

The violence of moral binaries

Response to Leigh Binford

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I agree with so many of the analytical and empirical points in Leigh Binford's response to my article on violence in El Salvador that at first I was not sure why he framed it as a critique rather than as a complement and extension. The mediating concepts that he introduces are compatible with – sometimes redundant to – my analysis. To sum up, we concur that: (1) the peace agreement in El Salvador preserved the unequal and unjust structures that spawned the conflict in the first place; (2) 'some forms of everyday violence decline[d] in incidence' in territories controlled by the guerrilla of the FLMN (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front); (3) structural violence is central to the operation of power relations under the reign of neoliberalism; and (4) political-economic analyses of violence must not be reductionist or mechanical.

Binford and I are cultural anthropologists trained in the US who have worked on similar topics in Central America. We are both heavily influenced by a flexible version of Marxism.¹ We both blame much of the suffering in the social worlds that we observe on the workings of structural forces that disproportionately benefit the powerful and harm the dominated even as we pay considerable attention to the ways in which historical and cultural processes shape structures of power. Finally, perhaps most importantly, we both think that anthropology, or ethnographically informed scholarship more generally, should exercise a 'preferential option for the poor' (Binford, 1996: 192). I emphasize our substantive points of theoretical, political, and personal agreement because I esteem Binford's work on revolutionary peasants. I am also wary of entering a spirited debate that is located so far out on the left-leaning sector of US academe that it renders the political stakes of our disagreement minor compared to our convergences.

Despite our shared theoretical and political frameworks, Binford and I have managed to report and emphasize different experiences of violence based on participant observation conducted in similar fields. This is because he misreads my discussion of the continuum of violence in El Salvador as a judgment on the moral worth of the FMLN guerillas. I recognize Binford's moralistic reading well because at times I share it. My own intellect and emotions are shaped, at least partially, by the same historical and ideological forces that make Binford uncomfortable with reports of bad news about the behavior of the poor, the socially vulnerable, and socialist revolutionaries.

To put it starkly, at the cost of some simplification, I would say that the crypto-puritanical, upwardly mobile, immigrant heritage of the United States imposes an unusually polarized understanding of politics and practice. It invites us to view individuals and actions as either all bad or all good, sinful or virtuous, noble or ignoble. Most importantly, individuals (and in Binford's case political coalitions like the FMLN guerillas in El Salvador) must be judged to be autonomous agents responsible for the moral worth and implications of all their actions. Our righteous and highly individualistic way of thinking, rooted deep in the fundamental categories of our national culture, is one of the main bulwarks for the symbolic violence that normalizes the structural violence of neoliberalism in the US today. It assigns the everyday interpersonal and delinquent violence that the poor visit on each other to their alleged character flaws. This Manichean ideology that dichotomizes humanity into good and bad, worthy and unworthy, is pervasive. The Cold War climate that I refer to in my original article was only one example of how the puritanical and individualistic culture of the US warps intellectual and political analysis. The absence of a social safety net, the vituperation of the poor, and the oversized prison system of the US are other manifestations of this same impetus towards binary judgment.

The centrality of structural violence but the importance of symbolic and everyday violence

I concluded my article with this sentence: '... it is international market forces rather than politically-driven repression or armed resistance that is waging war for the hearts and minds of populations' (Bourgois, 2001: 30). A central purpose of my analysis is to demonstrate the continuity – if not the exacerbation – of structural violence in the post-war transition in El Salvador. My ethnographic focus, however, is on how structural violence is experienced by its victims through its various interfaces with other forms of violence – symbolic, everyday, and political. The outcome is usually painful and ugly. This may have distracted Binford and may explain why

he calls for a greater focus on structural violence despite the fact that the term is listed as the first keyword for the article.

My emphasis on how symbolic violence and everyday violence mediate experience on a phenomenological level and thereby shape the understanding of social processes held by actors may be a point of more substantive interpretive disagreement with Binford. Typologies often obscure more than they clarify, but I believe that Pierre Bourdieu's (2001) concept of symbolic violence and Nancy Scheper-Hughes' (1996) more nebulous term 'everyday violence' are especially useful to a political-economic analysis of power relations and social inequality. These two concepts prevent the generative link between structural forces and individual action from becoming overly mechanical and predictable. In my conception of them, symbolic violence operates as the lynchpin that sustains power relations in peacetime. It persuades victims that their own actions are the cause of their own predicament and that their subordination is the logical outcome of the natural order of things.

