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The War Without Bullets: Socio-structural Violence from a Critical Standpoint

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The War Without Bullets: Socio-structural Violence from a Critical Standpoint.

Abstract

For over a quarter of a century David and Cathy have worked in separate, parallel but mutually supportive and stimulating ways, as community psychologist and community activist respectively, to collaboratively understand and contest socio-structural violence. Each has focused in different but critically complementary ways on interconnections between poverty, inequality, unemployment and psycho-social destruction. As a community activist, drawing on her experience of popular education and radical politics, Cathy characterised what was constituted by these interconnections as manifestations of “Wars Without Bullets” waged remorselessly against structurally oppressed people, and to promote conscientization through popular education, theatre of the oppressed, film making, radical politics and accessible writing. As a community psychologist, drawing upon critical scholarship and radical praxis, David tried to develop the notion of a “War Without Bullets” in ways which would give it legitimacy within the rhetorical discursive practices of the establishment yet critically refuse individualism, psychologism and essentialism. Both sought to deploy the notion of the “War Without Bullets” for progressive change. In this presentation, the discursive frame of reference of the “War Without Bullets” will be explicated, developed and critiqued. In doing so some advantages of long term collaboration between community activism and community psychology for effective thinking and action will be explored and debated.

“Have we ever seriously asked what psychosocial processes look like from the point of view of the dominated instead of from that of the dominator?” (Ignacio Martín-Baró in Aron and Corne, 1994: 28)

“The vagaries of modern life are undoing and remaking people’s lives in new and ominous ways. The subjects of our study struggle with the possibilities and dangers of economic globalisation, the threat of endless violence and insecurity, and the new infrastructures and forms of political domination and resistance that lie in the shadows of grand claims of democratization and reform.” (Biehl, Good and Kleinman, 2007: 1)

How should socio-structural violence be understood and how should that understanding be progressively deployed? For over a quarter of a century we, Cathy and David, have attempted to work in mutually supportive and mutually stimulating, if sometimes separate and parallel ways, as community activist and community psychologist respectively, in attempts to address this question. Each of us has focused critically, albeit in different ways, on interconnections between material poverty, societal inequality, socio-economic policy and psycho-social destruction in attempts to understand and contest socio-structural violence.

The standpoint from which this paper is written is fundamentally one of community praxis, a standpoint

from which we seek to understand and contest both how societal constructions (such as unemployment, psychologically toxic labour market entrapment, poverty, inequality, disabling practices, psy-pharmacology, gendered, heterosexist and racist oppression, etc.) immiserate, destroy and obliterate, and to understand and challenge oppressive forms of psychology; to de-construct, de-legitimise and de-ideologise the socio-political processes through which oppressive ‘psy’ claims are given the status of ‘knowledge’ or ‘truth’; to render transparent and accountable the subjective, material, institutional, societal, political and ideological ‘psy’ interests served by what is, and what is not, thought, said and done by all relevant subjects; to engage in progressive social action interconnected to and simultaneous with emancipatory power-of knowledge construction and legitimation and profound radical reflexivity; and to facilitate emancipatory process and outcome through progressive redistribution of social power, rather than collude with, or contribute to, reactionary notions of power as the property of an individual.

As a community activist, informed by her reading of popular education, community activism and radical politics, Cathy has - for over quarter of a century - witnessed each and every day a ‘War Without Bullets’ being waged remorselessly against herself and other structurally oppressed people: the poor, the ill, the unemployed, the disabled, the stigmatised, the

marginalised and the simply different. Cathy lives in one of the most notorious public housing schemes in Europe (Easterhouse, Glasgow) which is characterised by what the establishment refers to as multiple deprivation in the form of unemployment, poverty, substandard housing, etc. and which has a fearsome reputation for gang violence. However, we both prefer to draw attention to socio-structural, political, ideological and psychological violence being directed towards the people of Easterhouse, by means of policies which manufacture unemployment, inequality, material poverty, socio-economic apartheid, ghetto township status, etc. and knowledges which position the consequences of socio-structural violence as the fault of those at whom the violence is being directed.

