Violence and Disposability at the Intersection of Twin Pandemics

Ashley M. Howard

Abstract
COVID-19 and anti-Black violence represent interlocking pandemics animated by necropolitics, the power to determine who lives and who dies. By expanding our understanding of violence to include its structural and cultural forms alongside direct bodily harm, we must also expand our commitment to end violence. Labor educators, organizers, and workers are uniquely positioned to articulate this more expansive definition and advocate for the eradication of violence in all its forms.

Keywords
violence, resistance, workers, African American

In the summer of 2020, an unprecedented number of American communities experienced mass protests and civil disobedience. While very few of these demonstrations escalated into property damage or participant-instigated physical harm, a popular misconception dominates, that the whole of America was engulfed in flames. The demonstrations intimate proximity, unfolding in people’s neighborhoods, disrupting rush hour traffic, and streaming live across numerous platforms, certified an entire nation as self-appointed race experts. People who had never considered the daily indignities and trauma present in Black life rushed to explain away people of color’s centuries-old truths while opining how best to achieve equality. These responses underlie the confidence, entitlement even, with which people feel possessed to speak about Black history, tactics, and possibility.

These assertions come from a place of observation, masquerading as knowledge. Ideologies so deeply rooted that people do not even pause to consider its origins

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before digesting uncritically. The admonishment that “violence isn’t the way” exposed that when Americans express concern about violence, they consider a sole and narrow definition: physical harm done by one individual against another or their property. In so doing, they disregard the multiple violences which take place at the bottom of social hierarchies every day.

We must dislodge this entrenched definition of violence. When we articulate and uphold a more expansive framework, we recognize that COVID-19 and anti-Black violence are not separate, isolated phenomenon, but twin, interlocking pandemics. When these tragedies are viewed as ongoing variations of the same theme, the explicit role labor education must undertake to affect social change becomes apparent. Labor educators, organizers, and workers themselves are uniquely positioned to articulate a more expansive definition of violence and to advocate for its eradication.

In the past decade the American media landscape has been inundated with viral images of Black death. Eric Garner and George Floyd both gasping, pleading “I can’t breathe.” Freddie Gray and Layleen Polanco suffering the indignity of their cries for help going unanswered. Police exercising an “extreme indifference to the value of human life” in the botched raid that killed Breonna Taylor and in allowing Mike Brown’s body to lay uncovered in the street for hours. These violent episodes are indelibly marked in the public consciousness. In the past two years we have similarly witnessed a disease which inhibits people’s ability to breathe, while an overtaxed healthcare system and mangled social safety net are unable to address people’s pleas for assistance. We have witnessed the utter disregard for human life and dignity, as people are turned away from emergency care. While the six Black people I named died at the reckless hands of police and other carcel agents, the politics and policies around COVID are just as irresponsible. While most Americans would be remiss to consider this a violence, it is, without a doubt, exactly that.

The factor tethering both the novel coronavirus and centuries long anti-Black oppression together is simple, necropolitics. Political theorist Achille Mbembe defines the concept in his article of the same name as, “the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.” Building on Michel Foucault’s idea of “bio-power,” Mbembe argues that the exercise of sovereignty is exerting control over life, particularly the lives of those who the state has assigned lesser value to. Those who occupy the uppermost rungs of social hierarchies have greater opportunity, whereas those at the bottom walk in a death-world, “subjected to the conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead.” Under the logic of necropolitics, some people survive their encounters with police, while others do not. Some states shutter rural hospitals leaving people without care, while others expand Medicaid. In some nations, citizens have easy access to vaccines, while those in the global South are shut out due to vaccine apartheid.

Crises, like those experienced in the “long 2020,” do not create hierarchies in our society, they exacerbate them. Thus, viewing our world through the lens of crisis can be particularly didactic. If crisis is a “a process of transformation where the old system can no longer be maintained,” we find ourselves in a moment ripe for radical transformation. One where root causes and inequities are addressed, not
temporary fixes in service of neoliberal agendas. The inequities experienced the past two years are simply amplifications of the horrors that people at the bottom of gendered, racial, ethnic, nativist, and classed hierarchies survive, or at least try to, every single day.

This disposability is solidified in workplace cultures, calling meatpackers essential workers while bosses bet on how many people will get sick.\textsuperscript{11} Disposability is labor practices that do not offer workers paid time off if they fear they may be ill.\textsuperscript{12} Disposability is codified by laws like those in Oklahoma, Iowa, and Florida where penalties for hitting a protestor with your car have been removed.\textsuperscript{13} Disposable and fungible, like widgets in a machine. Workers, Black people, undocumented people, protestors, you.