The point of the concept of the 'continuum of violence' that I propose is to prevent an either/or understanding of the social processes whereby one form of violence neatly covers for or replaces another. I propose that structural violence often becomes expressed in an everyday violence of interpersonal rage and delinquency as well as in a set of institutionalized relations and norms that dehumanize. These different expressions of everyday violence then reverberate into the symbolic violence of self-blame and shame. Most importantly, once again, none of these forms of violence are neatly separable one from the other.

Treating violence as a continuum also moves us away from unidirectional conceptions of causation and process. I plead guilty for having quoted Bourdieu's phrase 'the law of the conservation of violence'. Bourdieu coined that formulation for a popular political speech attacking neoliberalism that was addressed to a trade union audience. The mechanical tone of the phrase 'law of . . .' contradicts Bourdieu's more nuanced approach to violence in his own research (such as his analysis of the logic of honor or gender domination in Kabylia) and is also inconsistent with my application of his concepts to both El Salvador and the US inner city. In point of fact, Loïc Wacquant, one of the editors of *Ethnography* and a leading expert of Bourdieusian theory, had suggested that I delete the quote from my first draft. He referred me instead to Bourdieu's book *Pascalian Meditations* which contains a more theoretically developed discussion of violence. I paraphrased and quoted at length in my conclusion from that book's discussion of the interface between structural ['inert'], symbolic, and everyday forms of violence (p. 28). Unfortunately, I neglected to delete Bourdieu's more compressed formulation from the union speech which contains the deceptively formulaic phrase 'law of conservation of violence' and this regrettably distracted Binford from the gist of my analysis.

My insistence on 'gendering the mesh of violence' in El Salvador brings the importance of symbolic violence to the forefront because gender power relations are an archetypical instance of symbolic violence (cf. Bourdieu, 2001). An understanding of how political, everyday, and structural violence follows the fault lines of gender derails any theoretical temptation to reduce social action and structure to a simple product of determination by economic or political forces. It emphasizes the role of symbolic violence in shaping experiences and expressions of violence as well as larger constellations of power relations.

Binford misreads my gendering of the mesh of violence through Carmen's account of forced migration to the US due to landlessness as an accusation of blame against the FMLN for both Salvadoran patriarchy and for the post-peace accord continuation of economic injustice – land scarcity, inadequate medical care, childhood disease, lack of farming tools. Few readers would disagree that the structural violence of land scarcity is not the fault of the FMLN. Rather, it is the outcome of a skewed, oligarchy-dominated land tenure system and a national economy distorted by global export markets for agricultural and *maquila* production at very unfavorable terms of trade. The inequalities and deprivations it generates are also aggravated along gender and age-graded lines by patriarchal definitions of who has the legitimate right to demand the means to support their household.

Historical memory and the symbolic violence of survivor guilt

Binford's point that historical memory is conditioned by political outcomes is an interesting empirical and theoretical question well worth pursuing. He suggests that 'it is quite possible that "many of the blames and feelings of betrayal over human failures [that] abound in counterinsurgency warfare" (Bourgeois, 2001: 13) would have been put to the background, forgotten, or expressed with less malice' if the FMLN had 'embarked on a process of radical social and economic reconstruction that fulfilled at least some of the wartime promises' (Binford, 2002: 206). Other historical instances of lasting civil strife and warfare, however, suggest that a symbolic violence of self-blame, inadequacy, and survivor guilt is often part and parcel of the experience of extreme violence whether structural, political, or interpersonal, no matter the outcome. The catch-all psychiatric diagnosis of Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome (Young, 1995) is probably an expression of this poorly understood dynamic. American veterans from the Second World War, for example, were victorious heroes, but they are notorious for not being able to talk about their experience. More dramatic still is the difficulty that Holocaust survivors have in providing testimonies of their survival of the Nazi death camps (for example Levi, 1988; Pollak, 1990). The Holocaust

of course is extreme. But it is often at the extremes that one can best document processes that operate more subtly under more common circumstances.