Cathy has facilitated tenants' group activism, promoted popular education, deployed the theatre of the oppressed, collaborated in award-winning documentary cinema, accepted international speaking engagements and written powerful accessible prose exposing and contesting socio-structural violence.

Cathy's struggle began in 1985 when she had felt so powerless to change the cruel reality facing her children and other people in her own community that she became more afraid of living than of dying. Although her children were bouncing with health when they were born, as soon as Cathy brought them home from hospital to her freezing-cold damp flat, her life became a constant battle for survival between her family and the fungus family. Then, when Britain was changed from an industrial to a money-market economy, Cathy's family were among the millions of working people deemed surplus to the requirements of capitalism who were thrown onto the unemployed-scrap-heap and forced to subsist on welfare. Whilst Mrs. Thatcher kept talking about individual choice, the real choice Cathy had to make was between feeding her hungry children or feeding her hungry fuel meter.

When Cathy joined her community's fight for justice she started to witness human suffering and hardship on a scale which she never thought she would see in her lifetime, except perhaps in time of war. Then she realised that there actually really was a war going on, only this war was not being fought with tanks, bombs or bullets: this War Without Bullets was a social, economic, psychological and propaganda war against the poor: a war without bullets.

As a research psychologist, informed by his reading of critical theory, community psychology and

emancipatory pedagogy, David has - for over quarter of a century - documented the everyday socio-structural violence which is unemployment and its roles in socially constituting misery, injustice and the destruction of individuals, families and communities. David has drawn attention to the gigantic numbers of people, globally, destructively caught up in unemployment; to the continued deleterious impact of unemployment even after re-employment; to the psychologically corrosive impact of the anticipation of unemployment; to the toxicity of unemployment for family members of unemployed people including their babies and children; to the oppressive impact of unemployment even on the non-unemployed people in communities blighted by mass unemployment; and to how participation in the so-called flexible labour market, with its generation of temporary, part-time, insecure, non-unionised, psychologically destructive sub-employment, is for many as psychologically toxic as unemployment.

Moreover, David has argued that the tsunami of misery, maiming and mortality which is the War Without Bullets has continued throughout Labour as well as Conservative government administrations in England and has been used as an instrument of economic and social control to control inflation. Economists even have an acronym, NAIRU (Non Accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment) referring to the level of unemployment necessary to control inflation - and to discipline the working poor; and that mass unemployment serves the interests of the status quo in a range of ways because unemployment is constructed to be a condition so undesirable that no-one wishes to become unemployed which all unemployed people wish to leave as soon as possible. Mass, involuntary, unemployment socially constituted to be personally and socially destructive, guarantees there are potential workers willing to do the most boring, dead end, underpaid, temporary, insecure, unpleasant jobs (i.e. the ones being created in the so-called flexible labour market), functioning effectively as an incomes policy, because it guarantees that there are unemployed people competing for the jobs of the employed, thus facilitating employers in reducing wages and working conditions. Unemployment serves the interests of the status quo better to the extent that there are far fewer jobs than potential workers seeking them; that unemployed people are poverty stricken and have to go through intrusive and degrading rituals to get the pittance they get to keep them healthy enough to compete for work but not comfortable enough to have a viable alternative life style; that unemployment is a stigmatised condition

with orchestrated campaigns by the media and politicians reinforcing the view that unemployed people are feckless, anti-social idlers living a life of luxury at taxpayers' expense, fraudulently claiming income and two-timing the system; that unemployed people are associated with criminality through media reports of mentioning whenever criminals were unemployed; and crucially in connection with the psychological War Without Bullets, that unemployment is demonstrated to 'cause' mental ill health whilst mental illness is simultaneously socially constructed as frightening, dangerous and deviant and whilst psychologists promote 'employability', active labour market policies and individualistic cognitive interventions to 'solve' unemployment.

