The scale and pervasiveness of violence today calls urgently for serious analysis – from ‘the war on terror’ and counter-insurgencies, involving massive expenditures of troops and weaponry, from terror and counter-terror, suicide bombings and torture, civil wars and anarchy, entailing human tragedies on a scale comparable to those of the two world wars (e.g. an estimated over 4 million deaths in the Democratic Republic of the Congo alone) – not to mention urban gang warfare, or the persistence of chronic violence against women, including in the most affluent countries of the global North. In many parts of the global South, violence has become more or less endemic – and not just in arenas of armed conflict like Iraq, Afghanistan, the Congo, Darfur, Sri Lanka and Chechnya. That the nirvana of global capitalism finds millions of people once again just ‘wishing (a) not to be killed, (b) for a good warm coat’ (as Stendhal is said to have put it in a different era) is, when fully contemplated, appalling.

In the so-called advanced capitalist countries of the North, while some forms of violence are much less common, fear of violence – from terrorists, but also from child abductors, carjackers, psychopaths, drug addicts, and the like – has become an increasingly central theme of politics. Surveillance and police powers have been steadily extended, and penal policy has shifted from prevention and rehabilitation to punishing and ‘warehousing’ people convicted of crimes. Media competing for circulation exaggerate the risk, scapegoating immigrants, and even social democratic political parties compete to be seen as ‘tougher’ than their rivals in responding to it. Civil liberties are eroded and methods of social control until recently thought barbaric, from detention without trial to isolation, shackles and torture, are restored to favour.

One of the most obvious differences between capitalism now and in earlier periods is that the major capitalist states no longer go to war against each
other, or even threaten to. Instead they collaborate in subjecting all peoples of the world to universal market competition. The resulting conditions of existence of daily life, reinforced by the hubristic imposition of ‘regime change’ by the world’s most powerful states, expose more and more people to forms of local violence – from crime to insurgencies. The so-called ‘third wave’ of democracy promoted by the ‘international community’ may have led to a large increase in the number of states holding apparently competitive elections, but no one can ignore the violence that so often precedes, accompanies and follows them, as in both Kenya and Zimbabwe in 2008. In reality, the world looks nothing like the rosy ‘end of history’ picture painted by the proponents of liberal democracy two decades ago. Violence pervades it everywhere.

We need, then, to disentangle the different kinds of violence currently occurring around the world, to identify their short and long-term causes, the perpetrators and victims, and the sustaining conditions (who benefits, directly and indirectly) – without preconceptions, and without confusing explanations with excuses. And without any illusions that contemporary violence is in some way exceptional, since it has always been a feature of human society. When the well-preserved body of a 5,000-year-old man was found in a glacier in Austria in 1991, it had an arrowhead in its back. When the 2000-year-old ‘Tollund man’ was found in a Danish peat bog in 1950, he had been strangled. The earliest recorded civilisations were founded on conquest and slaughter, and the vast war cemeteries strung along the former front lines of World War I remind us that capitalist civilisation has not been different in this respect, except for its industrialisation of the means of destruction. But whereas earlier cultures took violence and even cruelty for granted (some even celebrated it: the popularity of Homer’s account of the fighting outside Troy shows that Greek humanism co-existed with a fascination with hand-to-hand fighting in all its bloodiness), in our own times violence may be no less bloody (and glorified in movies and video games), but it is no longer taken for granted – or at least much less than formerly. We have to try to understand not only why violence is so extensive today, but also why, in spite of the many ways in which it is accepted and even promoted, it is also seen as wrong – in other words we must consider the ideology of violence, as well as its material reality.

The reflections that follow attempt to sketch an approach to this challenge, by addressing the violence that attends the development of capitalism; the counter-violence that resistance to capitalism and imperialism generates; the ‘violence amongst the people’ that is so tragically widespread under conditions
of contemporary capitalism; the role of the US as ‘global policeman’; and, once again, the issue of socialism or barbarism in our own time.