My point here is that political repression and resistance under warlike conditions – especially civil war ravaging deeply unequal societies – generates a symbolic violence in the form of shame and pain over memories of fear, betrayal, error, and compromise. For example, even if a uniquely effective and socially just version of socialism had been established in El Salvador under FMLN leadership, the mother who suffocated her two children hiding in the cave in order to prevent her children's screams from attracting enemy patrols would still be questioning her moral worth. I do not think her public elevation to the status of war hero by revolutionary authorities would have erased the symbolic violence of the quandary over her worthiness as a mother even as it might have spelled out more clearly the vectors of power relations responsible in the ultimate instance for that tragedy: the political repression and brutality of the government army patrols.

The redemptive potential of political violence

I agree with Binford that rates of public delinquency and crime against persons dropped in the rebel territories during the war. FMLN policies outlawing alcohol and public fighting led to a dramatic decrease in those interpersonal forms of everyday violence. Most important was the pride that FMLN members and supporters took in their metamorphosis from illiterate, dominated peasants to makers of history in the fight for justice. My awe at the potential of revolutionary mobilization to empower was to be communicated in the section of my article where I quote a guerrilla fighter who had told me, 'We used to be *machista*. We used to put away a lotta drink and cut each other up. But then the Organization showed us the way, and we've channeled that violence for the benefit of the people' (Bourgois, 1982: 24–5). That section was perhaps not as clear as needed, given that much of it was transferred into an endnote (page 31, note 4). The discussion also lies in the midst of my argument about Cold War ideological distortions and, consequently, may give the impression that I dismiss the reality of the decrease in delinquent forms of everyday violence as an anti-Cold War leftist fantasy. I thank Binford for giving me the chance to clarify this point.

Yet, once again Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence allows us to understand better how and why the everyday violence of intimate assault, robbing and killing might be reduced when people mobilize collectively for their political rights. Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* addresses this dynamic. Jean Paul Sartre's provocative statement in the preface to Fanon's book suggests the interplay between symbolic violence, structural violence

(colonialism) and everyday violence: 'In the first days of the revolt you must kill: to shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time: There remains a dead man, and a free man.' (1963: 22)

Violence, liberation, and oppression, however, need not stand in a binary relationship of opposition with one another. There is no reason, for example, why the everyday abuse of alcoholism and domestic violence cannot decrease while simultaneously a new version of everyday violence emerges. I believe this is what occurred in certain FMLN combat zones (though not all) where revolutionary companions and sympathizers occasionally killed one another out of suspicion of being government spies, or merely due to passing disagreements over political strategy. As I state clearly in the article, an exponentially far greater number of civilians were purposefully murdered by the government troops with the help of US weapons and military advisors than were executed by the FMLN over political disagreements or paranoid purges. It is nonetheless likely that the effects of the FMLN's internal killings extended beyond their numerical significance. Here Taussig's (1984, 1991) elaboration of the concepts of 'culture of terror' and *mimesis* may be useful despite their slipperiness and the danger of contributing to yet another anthropological essentialism. The formula 'culture of . . .' as an explanation for any social pattern should always be suspect. Yet the state of terror imposed by the repressive government in El Salvador both spawned a routine cheapening of life and supplied a rationale for killing someone when in doubt or in disagreement. For example, executions disproportionately followed gendered power lines as interpersonal romantic and sexual jealousies were sometimes transposed into a rhetoric of politics that resulted in interpersonal murders in the name of revolutionary justice. There is no reason to expect the FMLN guerrillas to escape so easily from their society's routine culture of terror or from the gendered logics of domestic violence. This is particularly true given that the use of terror is deeply engrained in Salvadoran history from the days of the Spanish conquest through the repeated massacre of indigenous rebels and later leftist revolutionaries, continuing with the establishment of death squads in the 1960s with US Alliance for Progress funds and culminating in the 1990s with computerized death lists facilitated by US military advisors, dollars and equipment (Nairn, 1984; Alvarenga, 1996).

The theory and politics of ethnographic narrative

Binford worries that my use of ethnographic narrative may have unintended right-wing political consequences. He specifically links his concern over the negative image he believes I have conveyed of the FMLN guerrillas to what

he thinks is my negative portrayal of Puerto Rican crack dealers in my book on US inner-city apartheid, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Bourgois, 1995). The leftist intellectual habitus that I share with him compels me to engage his critique rather than dismiss it as yet another example of Kissinger's aphorism about academics fighting so hard over so little.