This arrangement is nothing new, but the very scaffolding on which this nation is built.\textsuperscript{14} One that has prioritized profit over people, white over Black, man over woman, cis over trans, citizen over immigrant, and every intersection therein. The current crises provide a political opportunity, the cracking open of a door, for a transformative movement. But just as this order was built through culture and practices; law and customs; it must be crafted anew with the same materials, imagined in new, liberatory ways. We are not bystanders. We are the architects, brick layers, electricians, painters, and framers of the new order.

The foundational step to radical change is to name the thing that animates the system we are attempting to dismantle. VIOLENCE. This nation has long bought into our own “myth of American innocence.”\textsuperscript{15} The willful un-remembering that violence has undergirded the most lauded American historical milestones: the so-called opening of the frontier; the suppression of labor activism; the wielding of state and interpersonal violence to maintain social hierarchies. This forgetfulness so buttresses our American identity that the very government commission tasked with investigating it was shocked at violence’s “extraordinary frequency, its sheer commonplaceness in our history.”\textsuperscript{16} The ability to forget the omnipresence of bodily force in the pursuit of American objectives, once again evokes a different type of violence in and of itself.

Social scientist Johan Galtung developed an encompassing conceptualization of violence, essential to rethinking how we organize and reorganize in the wake of twin pandemics. He argues that there are three broad and interlocking categories of violence: direct, structural and cultural. Direct is the one we are most familiar with, the definition most people are comfortable identifying as violence, a person inflicting bodily harm upon another. In the past year, we are getting better at recognizing institutional violence, the systems and structures which prevent equal opportunity, equal justice. Then there is cultural violence, the most hidden. Galtung defines this as the thing “that makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong.”\textsuperscript{17}

Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd’s throat for nearly ten minutes is direct violence. The charging document commenting on the medical examiner’s preliminary findings, certifying that his autopsy “revealed no physical findings that support a diagnosis of traumatic asphyxia or strangulation” is structural violence.\textsuperscript{18} An official document co-signing his murder. Media outlets touting his peccadillos to justify police
murder is cultural violence. It is important to also note here that a conviction is not justice. A man is still dead, his family still grieving, and the assailant faces a two-decades long sentence in a horrendously violent place.

Justice cannot be served when we submit our tormentors to the same violence we experience. A commitment to non-violence must be in all of its forms, against all people.

Taken as a whole Galtung’s framework shows that violence is interlocking. An event, a process, an invariant. Death, cover-up, justification. For Black folks and many other humans at the bottom of social hierarchies, we know the outcomes of these deadly triads all too well.

One of the most interesting and understudied confluences of the COVID/racial injustice plagues is occurring in correctional facilities. Men, in the tastelessly named St. Louis Justice Center chanted “we want court dates!,” ultimately damaging property at the facility out of frustration and a desperation to be heard. A similar incident occurred in February 2021, where an independent oversight board determined that the incarcerated people engaging in unrest did so to amplify their grievances of being locked in their cells the majority of the day, isolation from family and friends, lack of COVID-19 precautions, and inordinate lengths of time awaiting trial. These men protested their perceived disposability, their position in the necropolitical ordering in both the COVID and racial-economic injustice accounting. People of color and the poor are disproportionally represented in the carceral system. On account of the pandemic, these individuals, many who could not afford bail or had court hearings suspended, languished for petty offenses that if wealthier, they could have paid the fine for or would have never been arrested in the first place. The State calculated that if they could not get their cash bail, they could at least extract free labor from these people.

Incarcerated persons in Washington, Kansas, and Louisiana also protested because of inadequate COVID protections alongside sick people being placed back in general population. That nearly all of the inmates in Alaska’s largest prison, Goose Creek, have contracted COVID-19, broadcasts loudly that there are individuals and systems who have “the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.”

These accounts are despicable and disheartening, evidence of the ways that economic, racial, gendered, and carceral violences conspire to determine who is considered disposable. Sadly, this crisis is not solely an American problem but a global one. As early as April 2020, prison uprisings had occurred in 36 countries over lack of appropriate COVID measures.