THE VIOLENCE OF CAPITALISM

Marx famously observed that ‘capital comes (into the world) dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt’, although he had no illusions about the ‘blood and dirt’ of those social formations that capitalism displaced. ‘The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production’. He was referring to the primitive accumulation through which the transition to agrarian capitalism, and then the emergence of industrial capitalism, was accomplished, with its centre in England, between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. The dispossession of the peasantry, the ruin of small artisans, and the appalling working and living conditions experienced by the early factory proletariat in England, were then replicated elsewhere, with different forms and degrees of violence, throughout the world system that capitalism created.

Colonial expansion and European settlement overseas involved the widespread dispossession (and in some cases the extermination) of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Asia, Africa and Australasia, followed by their forcible incorporation or marginalisation in a developing world capitalism. All this was facilitated by a racism that accompanied and was used to justify, in terms of a ‘civilising mission’, the imposition and administration of white rule. Violence was thus integral to primitive accumulation, both in what became the ‘core’ of the capitalist world and in the formation of its peripheries. Violence was also integral to the making of the modern capitalist state and the inter-state system, which was not completed in most of Europe until the second half of the twentieth century, and arguably continues into the twenty-first in the Balkans.

It is in Asia, Africa and Latin America that the major remaining zones of strategic natural resources continue to be enclosed and plundered – a form of primitive accumulation that persists into the era of capitalist accumulation proper. This too is regularly accomplished or sustained by violent means, as Michael Klare points out:

…intensified production of oil, natural gas, uranium and minerals is itself a source of instability…. The nations involved are largely poor, so whoever controls the resources controls the one sure source
of abundant wealth. This is an invitation for the monopolization of power by greedy elites who use control over military and police to suppress rivals. The result, more often than not, is wealthy strata of crony capitalists kept in power by brutal security forces and surrounded by disaffected and impoverished masses, often belonging to a different ethnic group – a recipe for unrest and insurgency. This is the situation today in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, in Darfur and southern Sudan, in the uranium-producing areas of Niger, in Zimbabwe, in the Cabinda province of Angola (where most of that country’s oil lies) and in numerous other areas suffering from what’s been called the ‘resource curse’.4

It is also in the ‘South’ today that interventions to achieve ‘liberal peace’, free markets and democracy are launched, and where the USA and its allies feel free to deploy ‘exemplary’ and ‘pre-emptive’ violence. The massacre of the Iraqi army retreating from Kuwait in 1991 was an act of massive ‘exemplary’ violence, as was the bombing of Serbia in 1999; the invasion and occupation of Iraq was justified in the name of ‘pre-empting’ aggression by the Saddam regime with ‘weapons of mass destruction’ that it, in fact, did not possess. Both ‘exemplary’ and ‘pre-emptive’ violence may be exercised directly, as in the instances cited, or by proxy via ‘friendly’ repressive regimes, for example, apartheid South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s in the name of combating ‘communism’. The USA was also instrumental in the overthrow of governments it considered ‘threatening’ – in Guatemala and Iran in the 1950s, Indonesia in the 1960s, Chile in the 1970s, Nicaragua and Grenada in the 1980s, and more recently Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq – and was complicit, when not a major actor, in the violence that attended these ‘regime changes’.

A CONTINUUM OF COUNTER-VIOLENCE
The processes of primitive accumulation and state-making and the various modalities of the rule of capital – from military adventurism to the enforced creation of individual and corporate property rights – have generated a range of consequential counter-violence. For the great social revolutions of the twentieth century, pre-eminently those of Russia and China, the initial conditions for their projects of socialist construction were necessarily established by violent means, in contexts of global war and imperialist offensives, and were followed by violence in the service of consolidating the party-state and of ‘socialist primitive accumulation’, including the great famines of the early 1930s in the USSR, and the late 1950s in China.
In the movements for independence from colonial rule in the Third World – Algeria, Vietnam, Mozambique, etc. – armed struggle was taken up in the face of the violent repression directed against any impulse for national liberation, not least on the part of the rural and urban labouring poor. It was also taken up in the face of violence, both exemplary and pre-emptive, exercised by local ruling classes and their imperialist allies against progressive political forces in Guatemala, Iran, Indonesia, Chile, Argentina, Nicaragua, South Africa, and elsewhere.

