

REASON AND VIOLENCE:
MORE THAN A FALSE ANTITHESIS—
A MECHANISM OF PATRIARCHAL POWER

Geraldine Finn

The following two commentaries were presented as part of a day-long interdisciplinary feminist session on REASON AND VIOLENCE: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES held during the Learned Societies' Meetings at Ottawa University, June 9, 1982. The object of this session was to bring together feminists from across the various disciplines—psychology, sociology, politics, biology, history, etc.—to explore the connection between "reason" as traditionally interpreted and "violence" as traditionally practised. Designated speakers were asked to reflect upon what they had learned about "reason" in their efforts to theorize and/or combat that violence. The selection of speakers and topics was informed by my own conviction that reason is an instrument of violence, of specifically male violence, and not its antithesis as we are often told, and by my need to test this hypothesis against the 'evidence'. What follows is a summary of my introductory comments to the session which indicate how this thesis might be defended.

It is commonly assumed though seldom actually argued that reason and violence are antithetical or mutually exclusive. It is further assumed though, again, rarely argued that reason is good (right and desirable) and violence bad (wrong and undesirable).¹ Those who challenge this presumed antithesis usually do so by pointing out that not all violence deserves to be dismissed as irrational and that in some circumstances the most rational thing to do is to act (or more commonly, to react) violently. In such cases (for example, in cases of self-defense), it would be contrary to reason to refrain from violence.

This weakening of the antithesis affects only one of the terms of the presumed polarization, however, by conceding that violence is not always exclusive of reason. The *key presumption* of the antithesis, that reason *per se* is right and its right to rule is sovereign, remains unchallenged.

It is rarely argued that reason itself may be a source of violence—and when it is, it is always presumed that there has been an historical 'falling away' from a more primordial and pristine 'higher' reason (which would necessarily exclude violence) to a 'lesser' instrumental or technical rationality, for example, which is the real root of the violence perpetrated in reason's name.² I know of no critique which suggests that *reason itself* and not just its historical forms and deviations may be a source of violence. It seems that Reason, like Science and the Family, is sacrosanct; an *a priori* good thing which in itself can only benefit humanity—in spite of what would appear to be a wealth of evidence to the contrary. Any

REASON AND VIOLENCE

violence associated with Reason, like the violence associated with Science and the Family (1 in 10 wives in Canada battered, 1 in 4 girls incestuously assaulted) is attributed, again *a priori* to particular and supposedly accidental features of an historical form of Reason, Science or the Family, and never to Reason, Science or the Family itself.

I maintain, by contrast, that Reason itself is constitutively and not accidentally violent,³ and that it is neither good nor even neutral (i.e. that its value depends on its use), but like Science and the Family it is a constitutive part of a political ideology (a theory and a practice) and apparatus of violence which is used to keep subordinates in their place in a given social and economic order. I believe, furthermore, that this Reason is most fundamentally an instrument of specifically *male* power and violence, constructed in the image of men and rooted in a peculiarly male experience of powerlessness and alienation, and that it is, perhaps first and foremost, an instrument of their particular alienation of women.

These are large claims and I cannot pretend to defend them adequately in the space of these few pages. What I will do, however, is indicate the *general* direction of my arguments and some of the particular details by which it might be supported.

First, no one can really say what Reason is.⁴ But whatever it is, (or is said to be) it is constituted in discourse and within that discourse has always been characterized as follows: as that by which we arrive at *Truth*; as that which always has its *Other* (what Reason is always contingent upon what it is *not*: it is not faith, for example, or emotion, or personal, or particular); as in some sense a function or faculty of the *mind*. These three characteristics of Reason, vague as they may be, are sufficient to render Reason both political and politically inaccessible (invisible, indefinable, intractable) and are the root of Reason's enormous power and Reason's violence. This is because, whatever it is (whatever precise content or denotation is attributed to Reason at any given moment in history) Reason is always exclusive and authoritarian, polarizing and law-making. *It always has its Other* over which it is sovereign, which it is entitled to control or destroy as circumstances demand. This is why I believe Reason to be constitutively violent.

Within the discourse of Reason, Reason as the locus of Truth plays the part of God. It is both the Author and Arbiter of the objective order of the world and of our knowledge of it, on the assumption that there is a single correctness about the world and Reason proves our sole access to it. As the norm of knowledge (i.e. as God) Reason is law-making and law-preserving. But law, as we learned from Walter Benjamin,⁵ is itself "an immediate manifestation of violence" in that violence is a necessary condition of its possibility. (How we 'define' violence will be considered later in this paper; the sense in which it is being used until then should be clear from the context.) For law is established and maintained only through force: the forced repression of dissent, the forced submission of dissenters. And indeed we have all been forced into 'acknowledging' the various (and often changing) 'truths of Reason': by failure, discipline, humiliation or expulsion in our pursuit of knowledge in academia; by threats of hell and damnation in

GERALDINE FINN

our pursuit of goodness in religions; by hospitalization, alienation or incarceration in our pursuit of social and psychological health in our 'private' family and social lives; by unemployment and homelessness in our pursuit of a living in our 'public' and 'productive' lives; by prison, death or exile in our pursuit of justice and self-determination in our 'political' lives—and so forth.

