# Violence: Six Sideways Reflections

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Summary:

Publisher Summary 1
A philosopher and cultural critic discusses the diverse ways in which violence is perceived and misperceived in the world, addressing such issues as whether or not capitalism, or even civilization, causes more violence than it prevents, and the inherent violence of globalization, fundamentalism, and language.

Publisher Summary 2
A philosopher and cultural critic discusses the diverse ways in which
violence is perceived and misperceived in the world, addressing such provocative issues as whether or not capitalism, or even civilization, causes more violence than it prevents, and the inherent violence of globalization, fundamentalism, and language. Original. 30,000 first printing.

Publisher Summary 3
Philosopher, cultural critic, and agent provocateur Slavoj Žižek constructs a fascinating new framework to look at the forces of violence in our world.

Using history, philosophy, books, movies, Lacanian psychiatry, and jokes, Slavoj Žižek examines the ways we perceive and misperceive violence. Drawing from his unique cultural vision, Žižek brings new light to the Paris riots of 2005; he questions the permissiveness of violence in philanthropy; in daring terms, he reflects on the powerful image and determination of contemporary terrorists.

Violence, Žižek states, takes three forms--subjective (crime, terror), objective (racism, hate-speech, discrimination), and systemic (the catastrophic effects of economic and political systems)--and often one form of violence blunts our ability to see the others, raising complicated questions.

Does the advent of capitalism and, indeed, civilization cause more violence than it prevents? Is there violence in the simple idea of "the neighbour"? And could the appropriate form of action against violence today simply be to contemplate, to think?

Beginning with these and other equally contemplative questions, Žižek discusses the inherent violence of globalization, capitalism, fundamentalism, and language, in a work that will confirm his standing as one of our most erudite and incendiary modern thinkers.
Excerpt:

Chapter One

Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo

Sos violence

Violence: Subjective and Objective

In 1922 the Soviet government organised the forced expulsion of leading anti-communist intellectuals, from philosophers and theologians to economists and historians. They left Russia for Germany on a boat known as the Philosophy Steamer. Prior to his expulsion, Nikolai Lossky, one of those forced into exile, had enjoyed with his family the comfortable life of the haute bourgeoisie, supported by servants and nannies. He simply couldn’t understand who would want to destroy his way of life. What had the Losskys and their kind done? His boys and their friends, as they inherited the best of what Russia had to offer, helped fill the world with talk of literature and music and art, and they led gentle lives. What was wrong with that? 1

While Lossky was without doubt a sincere and benevolent person, really caring for the poor and trying to civilise Russian life, such an attitude betrays a breathtaking insensitivity to the systemic violence that had to go on in order for such a comfortable life to be possible.
We’re talking here of the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence. The Losskys and their kind effectively did nothing bad. There was no subjective evil in their life, just the invisible background of this systemic violence.

Then suddenly, into this almost Proustian world . . . Leninism broke in. The day Andrei Lossky was born, in May 1917, the family could hear the sound of riderless horses galloping down neighboring Ivanovskaya Street. Such ominous intrusions multiplied. Once, in his school, Lossky’s son was brutally taunted by a working-class schoolmate who shouted at him that the days of him and his family are over now . . . In their benevolent-gentle innocence, the Losskys perceived such signs of the forthcoming catastrophe as emerging out of nowhere, as signals of an incomprehensibly malevolent new spirit. What they didn’t understand was that in the guise of this irrational subjective violence, they were getting back the message they themselves sent out in its inverted true form. It is this violence which seems to arise out of nowhere that, perhaps, fits what Walter Benjamin, in his Critique of Violence, called pure, divine violence.

Opposing all forms of violence, from direct, physical violence (mass murder, terror) to ideological violence (racism, incitement, sexual discrimination), seems to be the main preoccupation of the tolerant liberal attitude that predominates today. An SOS call sustains such talk, drowning out all other approaches: everything else can and has to wait . . . Is there not something suspicious, indeed symptomatic, about this focus on subjective violence that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds? Doesn’t it desperately try to distract our attention from the true locus of trouble, by obliterating from view other forms of violence and thus actively participating in them? According to a well-known anecdote, a German officer visited
Picasso in his Paris studio during the Second World War. There he saw Guernica and, shocked at the modernist “chaos” of the painting, asked Picasso: “Did you do this?” Picasso calmly replied: “No, you did this!” Today, many a liberal, when faced with violent outbursts such as the recent looting in the suburbs of Paris, asks the few remaining leftists who still count on a radical social transformation: “Isn’t it you who did this? Is this what you want?” And we should reply, like Picasso: “No, you did this! This is the true result of your politics!”