Wars for national liberation represented one manifestation of the resistance to dispossession and oppression that accompanied the process of primitive accumulation, and continue today. Such resistance also takes the form of peasant revolts, strikes, ‘social banditry’ and the invention and daily exercise of what James Scott termed ‘weapons of the weak’, all of which can involve their own dialectic of violent response to violent oppression. These actions span a continuum of ‘counter-violence’ which ranges from national liberation struggles to responsive, often defensive, violence against the predations of landlords and land-grabbers, merchants and usurers, and against colonial and post-colonial authoritarian states and their tax-collectors, gendarmes and magistrates, priests and imams.

And then, in this grisly dialectic, the predators raise the stakes: resistance is met by the intensified violence of ‘paramilitaries’, private ‘security’ firms, ‘extraordinary renditions’, disappearances, torture, etc, culminating in a ‘war on terror’ that covers anything and anyone, and seeks to excuse all crimes and even atrocities.

VIOLENCE ‘AMONG THE PEOPLE’

But the weapons of the weak are not always turned against the strong. One of the most widespread kinds of violence today is between people who are all themselves victims, in one way or another, of global capitalism, imperialism and attendant local forms of inequality and injustice. An instance is the African ‘conflict zones’ of Rwanda and the eastern Congo, Sudan/ Darfur, and Liberia/Sierra Leone, ‘when victims become killers’ as Mahmood Mamdani put it. The Congo, in which ‘disease and malnutrition caused by almost a decade of political violence has since 2003 been killing an average of 40,000 people a month – half of them children’, is possibly the most appalling example in the world at this moment.

Such conflicts often extend across porous international borders in areas with long histories of the brutal extraction of valuable resources, and/or new interests in strategic materials that reproduce and intensify extreme poverty, insecurity and social tension – and where ethnicity is refashioned
and manipulated for purposes of power and economic gain by indigenous ‘political entrepreneurs’, typically in alliance with external forces interested in the extraction of strategic minerals and the sale of arms. Similar processes could be seen in the Balkans and Caucasus amid the ruins of former state socialism, exacerbated by Western interventions.

These conflicts also exemplify the ‘informal’ organisation of violence by ‘warlords’ of various kinds, just as the massive slums of the South are permeated by gangsterism that thrives on conditions of desperation, trading in drugs, the control of housing and jobs, ‘protectionism’, and services to urban political parties and ‘entrepreneurs’. Life on the street in many of the world’s cities can be hardly less precarious, if in a different way. In Guatemala City, for example:

Over the past four years [2003–2007], the number of people found dead in the streets or hung from trees or pulled from ditches has climbed to mind-numbing levels. In 2002, before the violence began to escalate, roughly 2,900 people were killed. Last year, the total reached 6,033, although international observers believe that it could be as high as 8,000 (the National Civil Police doesn’t count people who are injured in an attack but die later in hospital)… Every day on the streets of this city… citizens are robbed at gunpoint. It happens while they sit in their cars, and while they ride the bus… [in 2007] 76 Guatemalan bus drivers have been killed for their cash boxes. The crime wave is so bad that virtually every business in the city has armed guards, some mere teenagers, who now outnumber the police 3 to 1...8

According to circumstances – including the ways in which capitalism seizes on existing social and cultural differences and weaves them into its divisions of labour and class rule – responsive/defensive violence can often also develop an ethnic, religious or linguistic character that all too often permeates widespread ‘violence among the people’. Thus some of the features noted above also characterise the mobilisation of communal violence by well-defined reactionary political forces like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindu fascist organisation in India. Daily forms of individual violence within communities of the dispossessed and oppressed, such as those associated with (usually male) youth gangs, sexual and other violence against women (and children) are converted into violence against neighbours with the ‘wrong’ ethnic or religious identities.
Such violence does not express some kind of endemic or tribal atavism in the global South, as the media in the North are only too ready to imply. It tends to be concentrated in particular social environments at particular times: it can appear, flourish, abate or vanish. Nor is the attempt to understand its causes and patterns to seek to condone them, any more than understanding why workers might engage in communal violence, or why ‘marginals’, ‘anti-socials’ or ‘lumpenproletarians’ are susceptible to hire to break strikes or brutalise political opponents, is to condone those actions. Behind the sometimes distinctive forms and peculiar cruelty of this kind of violence, there is so often a previous moment – or several – in which external agents intervened in internal class struggle; and this in turn precipitated the chain of events that lead to, and eventually drive the violence with its locally-derived characteristics and horrors. What is happening today in Guatemala City must be traced back to the CIA-organised coup which overthrew the elected government of the social-democratic president Arbenz in 1954, replacing it with a military dictatorship and culminating in a brutal civil war which ended without any significant redress of the extreme inequality and mass poverty which now fuels the chronic insecurity of the streets. In the same way, what is happening today in the Congo must be understood in relation to the CIA-inspired murder of Lumumba at the moment of independence from Belgian colonial rule.