There is no empirical evidence that my book on crack-dealing in East Harlem contributes anything to right-wing conservative hegemony in the United States. All the published reviews of the book by conservative right-wing intellectuals as well as by mainstream liberal and social-democratic US and international journalists point to the contrary. European readers (especially the francophone, judging by the numerous published and personal reactions I have received since the French publication of the book in March 2001) have little trouble recognizing that my work is about the *political economy* of intimate suffering. Readers come away from the book with a negative image of the US political system and civil society – specifically of the deep-seated fact of inner-city segregation and social marginalization. They do not derive 'blame-the-victim' negative images of low-income ethnic minorities from my work. Indeed, US right-wing reviewers and polemicists have accused *In Search of Respect* of blaming US society for the sins of its drug addicts: '[Bourgois] insists on thrusting his political views onto every page . . . politically correct jargon identifying "class exploitation, racial discrimination and, of course, sexist oppression" as the underlying causes of everything' (*New York Times*, 27 December, 1995).² I have received hundreds of emails over the years from US readers, the overwhelming majority of which fully grasp the central neo-Marxist arguments of the book.

As I note in a section of the introduction to *In Search of Respect* entitled 'Ethnographic Methods and Negative Stereotyping' (Bourgois, 1995: 11–18), I was deeply concerned with the politics of representation and deliberately structured the text of the book to minimize potential misreadings. The first half of the book emphasizes the historical and structural victimization of the dealers and their parents in the labor force and in the major social institutions which limit their life options, such as: the public-school system; welfare services; and the criminal-justice system (including routine police brutality). I frequently selected and edited personal narrative so as to evoke sympathy from readers, so that they would recognize emotionally as well as intellectually their common humanity with the crack dealers, in spite of the many disturbing and potentially alienating details of mutual betrayal and intimate violence that I also documented. Rather than being under-theorized, I believe that my quotes of conversations with the street-level participants in East Harlem's drug economy were edited, framed, and introduced in a manner that, if anything, clobbers the reader on almost

every page with political-economic arguments. Only a pre-determinedly hostile reader could blame or pathologize the characters I present in the book.

In Search of Respect does, however, make some readers in the US uncomfortable by displaying in an unsanitized manner how everyday violence becomes a solvent of human dignity and how, under circumstances of extreme misery in the midst of stupendous wealth, victims turn into victimizers. It also steadfastly argues against binary conceptions of worthiness. It presents the coexistence of 'good' with 'bad' in the very same person and households as well as in the same sector of practice. Indeed, many readers via email or in question-and-answer forums have objected that I do not condemn drugs strongly enough. Others express discomfort over the immoral acts of one or another of the primary characters of the book. No one from a right-wing perspective, however, has ever published or communicated anything to imply that the book's content demonstrates that Puerto Ricans deserve to live in poverty or that their warped cultural values cause their current social predicament in the US metropolis.

Suffice it to say that the bulk of Binford's concerns about the textual or data inadequacies of my article on the continuum of violence in El Salvador and in my book on crack dealing in the US inner city are out of touch with current political realities. They are also removed from the empirical facts of daily life among the socially vulnerable. His defensive over-reaction serves as a demonstration of the importance of the reflexive, self-critical argument that organized my original article: how my own political location in the ideological morass of the Cold War affected what I was able to observe, note, and write on ethnographically. I had thought in the 1980s that my critical theoretical and political approach enabled me to see through the blinders imposed by the anti-Communist crusade when in fact I was shaped by those truncated debates in much the same way that Binford continues to be. One would have to be very distant from either the reality of the families of Salvadoran guerrilla fighters or of inner-city street dealers to think that the portrait I drew of their wrenching experiences of everyday violence are surprising or exceptional. Sad to say, the forms of violence that I report are easy to document and are not shocking, even for one who would have only what Binford calls my 'passing' and 'cursory' knowledge of the ethnographic field.