Catastrophic as the pogrom on the poor achieved through neo-liberal labour markets is, David has argued that the pathogenic labour market characteristic of contemporary post-industrial societies is only one of many powerful mechanisms through which 'class-cleansing' socio-structural violence is accomplished under capitalism in the 21st century. Other mechanisms include: manufactured poverty and inequality; disabling practices; class, gender and white privilege.

Cathy's rhetoric and David's rhetoric are sometimes far apart in style but are essentially in agreement. For example, whilst Cathy observes that few of her class mates from primary school are still alive, David draws attention to the Final Report of the World Health Organisation Commission on Social Determinants of Health ([Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health equity through action on the social determinants of health](#) (WHO, 2008), which makes it clear (in table 2.1) that for men life expectancy in one of the poorer parts of Glasgow (the city where Cathy lives) is at 54 years, nearly 3 decades shorter than life expectancy in one of the richer areas of Glasgow, only a few short distance away.

Whilst Cathy writes that "the wealth in this country is not trickling down from the rich but gushing up from the poor sods like us" (McCormack, 2009: 52), David quotes Iris Marion Young (1988) that: "The injustice of class division does not consist only in the fact that some people have great wealth whilst most people have little and some are severely deprived. The theory of exploitation shows that this relation of power and inequality is produced and reproduced through a systematic process in which the energies of the have-nots are continuously expended to maintain

and augment the power, status and wealth of the haves".

Whilst Cathy writes: "our children . . . see that the people with the knowledge are the cause of their frustrations" (McCormack, 2009: 132), David argues that psychology (and the associated wider and deeper set of knowledges, practices, technical processes and discourses which constitute the 'psy-complex') is increasingly clearly part of the problem and that, despite rhetorics of social justice, empowerment etc., community psychology is as ideologically problematic as any other manifestation of 'psy'.

Whilst Cathy (along with allies) "began a popular education group in Easterhouse, the Popular Democracy Education Resource Centre", and became involved in setting up the Scottish Popular Education Forum whose "aim was to bring about social change using popular education and try to build a social movement" (McCormack, 2009: 137), David has argued for the merits of 'un-teaching', critical pedagogy and praxis.

Positioning the carnage in our communities as a War Without Bullets may suggest the posing of new questions and answers:

Q: Who are the enemy?

A: The dead, wounded and traumatised are disproportionately amongst the most powerless who as non-producers and non-consumers are surplus to contemporary market requirements. Mortality, morbidity and misery are greater the lower down the socio-occupational-class-poverty-power hierarchy one goes and however one constructs it: by employment status, wealth indicators, inequality, educational level etc. (which are all proxies for relative powerlessness).

Q: What are the means of waging war?

A: The 'Weapons of Mass Demoralisation' (WMD) deployed include processes which generate psychologically toxic: inequality; poverty; inequality; unemployment; flexible labour market (insecure, unsatisfying, poorly paid, poor quality, stressful jobs); substandard or insufficient housing; stigma; social apartheid and mis-education for critical illiteracy. If this was a 'War With Bullets', this weaponry would be banned under the Geneva Convention.

Q: What is the scale of the War Without Bullets?

A: All out - the chances of surviving the policy minefields in parts of the world are like the chances of walking blindfold through in a war zone

Q: What is the goal of the war without bullets?

A: Full spectrum dominance¹ through full spectrum governmentality.

Q: What are weapons of resistance?

A: Critique; answering back; subversion; solidarity; conscientization; praxis.

Q: From whom can we learn - where has resistance been effective?