The catastrophic toll of the COVID epidemic and the widespread protests against anti-Black violence are symptoms of injustice, not the illness itself. Poverty, prejudice, and militarism, what Martin Luther King, Jr. described as the three evils, exacerbates each of these crises. If we think of the targets of major social movements in the past two decades, they almost exclusively fit under these categories of oppression. This is because each of these elements is a cause of violence. When we think of violence we must broadly recognize it as, “the cause of the difference between the potential and the
actual, between what could have been and what is. Violence is that which increases the
distance between the potential and the actual, and that which impedes the decrease of
this distance.”

By aligning ourselves with Galtung’s definition, we open our eyes and see violence
daily. Those constant indignities which launch people into the streets. Unequal wages
for equal work—a violence. Lack of potable water in Flint, Michigan—a violence. Black
women dying in childbirth at higher rates today than during slavery—a violence. Children and parents being separated at the border—a violence. While each of these
may not necessarily leave a visible scar or bruise, they all still constitute a form of
violence. That a singular perpetrator is difficult to identify or hold accountable,
makes this harm all the more insidious. Structures provide the how, allowing these
injustices to occur; cultural justifications rationalize the why these inequities occur.

To end violence, we must broaden our targets. Social justice organizations like
Movement 4 Black Lives and the Black Youth Project 100 include more expansive
understandings of violence as central planks in their platforms. They have put forth
demands which not only call for the end of direct violence against Black bodies but
also seek to end the economic, sexual, gendered, heteronormative, and anti-immigrant
violence that occurs against Black people at the intersection their identities. As a yard
sign I recently read intoned, “Matter is the Minimum.” What does a world look like
where Black lives not only matter, but thrive?

Labor educators and organizers are uniquely positioned to help carry this load.
There is a long history of organized labor protesting against police violence, espe-
cially as striking workers and the working class have frequently been the recipients
of that violence. Even last year, bus drivers around the country refused to drive
police officers in commandeered city buses, with the Amalgamated Transit Union
backing them up.

Yet in June 2020 the AFL-CIO building in Washington D.C. was vandalized and the
lobby set on fire. While the reason the fire began is unknown, one would be remiss not
to note that the 100,000 member strong International Union of Police Associations in one
of the member unions. While then AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka wrote a letter in
support of the Minneapolis protestors and acknowledged that in Ferguson six years prior,
“Our brother killed our sister’s son.” (Darren Wilson who shot and killed Michael Brown
is a member of the Fraternal Order of Police. Brown’s mother, Lesley McSpadden, is a
member of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 88). There is signi-
ficant work yet to be done to consider and connect people of color, undocumented people and
other workers experiences with violence, especially with law enforcement, once they
leave the shop floor. For many the only acceptable relationship between organized
labor and police unions, is a non-existent one.

Organized labor, educators, and workers can take specific steps to end the violences
Galtung identified.

- Direct-Mobilize labor’s considerable resources, networks, and organizing expe-
  rience to bring about the cultural and legal changes necessary to halt direct vio-
  lence and hold people accountable.
- Structural—Continue to fight for the dignity of labor, paid time off, guaranteed minimum wages, universal healthcare, and safe working conditions.
- Cultural—Flip necropolitical narratives by educating on the complexity of violence and its long history. In particular, we must internationalize our perspectives. No worker is disposable, regardless of their country of origin or location of employment.

Our cure for these twin pandemics must include the least of us wherever they may be, in our world, our nation, our community, and our organizations. By expanding our framework of what actually constitutes violence, we must also expand our actions to care for others. With a more expansive definition, we can embrace the most vulnerable, those most likely to be deemed disposable and fungible. This frame also provides a path forward by forcing us to ask ourselves in every space we inhabit: how can I undo the direct violence I/we cause, the institutional violence I/we tacitly support and the cultural violence I/we choose to ignore?

If we are concerned about violence only when rocks fly through plate glass windows or when the most unapologetic brutality is caught on camera, we are complicit in the very act of cultural violence. The outrage in these moments, and not others, exposes our threshold. This baseline for tolerable violence undergirds the notion that some people deserve the daily erasure of their human dignity caused by inadequate healthcare, lack of opportunity, and entrenched hierarchies.

The institutional and cultural violence that lay just below the surface calcified over centuries. As such, it must be chipped away bit by bit, for us by us. We must put people before property; justice before inconvenience. It is our personal responsibility to put the last, first; ensuring that no one is disposable. Violence in all its forms, ends now.

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Notes
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