Yet while the role of imperialism in stoking conflicts in Africa and elsewhere goes far to explain the extreme and cruel forms of violence, such as the widespread rape and mutilations seen today in the eastern Congo, Sierra Leone, or Darfur, for example, it does not explain everything. There are undoubtedly tendencies to violence, to cruelty, and to sadism, in all human beings, aggravated as these are by the gendered relations of power into which they are born, and the broader social conditions of human history to date. At the same time, such tendencies are shaped and allowed expression by cultural dynamics, themselves the product of historical processes and their contradictions.

In short, the desperation of the dispossessed and oppressed, and the emotional and psychological states it generates, can animate actions of quite different political significance. Mike Davis’s summary of the situation in the cities of the South could just as well be extended to its countrysides:

…the future of human solidarity depends upon the militant refusal of the new urban poor to accept their terminal marginality within global capitalism.
This refusal may take atavistic as well as avant-garde forms: the repeal of modernity as well as attempts to recover its repressed promises. It should not be surprising that some poor youth on the outskirts of Istanbul, Cairo, Casablanca, or Paris embrace the religious nihilism of al Salafia Jihadia and rejoice in the destruction of modernity’s most overweening symbols. Or that millions of others turn to the urban subsistence economies operated by street gangs, *narcotraficantes*, militias, and sectarian political organizations. The demonizing rhetorics of the various ‘wars’ on terrorism, drugs, and crime are so much semantic apartheid: they constitute epistemological walls around *gecekondu*, *favelas*, and *chawls* that disable any honest debate about the daily violence of economic exclusion. And, as in Victorian times, the categorical criminalization of the urban poor is a self-fulfilling prophecy, guaranteed to shape a future of endless war in the streets.10

**IDEOLOGIES OF VIOLENCE**

The broad patterns of violence in the era of capitalism outlined above are hardly mysterious, but how they are understood and reacted to is not so straightforward. On the one hand, violence is deplored. On the other, it is threatened, condoned, and advocated. This apparent contradiction needs to be clarified.

To begin with, it is clear that in the emergent bourgeois societies of Europe and North America an ‘Enlightenment’ sensibility developed that gradually turned against certain types of violence – though with a notable lag in relation to colonies and slavery. One indicator is the gradual rejection of exemplary cruelty in judicial punishment: burning, boiling, flaying alive, drawing and quartering and breaking on the rack (not to mention flogging), fell out of favour. In Britain, capital punishment was abolished for over 200 crimes in 1838; the last public hanging took place in 1868. Even if it took another hundred years for ‘judicial murder’ carried out behind prison walls to be finally given up, its eventual abandonment in Europe and much of the rest of the world is still significant.

To explore the religious, psychosocial and cultural as well as economic and political developments responsible for this shift would take us far beyond the scope of this essay, but there is no doubting that contemporary concerns over the extent of subjective violence is genuine and strong. However, as Slavoj Žižek points out, it is also often inversely related to concern about the objective violence ‘inherent in a system… the more subtle forms of coercion
that sustain relations of domination and exploitation’. Mark Twain made a similar point on the centenary of the French Revolution:

There were two ‘Reigns of Terror’, if we would but remember it and consider it; the one wrought murder in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years; the one inflicted death upon ten thousand persons, the other upon a hundred millions; but our shudders are all for the ‘horrors’ of the minor Terror, the momentary Terror, so to speak… A city cemetery could contain the coffins filled by that brief Terror which we have all been so diligently taught to shiver at and mourn over; but all France could hardly contain the coffins filled by that older and real Terror – that unspeakably bitter and awful Terror which none of us has been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserves.