There is an old joke about a husband who returns home earli

Reviews Detail:
Kirkus Reviews
The Slovene philosopher (In Defense of Lost Causes, 2008, etc.) defines the many facets of violence in the postmodern era. He argues that violence can be categorized in three forms: subjective (crime, terror), objective (racism, discrimination) and systemic (the catastrophic effects of political and economic systems). Too often, the author believes, subjective and objective violence distract discussion from the systemic. He offers as an example a wealthy entrepreneur whose fortune was the result of ruthless capitalist pursuit, perhaps marked by outsourcing production to a developing country. When this entrepreneur enjoys a favorable public reputation for donating annually to charities benefiting these same impoverished nations, avers the author, it proves that capitalism relies on charity to sustain its social feasibility. This kind of "philanthropy" masks economic exploitation, he posits; systemic violence here is cloaked by the gesture of writing a check. "The same structure—the thing itself is the remedy against the threat it poses—is widely visible in today's ideological landscape," the author writes. He gives examples from Abu Ghraib to fundamentalist Islam to the Catholic Church to make his point: When high authority is both the
enforcing entity and the criminal, systemic violence is enabled and pervasive. The author also argues that language is violently misused when a vague term like intolerance replaces specific, factual words such as inequality, exploitation or injustice. He ponders whether the concept of free will is paradoxical, or even oppressive, citing examples from social politeness to suicide bombers. It seems no subject escapes his omnivorous dissection, and all somehow support his central theme: The violence most discussed is not the most damaging to humankind, but simply the most obvious. The author's familiar kaleidoscope of cultural allusions seems almost anachronistic within his dense intellectual prose and Lacanian-Hegelian-Freudian dialectic, yet this may well be the philosophy of the future.

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Library Journal Reviews
Žižek, (Inst. of Sociology, Univ. of Ljubljana, Slovenia) brings his hallmark erudition, acerbic wit, and compelling use of pop culture to a focused discussion of what amounts to the human will to violence. In half a dozen movements arranged like formal music, he discusses by turns the stripped-down realities of liberalism, fascism, and true fundamentalism (such as that of the Amish); the role of Israel's identity on the world political stage; the Paris riots of 1968; the concept of neighbor as ultimate Other; and so on. Reaching back politically only to the Nazi era and philosophically to Kant, this discussion is grounded in the present and directs readers to consider the counterposed violences of doing evil and doing nothing. Žižek's interests and writing style offer easy enough intellectual access for a wide audience of undergraduates and college-educated lay readers; his book could become an essential campus read, but his theories go beyond the academic and should be brought to the attention of anyone concerned with converting social relations policies from any core of violence. [This title and Steven Lukes's Moral Relativism are the first volumes in Picador's new "Big Ideas/Small Books" series.―
Publishers Weekly Reviews

In this provocative and brilliantly argued work, philosopher Zizek takes readers on an intellectual and artistic tour—drawing upon Picasso's Guernica, Alfred Hitchcock and M. Night Shyamalan's films, Michel Houellebecq's novels, jokes, Lacanian psychology and a Kantian analysis of Hurricane Katrina—to demonstrate how societies understand, obscure and deny the sources of violence. His is not an examination of offenses but an argument that violence can perhaps be best defined by the bystanders and not by its perpetrators or victims. Zizek enumerates the varieties of violence (subjective, objective, systemic) and how it inheres in language, economics and religion, urging readers to discern the "violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance." In meditations on the events of 9/11, the Abu Ghraib scandal and the 2005 Paris riots, the book turns numerous familiar arguments on their ear (he proposes that the guards at Abu Ghraib represent the true underside of American society). His unrelenting scrutiny and host of cultural and literary references dazzle, and this bracing and rewarding read will challenge anyone unwilling to recognize his or her complicity in systems of institutional and interpersonal violence. (Aug.)