to the other, one does not contest, and ultimately, one does not share meaning with others. And yet this very fragility means that the political can be susceptible toward radical disfigurements: when meaning falls apart, when recognition fails for people, when vulnerability turns against itself, the world that makes political life possible can be undone from the inside.

If things are fragile and not merely contingent, this would help explain why political orders continue to exist around radical violence. The violence degrades the ontological infrastructure that institutions are built on. This violence does not necessarily destroy institutions outright.

Radical Violence as a Test of Political Foundations

Radical violence, in contrast, reminds us of the fragility of the political by pushing with some force against the conditions of its possibility, fragilizing the links of trust, recognition, and orientation. Under conditions of structural deprivation, epistemic erasure, and algorithmic governance, however, those bonds are attenuated: subjects remain present in institutional spaces called “democratic”, but under increasingly precarious recognition, civic exhaustion, and depoliticization.

In this sense, radical violence is a diagnostic phenomenon. It shows the limits of trying to understand politics in terms simply of sovereignty, of the institutional organization of society, or of relations of justice. But though they are indispensable, they do not get us to the ontological vulnerability of political life, the vulnerability that exceeds and precedes questions of legitimacy, law, and rights. Radical violence compels us to think again of the vulnerability of the conditions of existence in which worlds are made or unmade, meaning sustained or fragmented, and subjects made to appear to one another or consigned to opacity.

Fragility, Plurality, and the Limits of Repair

Once we understand the ontological fragility of the political, the implication is not that we should be resigned

to this fragility. Instead, it suggests that a political response to radical violence cannot be limited to reform, repair, or technical correction. These responses might alleviate some of the damage, but not restore the world.

Common worlds are not merely repaired administratively but rather reconstituted through processes of meaning-making, recognition, and narration. Ricoeur’s [15] work on narrative identity as well as Arendt’s [46] work on reflective judgment show how common worlds are reconstituted as precariously as they are. These processes are themselves uncertain, slow, and arguably never complete, nor are they likely to generate cohesion, or prevent further violence. But their importance is not in closure, but in creating, or re-opening conditions under which plurality and judgment may again become possible.

This is to acknowledge the fragility of political life, to accept that the world may always break up, that meaning may always dissolve, that violence may always return in new forms. It is to respond to the fragility of life by attending to the ways in which we share a world in common, by taking responsibility in relation to the conditions through which we appear to one another as beings.

The Ontological Stakes of the Contemporary Condition

It does not claim to account for the totality of violence, nor claim that other forms have been fully supplanted. It rather claims that, under present configurations of governance, technology, inequality, and epistemic order, a specific type of harm has been radically strengthened at the root of world-relation. Radical violence attests, though, to the fragile nature of the political: not just because institutions can collapse, but because worlds thin out, meanings collapse, and subjects can no longer appear as political subjects within their own communities.

To think through this fragility is not to celebrate it, but to make visible the stakes of how political worlds hold together, how meaning is built up and dispersed, how vulnerability is domesticated, and how violence is maintained in the absence of open coercive practices or overtly spectacular forms of force. In naming radical violence as an ontologically corrosive condition, this article proposes an expansion of the conceptual vocabulary through which such questions may be addressed.

It only gestures at the implications of this account in terms of prescriptive solutions but concerns itself with the theoretical implications for conceptualizing violence as it touches upon the ontological bedrock of the political.

Conclusion — Violence Beyond Harm and the Question of the Political

The analysis of violence that we have pursued here has intended to rethink violence in a world in which it no longer stands forth most clearly as spectacular rupture, direct coercion, or episodic injury. By disclosing the limitations of older, normative theories of violence, excavating the ontology of worldhood and meaning, and articulating the concept of violence as diffuse, opaque, and ontologically deep, we have argued for thinking violence no longer as an instrument of politics but as a horizon of the political per se.

Radical violence does not displace direct, structural, symbolic, or legal violence from the social analysis agenda, but rather shows how these forms increasingly hybridized and permeated the ordinariness of life, demonstratively complicating its location across institutional, epistemic, and technological contexts, usually under the forms of ordinary rational management, humanitarian concern, or organizational performance [9,13,17]. Its opacity does not make it less real, rather it makes it more deeply inscribed in the structures through which subjects live, interpret, and relate to one another.

Thus, the ontological extension of radical violence is not a claim about its forms so much as about violence's capacity to fracture the worldedness, narrativity and recognition that constitutes political subjectivity. Considering this, the empirical challenges to this philosophical thrust have been framed in terms of phenomenological, hermeneutic and post-foundational philosophical accounts, where violence today is being understood not simply as harm but as enabling an unworlding process that produces vulnerability as a mode of existence [5,15,16,28]. In this radical sense, violence is obviously the assault on the roots of world-relation, the constriction of the space of appearance, plurality, and judgment.

It is not just repression and institutional collapse. Radical violence produces its own kind of politics: democratic erosion, civic exhaustion, and depoliticization whereby political institutions survive but the lived experience of and relationships that constitute social and political life do not [32,43]. Radical violence does not destroy politics, but it destroys the world in which the practice of politics as shared meaning and common action is possible.

This analysis leads to the theory of the ontological fragility of the political: fragility is the condition of plural, finite, represented existence and not just a pure lack contingent upon a foundation. It is what introduces the very possibility of being political, and what also exposes that political life to what can only be described as radical violence. In the face

of such violence, the political modes through which we give meaning and value to social life all seem to lack secure foundations, relying as they do on practices of recognition, narration, and judgment that can never be guaranteed [16,46,47]. Radical violence thus exposes the fragility of the political world, even in democracies.

This article has not sought to offer a program of repair or redemption, nor to reduce violence to a single explanatory logic. Rather, it has set out to expand the conceptual vocabulary through which contemporary harm may be understood: to show that violence today often operates as a world-altering condition rather than a discrete act, and that its deepest stakes lie in the erosion of the fragile ontological infrastructures that sustain political life.

To recognize radical violence in this sense is not only to identify a new theoretical object but also to disclose the depth and precarity of the political itself. It is to investigate further how worlds are made and unmade, how vulnerability is organized, and how meaning may be sustained, if only provisionally, in the face of those conditions which threaten to dissolve the very spaces in which we appear to one another as beings who share a world.

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