People in the North today may wring their hands over violence in, say, Darfur, without reflecting on the global economic relationships that underlie it. Billionaire philanthropists lead the chorus of concern about humanitarian crises whose causes are closely intertwined with the economic system from which their wealth is extracted.

In other words liberal concern about violence has limits: it diminishes with distance – the farther away the victims of violence are, the less we are inclined to be concerned – and especially with perceived difference. It is a commonplace of modern military history that soldiers have to be trained to see the enemy as inferior beings if they are to be able to kill them enthusiastically. The American public was shocked by the photos of American soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib because they had not had the necessary indoctrination – the kind of indoctrination that is perhaps only possible on a mass scale under a fascist regime. In Hitler’s Germany, after years of public indoctrination and the existential fear created by daily mounting brutality, a disturbingly large number of Germans were ready to write off their Jewish fellow-citizens as ‘untermenschen’, subhumans. Whatever the effects of the 24 hour barrage of Fox News, Americans were not prepared to accept the notion that Iraqi prisoners could be treated as subhuman.

Ideology, then, plays a crucial role in determining our view of violence, both in occluding ‘objective violence’, and in limiting our concern for many of the victims of ‘subjective’ violence by defining them as ‘others’ – people who for one reason or another are less entitled to our concern. Neoliberal
ideology offers its own particular rationale: bourgeois civilisation and its state order are represented as intrinsically humane and peaceful. First, by contrast with what preceded them historically: thus the peaceful nature of capitalism (‘industrial society’) was proclaimed by such nineteenth-century social theorists as St. Simon, Comte, Spencer, and informed colonial doctrines like that of *pax Britannica*. ‘Pacification’ and the rule of law, along with commerce and Christianity, were the instruments of its ‘civilising mission’. Second, capitalism as ‘liberal peace’ is contrasted with contemporary social groups, ideologies, and political formations which challenge it: the ‘others’ who would subvert or attack bourgeois civilisation – its enemies within and without. According to liberal ideology, the state’s exercise of legitimate violence today limits itself strictly to instruments set by humane rules (rules of constraint) necessary to achieve peace and prosperity. Those institutional instruments are, ‘internally’, the judicial system (law-making and enforcement, hence police, courts, prisons), and, ‘externally’, international law-making and the military.

This ideological framework can be interrogated through analysis of the historical processes and moments that generate it and the institutions and practices that implement it. The Enlightenment sensibilities referred to above led to the replacement of brutal forms of punishment by more nuanced forms of control and regulation that nonetheless served to discipline the citizenry (and the poor, blacks and females in particular). The ‘discipline’ exercised by bourgeois institutions, practices and discourses that claimed to be applying reason (science) in the service of humanism, famously explored by Foucault in his studies of prisons, medicine, hospitals for the mentally ill, and sexuality, has also been charted in other key institutions involved in the regulation of labour and housing markets, and of immigration, schooling, and systems of welfare provision and social work.

In relation to the global ‘South’, neoliberal ideology strives both to establish itself as the unchallenged common sense of the epoch and to subsume the development of poorer countries and people in a grandiose project of social engineering that amounts to establishing bourgeois civilisation on a global scale: economic growth will be assured, poverty overcome, ‘civil society’ and social capital strengthened, and sound democracies established, if only the right reforms are implemented and the right policies pursued. This project of ‘development’, driven by the best of purposes, constructs its antagonistic others, driven by the worst. In a probably ascending register of criminality, the enemies of ‘development’, liberal peace and freedom comprise demagogic politicians, rent-seeking officials, and others who exemplify ‘cronyism’ (the corrupt), opponents of free trade and the unfettered mobility of capital
(protectionists, anti-globalisation ‘anarchists’), barbarous warlords (‘theirs’, not ‘ours’), and international terrorists (of a certain religious complexion).

Against such others violence can, then, according to this ideology, be legitimately used (keeping ‘collateral damage’ to a minimum, naturally). Neoliberal ideology in fact creates a very wide and flexible range of ‘others’ who in one way or another may be pictured as threatening the liberal-democratic order, and whom the liberal-democratic state can therefore legitimately detain and punish – domestic criminals, ‘gang members’, ‘failed asylum seekers’ and the like – and in the case of people, especially foreigners, who are designated as ‘terrorists’ (or terrorist ‘supporters’ or even just ‘sympathisers’), detain and interrogate, and even torture, or kill. ‘Humanitarian’ military interventions, or military interventions aimed at merely ‘spreading democracy’, have been justified on this kind of ground.13 And then popular ‘common sense’, shaped by this ideology, makes the necessary exceptions to its general distaste for, and scruples about, the uses of violence.