A: De-colonisers², emancipatory disability activists, community activists; critical theorists; feminists;

¹ "The overarching focus of this vision is full spectrum dominance—achieved through the interdependent application of dominant manoeuvre, precision engagement, focused logistics, and full dimensional protection. Attaining that goal requires the steady infusion of new technology and modernization and replacement of equipment. However, material superiority alone is not sufficient. Of greater importance is the development of doctrine, organizations, training and education, leaders, and people that effectively take advantage of the technology . . . the creation of a force that is dominant across the full spectrum of military operations—persuasive in peace, decisive in war, preeminent in any form of conflict" (http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/jfq_pubs/1225.pdf).

² "Many indigenous communities continue to live within political and social conditions that perpetuate extreme levels of poverty, chronic ill health and poor educational opportunities. Their children may be removed forcibly from their care, 'adopted' or institutionalized. The adults may be as addicted to alcohol as their children are to glue, they may live in destructive relationships which are formed and shaped by their impoverished material conditions and structured by politically oppressive regimes. While they live like this they are constantly fed messages about their worthlessness, laziness, dependence and lack of higher order human qualities. This applies as much to indigenous communities in First World nations as it does to indigenous communities in developing countries. Within these sorts of social realities, questions of

queer theorists; trades unionists; anti-capitalists; anti-globalisation activists; popular educators; progressive journalists; anti-imperial intellectuals . . . anyone who is not complaint in the face of the War Without Bullets.

Q: Who is waging the War Without Bullets?

A: The War Without Bullets is not just a civil war of the 'higher' classes against the 'lower', or a war of the 'State' against sub-groups of its citizens; and whilst a War Without Bullets, a briefcase war, involves people drafting and enacting policy, relaying problematic discourses, the relays of structural oppression, including: politicians, policy makers; bureaucrats; researchers; teachers; lecturers; psychiatrists; psychologists; therapists; counsellors; social workers; journalists; street level bureaucrats, etc., from a critical standpoint, it is essential not to default back to psychologism or individualism by positioning the War Without Bullets as being intentionally waged by malevolent individual agents. As Iris Marion Young put it: 'oppression' designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power intends to keep them down, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society.'" (Young, 1988: 272).

We are committed to working, collectively with others, to uncover the apparatuses, in the Foucauldian sense, composed of interconnections of discourses, institutions, scientific statements, regulations, practices etc., which constitute 'chronic socio-structural violence' and through which the ongoing transfer of powers from have-nots to haves, from poor to rich, from lower class to middle is accomplished in neo-liberal societies.

imperialism and the effects of colonization may seem to be merely academic; sheer physical survival is far more pressing. The problem is that constant efforts by governments, states, societies and institutions to deny the historical formations of such conditions have simultaneously denied our claims to humanity, to having a history, and to all sense of hope. To acquiesce is to lose ourselves entirely and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us. To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves. The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices – all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope" (Smith, 1999: 4).

Some of the most sophisticated, contemporary, post-Foucauldian, work on subjectivity is currently being done by anthropologists and ethnographers like Joao Biehl (2005) who are extending and deepening our understanding of the process of subjectification, the genealogy of the subject, by painstaking investigation into “the ways in which inner processes are reshaped amid economic and political reforms, violence, and social suffering” (Biehl, Good and Kleinman, 2007). From this perspective, the 'subjectivity of the unemployed' is both the means and the outcome of the construction, regulation and destruction of the unemployed person, accomplished through apparatuses (in the Foucauldian sense) of interlocking discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements (including – of course - ones produced by community psychologists), philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions functioning to produce governmentality working in the interests of the neo-liberal social order. Rather than agency being positioned as restricted by depowering contextual structures, agency restriction is now positioned as a dynamic manifestation of violent auto-subjugation through the infolding of discursive exteriority.

The contemporary world is replete with problematic subjectification, the psychological War Without Bullets, and we believe that things are swiftly going from bad to worse. The question for us is not whether socio-structural violence characterises contemporary Western societies but through which apparatuses socio-structural violence is achieved in

particular domains and its roles in those domains in rendering people governable through processes of violent subjectification.

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