**Trauma, History and the Legacies of Colonial Violence**

As a scholar who works on colonial violence – my ISRF project (2017-18) looked at the ways in which torture became systematised as a technology of colonial rule in India – I am troubled by the legacies of what I have termed the “unworlding violence” of colonialism. What I mean, by this term, is the ways in which colonialism undid the worlds of the colonised, whether through clearly visible forms of violence perpetrated by colonial regimes, such as conquest, war, or genocide, or the less visible or hidden forms of violence, such as structural or symbolic violence – i.e. the theft of land or natural resources, the decimation of economic, social and political systems, or the myriad ways in which colonised peoples were dehumanised and their cultures, indeed their very sense of self, devalued. I am not suggesting that resistance to such forms of unworlding violence is impossible, or that colonialism transformed all members of colonised populations into victims. But if colonialism entailed a process of unmaking or unworlding, and trauma is an experience of such a process, I would like to ask if we can talk about the legacies of colonial violence in terms of trauma, or to locate or recuperate the traumatic legacies of colonial violence? Since colonialism cannot be understood in terms of a single, violent event, like the Holocaust, and innumerable questions remain as to whether trauma studies can be decolonised – not to mention that postcolonial states continue, like their colonial predecessors, to subsume segments of their populations to what the philosopher Giorgio Agamben terms bare life, or life that can be taken with impunity – such a task may, in fact, be impossible. The millions of individuals reduced to bare life in postcolonial contexts are marked, in other words, not only by the traumas experienced by their colonised forbears, but by traumas that they have directly experienced. How, then, can we trace the legacies of colonial violence in the postcolony, or read the violence in which subaltern lives are enmeshed as a product not just of contemporary traumas, but of the intermingling of those between the present and the past – of, in other words, multiple and intersecting processes of unworlding?

A good place to begin, I would argue, is the domestic sphere, since it is not only the space in which such violence arguably has its most profound impact but is central to processes of reworlding. For the colonised the importance of preserving – or, rather, re-inventing or transforming – the domestic sphere has been well documented by scholars of colonialism. But the ways in which the colonised turn the anger and frustration engendered in them by colonialism against their own peoples, in what the Martiniqan psychiatrist, philosopher and revolutionary Frantz Fanon has termed a process of “collective autodestruction”, has not. For the colonised violence *as a response* to the unmaking of the world operates, according to Fanon, as an assertion of agency that serves to restore self-respect and, with it, the sense that nothing has changed; that history, in other words, continues. It therefore functions as a valuable tool in world making or reworlding. Such processes of reworlding are, of course, by no means unique to the colonial era; they are instead a means through which people who are reduced to bare life attempt to negate such a status. To demonstrate what I mean by such “reworlding” violence and how we might interpret its significance I will analyse a series of horrific murders, acts of “collective autodestruction”, that took place in New Delhi in the early 2000s, before considering what such violence might reveal about the legacies of colonial violence.

In 2006, the partial remains of a young woman and sixteen children were found in a ditch behind the house of wealthy businessman Moninder Singh Pandher in Noida, on the New Delhi border. Although migrant labourers living in Nithari, a nearby slum, had reported the disappearance of 38 children to the local police over the previous two years, no investigations had ensued – standard practice in a country in which as many as 96,000 children a year go “missing”. It was only with the discovery of a severed hand that the police were forced to investigate, and Pandher’s servant, Surnder Koli, was eventually convicted of murder. A rural migrant whose pregnant wife and small daughter still lived in the small town from which he came, in working for Pandher Koli had been plunged into a world of wealth, exploitation and debauchery; Pandher often, according to Koli, spent the night with two or three prostitutes in his bed. Such sights, Koli later claimed, made him not only crave sex, but to want to eat the young women that he saw. He admitted to not only murdering and raping his victims (including one of the prostitutes who frequently served Pandher), but to committing necrophilia with them before cutting them up and consuming some of their organs.

The horrific incidents at Nithari serve, as Rana Dasgupta argues in *Capital: The Eruption of Delhi*, his searing and insightful study of contemporary Delhi, both as an allegory of contemporary India, in which the poor are completely dehumanised and their bodies are “consumed” by the rich, as well as of globalisation. For the broken and half-starved bodies of India’s poor, who have been forced to flee the countryside in the face of state-engineered land grabs, environmental decimation and the changing economics of agriculture have provided the desperate labour pool from which the system of global capitalism can draw. Millions of refugees have fled the decimation of the Indian countryside to Delhi since the onset of India’s economic liberalisation in 1991, providing a flood of cheap and exploitable labour to fuel the accumulation of middle-class wealth. In the face of such a glut of bodies and a state that denies them existence, let alone rights, factory owners could pay virtually nothing and demand inhuman levels of toil, while treating the bodies that laboured so relentlessly for them as disposable, and therefore without need of necessities such as habitation or protective clothing.

The Nithari killings reveal the stark brutality of such structural violence. The wealth that Moninder Singh Pandher used to buy the labour of men like Koli and the bodies of poor women came, in part, from his dealerships in earth-moving equipment – equipment that, significantly, served to usurp the farmland of the poor and destroy their homes in order to make way for houses and malls for India’s elites. Pandher’s wealth also made him privy to the basic amenities of modern life that the inhabitants of Nithari, just a few metres away, were denied. It ensured, furthermore, that he served to exist in the eyes of the state, whereas the migrant population of Nithari, denied voting rights, did not. In light of the brutal disregard for the lives of the poor in India we can therefore see that Koli’s response to the violence that he both experienced and witnessed was not to abolish the privileges of the rich, but to usurp their power to, quite literally, consume the poor.

The experiences of both Koli and his victims are indicative, therefore, of the traumatic, unworlding and long-term impact that structural forms of violence can have on individuals and societies. So, too, are the experiences of the parents of Koli’s victims. For when rumours began to circulate that the government was going to give five lakhs (roughly £5, 500) compensation for every murdered child, the parents informed the psychologist who conducted a grief session with them that if they had known they would receive such a sum for a dead child they would have sent two children to be killed. Dasgupta quotes the psychologist who conducted the grief session reflecting that “You think . . . that no suffering can be so great as that of a parent who has lost a child. But there are things that are even worse, forms of suffering so great that they harden people even to the death of their children. And you can see them everywhere in this country”.

But what are we actually “seeing”, and what, if anything, can such tremendous forms of suffering reveal about not just the postcolonial present, but the colonial past? If we understand violence, as the postcolonial theorist Robert Young has argued, less as an act in the present than as a phenomenon with a history that repeats itself, then we need to view the traumas of Koli’s victims, not to mention those of Koli himself, as a deferred re-experiencing of the traumatic unworlding of colonial violence. Doing so may make possible, in the trauma scholar Cathy Caruth’s words, a history that is “no longer straightforwardly referential . . . to arise where *immediate understanding* may not”. Focusing on the perpetrators of reworlding violence, such as Koli, may prove particularly fruitful for such a project. For while according to the colonisers the purported criminality of the colonised was a sign that they were naturally impulsive, aggressive, and mentally weak it was colonialism that subjected the colonised to tensions so great they were driven, as Fanon argues, to murder and other forms of reworlding violence. If the colonial context necessitates a rethinking of the causes of criminality, then understanding postcolonial trauma requires that we rethink the historical genealogies of the production of perpetrators like Koli – perpetrators who have not only been reduced to bare life but whose criminalisation continues, as in the colonial era, to be part of the process of managing populations and of reducing them to bare life.