THE GLOBAL POLICEMAN
In the era of neoliberal global capitalism, it is the instability associated with localised conflicts around the globe that has increasingly come to define what capital sees as ‘the problem of order’. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened the way for the US to act with impunity as the global policeman, but at the same time fuelled the black market in modern armaments – with the buyers, moreover, now more often intending them for use rather than display or deterrence.14 As the global policeman, however, the US state has hardly been more successful than the Los Angeles Police Department has been in south-central Los Angeles.

The deployment of its unparalleled means of violence in its interventions in the 1990s led to the transformation of NATO from a ‘defensive organization into a powerful alliance prepared to intervene militarily wherever it chose to do so’, in the words of Canada’s former ambassador to Yugoslavia. ‘And it paved the way for the unilateral US invasion of Iraq’.15 While September 11, 2001 may have brought home to some Americans, in a horrible manner, the contradictions of policing the world, it was also the pretext for a new wave of military adventurism in the terror unleashed on Afghanistan and Iraq that in turn provoked violent insurgencies in response. The Bush Administration’s sanctioning of the use of torture in investigations by the US military (and especially by the CIA), its practice of ‘rendition’ to torture chambers abroad, and the Patriot Act’s violation of elementary legal rights of ‘suspected terrorists’ within the USA were accompanied by US federal government
departments ‘classifying documents at the rate of 125 a minute as they create new categories of semi-secrets bearing vague labels like “sensitive security information”’.16

It is important to register the fact that, despite claims by ‘security experts’ that the threat of terrorism has been increasing (and despite criticisms of the Iraq war that focus on how it has misdirected attention from alleged terrorist threats closer to home17), the incidence of terrorist attacks outside Iraq has in fact declined since 2001.18 Of course, incidence and threat are not the same, and so the experts say that increased security measures have reduced the incidence while the threat has increased. That said, what has increased is the incidence of domestic insurgencies against foreign occupations, armed conflicts among rebels, warlords and ethnic and religious groups, and the ‘one-sided violence’ involved in deadly attacks against civilians (both by governments and such groups).19

The intensified security mentality of the US and allied states has been accompanied by surreal shifts in the language of violence and its uses. Even before 9/11 the police seized as a ‘violent weapon’ a toy catapult designed to throw teddy bears over a security fence at the Quebec City Free Trade Area of the Americas Summit in April 2001. Yet anti-globalisation protesters who tried to break through the police lines behind which the rich and powerful gathered, or who threw a rock at a McDonald’s window along the route of a march, or who managed to get so far as to toss paint at a politician or CEO, were clearly engaged in a form of politics of a fundamentally different order in terms of intent, material employed, and effects, than the practice of armed violence by a state (such as the use of police violence in Genoa or Oaxaca). An immediate effect of 9/11 and the declaration of the war on terrorism was that rather than these important distinctions becoming clearer, they were further obscured by agencies concerned with ‘state security’ – including in the EU, which was quick to include ‘urban violence’, ‘damage to government facilities’ and ‘seriously intimidating a population’ in its post-9/11 redefinitions of terrorism, and to launch an unprecedented level of cooperation between Europol and American law enforcement agencies.20 The distinctions were also obscured by unscrupulous politicians and journalists, one of whom wrote immediately after 9/11: ‘Like terrorists, the anti-globalization movement is disdainful of democratic institutions… Terrorism, if not so heinous as what we witnessed last week, has always been part of the protesters’ game plan’.21

Such claims are as absurd as they are mendacious. For what characterises this generation of left activists is the explicit eschewal, even among its most militant elements, of armed revolutionary struggle, let alone terrorism
(along the lines of the Red Brigades or Weathermen) as a means of effecting political change. In the current era, it is not among activists on the left, but rather almost exclusively on the right that one finds violence adopted as a strategy, as among those Christian fundamentalists or American militiamen or European neo-Nazis who bomb abortion clinics, government buildings and refugee shelters, burn Roma camps and attack immigrants. And the same applies to the militants of political religion across Asia from the eastern Mediterranean to the China Sea, whether Muslim or Jewish or Hindu, whose self-identification as the scourge of secularism, and of those of other religious beliefs, is a defining element.22