Once again, if Binford was not so worried about the moral image of the FMLN, he would not feel the need to dismiss the former FMLN fighters I write about as a small aberrant sample of malcontents. They are revolutionaries who fought hard, if not heroically. They suffered savage government military repression like so many other Salvadoran peasants from FMLN-controlled territories. Their criticism of internal FMLN violence and their current experience of everyday violence is not uncommon; nor is their relationship to symbolic, structural, and political violence unusual. Pride,

anger, and self-blame over participation in revolutionary activities typically *co-exist within the same person*. Thus Carmen and her family continued working for the FMLN after the local commander killed Carmen's older brother in a romantic dispute. Carmen's little brother was even recruited to fight in the final offensive several years after his older brother's execution. Moreover, today Carmen cannot be sure that her brother might not have denounced the location of the guerrilla encampment when the woman he loved jilted him in favor of the local commander; killing him can be constructed as necessary. This burden of symbolic violence weighs down heavily on Carmen's ability to recognize the power fractures that triggered her brother's killing. Thus she blames her brother's death more on his fickle girlfriend than on the local FMLN commander who actually ordered his execution. She does not even mention the extreme level of repression imposed by the military dictatorship that distorted the actions and logics of those who resisted on the ground by spawning mutual mistrust.

Conclusion: good-enough ethnography but not feel-good ethnography

The purpose of my original article is to re-theorize self-critically two decades of ethnographic relationships I have developed in the countryside of El Salvador and the metropolis of the US in order to document how violence operates in war and peace. I proposed that violence operates through an overlapping continuum of forms. These range from the bloody guts and gore of politically directed bullets and machetes (i.e. political violence); to the words that hurt more than sticks and stones (i.e. symbolic violence); as well as to the impersonal, political economic forces that make children die of malnutrition (i.e. structural violence) and which fuel interpersonal and institutional violence (i.e. everyday violence). My hope was to contribute, not just to a documentation of human pain and social injustice, but also to a clearer political critique of how power relations maintain inequality and (useless) social suffering under neo-liberalism.

In a withering critique of the analytic limitations and political failings of recent ethnographies of race and poverty in the US metropolis, Loïc Wacquant identifies what he calls 'the unwritten "code of writing about the poor" in American social science' that produces moralistic and depoliticized accounts of urban marginality. The 'five cardinal rules' include the dictate to 'spotlight the deeds of the worthy poor, exalt their striving, strength and creativity, and emphasize success stories, even as they are marginal and non-replicable'. The list culminates with the prescription that 'last but not least, you shall bring good news and leave the reader feeling reassured' (Wacquant, 2002). Like Binford and Wacquant's middle-class US consumers

of ethnographies of poverty, I too prefer to read about ‘moments of warmth and love’ or about ‘embryonic cultural forms . . . arising as creative products of the struggle against dehumanization’, in the hope that they ‘sometimes prove capable of detaining, counteracting, or eliminating some anti-social behaviors’ (Binford, 2002: 212–13). I too, out of a respect for the politics of representation inherent to intimate ethnographic data, share the US defensive leftist impulse to sanitize, lest anything I write about the poor and the powerless be used against them. The sad reality, however, is that violence is nearly always ugly and power struggles usually disfigure those who are party to them. We cannot write effectively against the unpleasant products of power and inequality if we remain trapped in a US moralism that obsessively seeks to distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy poor at home and between brutal terrorists and humane freedom fighters abroad. Ethnographic methods, sensibilities, and politics oblige us to touch, smell, and even feel the actual existing social suffering that we may not want to admit to ourselves we have witnessed.

Notes

- 1 As a post-Cold War experiment, I will intersperse the unfashionable term ‘Marxism’ with the less precise term ‘political economy’. I hope this does not distract readers – especially US readers – socialized by Cold War academic training or European readers for that matter, who might know and care about the philosophical and analytical distinctions between Marxism and political economy that those of us trained in the United States ignore.
- 2 The contrast between what conservative intellectuals have written about my book compared to what someone like Michaela di Leonardo has said about the unforeseen political consequences of my narrative style reveals how out of touch leftist intellectuals in the US can be with meaningful political debate. Binford unfortunately cites di Leonardo (1998: 349) as if her polemic against my ‘yellow journalism’ and her assertion that I am a ‘darling of the right wing’ have any basis whatsoever.

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