ONCE AGAIN, SOCIALISM OR BARBARISM

That said, the barbarism ‘actually existing’ in so much of the world, however much it may be connected with the suppression and sometimes extermination of so many of the egalitarian, democratic and socialist projects of the 20th century, also needs to be traced back to the failures of so many parties and movements that sustained these projects. What happened in South Africa’s townships in 2008 – ‘a burning tire around the neck of a terrified immigrant; neighbours turning on neighbours with violent rage; hundreds huddling in police stations for fear of more bloodshed’23 – is directly related to the ANC government’s embrace of neoliberalism, the loss of influence of its partners, the SACP and COSATU, and experiences of rates of unemployment and poverty as great or greater than under apartheid. As one South African observer put it: ‘We are sitting on a (time bomb). People are poor. They don’t have jobs or decent housing and they are sick and tired of it. It’s at a point where it is easy for anybody to incite violence… This is not just about xenophobia. The next thing you might get some lunatic in the informal settlement say, how can we be hungry when they are rich across (the highway). These conditions are ripe for that sort of uprising’.24 Nor can the incidents of violence against the Gypsy community and Bengali shopkeepers in Italy – in the context of increased anti-Roma and anti-immigrant rhetoric coming from official authorities25 – be properly understood without taking into account the confusion and loss of purpose that accompanied the demise of the PCI, once the most vibrant Communist party in the west.

The proliferation of barbarisms large and small needs to be understood in the context of the low point reached by the socialist project at the end of the 20th century – whether due to defeats inflicted by imperialism and domestic reaction, or to the many failures and acts of oppression of actually-existing socialism and post-colonial nationalism, or to the contradictions of social democratic reformism and its settlement with neoliberalism. This is, in fact,
what Engels was getting at when he raised the possibility of a ‘universal lapse into barbarism’ in the Europe of his time. He saw this as likely if the nascent socialist mass movement’s political transformation of the working classes themselves was stopped in its tracks. Marx and Engels founded their politics on the knowledge that ‘for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement: a revolution’. They called the development of the practical movement a revolution ‘not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found a society anew’.26 This was not something that could take place overnight, in an insurrectionary moment. Engels’ letters in the late 1880s, while expressing his concern about the ‘unparalleled devastation’ of a war among the Great Powers, was most troubled by the fact that war would lead to the socialist movement being ‘smashed up, disorganized, deprived of freedom of action everywhere’; and with ‘the compulsory and universal suppression of our movement’, would come ‘a period of reaction based on “the inanition of all the peoples bled white…”’.27

We are in such a position now. The violence with which the world is now saturated reflects the failures of the socialist movements of the 20th century to transform the working classes so as to transcend their particularisms and develop the ambition and strength to face down and defeat ruling-class violence. The current impasse of the socialist movement is thus directly relevant to question of actually existing barbarism at the beginning of the 21st century. As Raymond Williams so well understood,

there must be something in every socialist, from the very values involved in wanting socialism at all, wanting a revolution to bring about socialism rather than just wanting a revolution, that continually pulls towards precisely the compromises, the settlements, the getting through without too much trouble and suffering that is the great resource of longing on which the capitalist parties draw… It is only when people get to the point of seeing that the price of the contradictions is yet more intolerable than the price of ending them that they acquire the nerve to go all the way through to a consistent socialist politics.28

A consistent socialist politics for the 21st century remains to be developed. But it will certainly have to achieve a better balance between means and ends, values and practice, than 20th century socialist politics managed to
do. The main task for the foreseeable future lies in fashioning new socialist institutions oriented to developing class identities and capacities and doing so in ways that are inclusive, democratic and potentially transformative. Only this can really put socialist revolution back on the historical agenda. The question will then remain of how far this can be brought about through peaceful means. But a consistent socialist politics, while grasping the violence of capitalism and imperialism in all its manifestations, will also have to be vigilant against the temptation to glamorise revolutionary violence, and not to mistake as revolutionary every act of violent resistance by those subjected to dispossession and oppression. For a consistent socialist politics, a very different set of values and judgements is involved, a very different existential calculus, as it were, from one which celebrates the cathartic and positive effects of ‘subjective’ violence against those who have inflicted violence on you, as in the position once supported by (mis)readings of Fanon. What is properly celebrated is courage and selflessness in the fight for human decency, solidarity and the emancipatory goals of socialism – not the exercise of violence.

The widespread discrediting of neoliberalism as ideology and policy today suggests that as political consent to neoliberalism declines, coercion is increasingly likely to be resorted to. In this context, while the prime task remains that of rebuilding the socialist movement, there are many other important and immediate tasks – not least those involving organisations, campaigns and movements for civil liberties and against war. It is more than ever necessary to hold liberal democracy to account for its own claims of legality and humanity, reason and peacefulness. In the current period of reaction there is political scope, and a responsibility, to test and contest the bourgeois order on its own grounds. Revealing its contradictions in this way can also help to move towards developing the consistent socialist politics needed to transcend it.

NOTES

1 ‘Idomeneus stabbed at the middle/ of his chest with the spear, and broke the bronze armour about him… He cried out then, a great cry, broken, the spear in him,/ and fell, thunderously, and the spear in his heart was stuck fast/ but the heart was panting still and beating to shake the butt end/ of the spear’. The Iliad, cited in David Denby, Great Books, New York: Simon and Schuster 1996, pp. 29–30.

A disturbing recent form of this is the seizure of tropical forests to serve as carbon sinks as part and parcel of the carbon trading ‘solution’ to today’s ecological crisis.


For a striking example of the refusal to condone, see Fidel Castro’s statement at the time of the rescue of the FARC captives from the Columbian jungle in July 2008: ‘Out of a basically humanist sentiment, we rejoiced at the news that Ingrid Betancourt, three American citizens and other captives had been released. The civilians should have never been kidnapped neither should the militaries have been kept prisoners in the conditions of the jungle. These were objectively cruel actions. No revolutionary purpose could justify it. The time will come when the subjective factors should be analyzed in depth’. http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/reflexiones/2008/ing/f030708i.html.


For example, the British Foreign Secretary David Miliband argues that ‘...mistakes made in Iraq and Afghanistan must not cloud the moral imperative to intervene – sometimes militarily – to help spread democracy throughout the world’. (*Guardian*, 13 February 2008). For a critique see Gwydion Williams, ‘I’ll do it my way, you’ll do it my way’, in *Labour and Trade Union Review*, 185(March), 2008, pp. 3–6.


17 Thus even Noam Chomsky: ‘One of the things that Bush hasn’t been doing is improving security. So, for example, if you look at the government commission after 9-11, one of its recommendations – which is a natural one – is to improve security of the US-Canadian border. I mean, if you look at that border, it’s very porous. You or I could walk across it somewhere with a suitcase holding components of a nuclear bomb. The Bush administration did not follow that recommendation. What it did instead was fortify the Mexican border, which was not regarded as a serious source of potential terrorism. They in fact slowed the rate of growth of border guards on the Canadian Border’. Noam Chomsky interviewed by Gabriel Matthew Schivone, ‘United States of Insecurity’, Monthly Review, 60(1), 2008, p. 16. See also Barack Obama’s major foreign policy speech, ‘The War We Need to Win’ to the Woodrow Wilson Centre, August 1, 2007 at http://www.barackobama.com; and his ‘Renewing American Leadership’, Foreign Affairs, 86(4), 2007, esp. pp. 9-11.


19 Ibid, pp. 41-43. Counting only the 25 or more killings that must be perpetrated for a campaign of one-sided violence to be recorded by Uppsala University’s Conflict Data Program (and noting civilians killed in attacks on military targets are not included), the data confirm that the number of such campaigns rose from 19 in 1989 to a high of 38 in 2004.


21 Aaron Lukas, ‘America Still the Villain’, National Post, 18 Sept, 2001, quoted in D. Schederman and B. Cossman, ‘Political Association and

22 Several of the most important of these movements are analysed in the 2008 volume of the Socialist Register, Global Flashpoints: Reactions to Imperialism and Neoliberalism.