Again, if Reason is Truth then that which is not Reason (and there is always something which is not Reason, for Reason is essentially oppositional—it would be nothing were it not for that to which it is opposed) is False and a candidate for elimination or repression.⁶ Since Reason itself has no real referent (or content) and is actually constituted as that which it is not, anything can be opposed to Reason depending on what it is politically expedient for the ruling-class spokesmen (sic.) of Reason (i.e. of Law) to discredit, control or repress at the time—nature, experience (both 'subjective' and 'objective'), faith, emotion, intuition, instinct—and even forms of Reason itself re-named and re-classified as 'rationalism', 'scientism', 'instrumentalism', 'objectivism', 'subjectivism' and so forth. For Reason, if it is Right is necessarily exclusive: of certain knowledges and certain subjectivities. It disqualifies most often knowledge acquired from particular practice and concrete everyday experience (i.e. *knowledge available to everyone*) at the same time as it diminishes those subjects who can only speak from these positions—historically women and those men who do physical labour—those who service a ruling-class who claim to 'know' and 'rule' by virtue of their superior Reason miraculously untarnished by the 'personal', 'material', 'practical' or 'emotional' constraints which disqualify those over whom they rule from both knowledge and the good life.⁷

Thus Reason serves the ideological (always political) purpose of *ruling-out* as ill-founded and irrational and therefore untrue the only knowledge available to members of certain social classes (the dominated). Since knowledge is power and truth a knowledge-effect i.e. an effect of power, the discourse of Reason effectively deprives members of these classes of social power and maintains and reproduces its concentration in the hands of a ruling and leisured élite.⁸ Immediate truths which originate in and are verified by the actual practice of life are, along with those with access to them, ruled out of the court of Reason. They are in turn obfuscated, discredited and repressed (as subjective, particular, and unverifiable, for example) in the name of a transcendent Reason whose 'eternal' categories of thought are sanctified as sovereign.⁹

The identification of Reason with the Mind reinforces this polarization which I maintain is implicit in and necessary to the discourse of Reason, and reproduces it as a feature of reality itself. At its most primitive the dualism presumed by the discourse of Reason consists in the division of human beings into minds and bodies and the simultaneous association of Reason (Truth and Right) with the former.¹⁰ It is man's (sic.) Mind or Reason we are told which distinguishes him from the rest of the natural world and entitles him to sovereignty over it.¹¹ Knowledge is a function of the Mind and knower and known belong to different orders of being. Man, the Mind, is the subject who knows; Nature, mere matter, the object known. The knower is active, the known passive. The knower is

REASON AND VIOLENCE

universal, the known 'merely' particular. This fundamental dualism—part and parcel of the discourse of Reason—has generated a whole battery of dichotomies which are constitutive of male-stream thought at all levels—the political, economic, historical, scientific or whatever—the most common of these being the supposed oppositions between: mind and body, reason and emotion, culture and nature, universal and particular, abstract and concrete, sacred and profane, divine and mundane, absolute and relative, subject and object, order and disorder, real and apparent, self and other, light and dark, good and bad, true and false, and of course, male and female.

I maintain that this division of reality is peculiarly and not accidentally male. It serves peculiarly male needs for a certain kind of power, needs which women do not experience as a result of their more immediate and concrete relationship to the species by way of their reproductive activity. These dualisms express at the ideological level men's experienced alienation from species continuity, creativity and community at the basic material level of their relationship to reproduction—from which they are essentially excluded. Consequently, male thought emphasises difference, separation, opposition, polarity and conflict in its discourse about the world. For that is indeed how men experience their relationship to species continuity, creativity, community and control: they are alienated from it. At the same time male thought expresses men's desire for a unity, continuity and community they do not immediately experience in their everyday lives, in its persistent aspiration to 'oneness': to the universal, absolute, eternal and unasailable knowledge and subjectivity of a transcendent and impersonal Reason.¹³

The dualism of male-stream thought, of which the discourse of Reason is a powerful and telling example¹⁴ serves men's interests by mediating ideologically¹⁵ their experienced alienation from the species. But it does so at the expense of women's lives. For women are men's Other; we therefore belong to that pole of the system of dichotomies which requires control and domination by the other pole consisting of Reason and Men. This identification of women with the irrational and inhuman pole of the mind/matter dichotomy persists to this day and serves to disqualify female knowledge *a priori* whenever it fails to conform to the norms and practices of male-stream rationality.

Representing the world in dualistic terms allows the knower to treat not only nature but also people as objects and to take no kind of responsibility for the uses and direction of his knowledge—which is declared Rational, and therefore impersonal and objective.¹⁶ It has enabled men, the knowers, to falsely abstract themselves from nature, as if they were not themselves historical, material, organic and social beings. This abstraction of men from the rest of nature, and from women, is the root at one and the same time of both their *power*, for they can be ruthless with others with whom they feel no identification, and their alienation, from the world, each other and themselves. It is also a measure of their freedom, and, for them, of their 'humanity'; for the more they control the more free they think they are. But the more free they are in this sense, the more alienated they are from their real material roots in nature and intersubjectivity. Within the discourse of Reason, freedom and alienation are far from being anti-

GERALDINE FINN

theses: they are two sides of the same coin—gains in freedom perceived as control over nature only increase the alienation they are presumed to remedy.¹⁷

Reason and violence are far from antithetical, therefore. On the contrary, Reason is constitutively violent, first because it is Right and therefore necessarily coercive, and secondly because it is most essentially part of a mechanism of power.

But what is this violence to which Reason is conventionally opposed? Just as there is "no universally agreed or uniquely correct sense of Reason"¹⁸, so, it must be acknowledged, there is no universally agreed on or uniquely correct sense of violence. I follow Robert Paul Wolff's example¹⁹ here in maintaining that what is perceived and conceived as violence varies according to expectations and to one's vital interests. When my peripheral interests are at stake anything in excess of moderate force from others, whether mental or physical, will be perceived as violent, while I am inclined to forget that other parties to the dispute may find their primary interests challenged and thus have a different view of what is and is not violent. (Compare the 'violence' of a husband's response to a scratch on the fender of 'his' car, with the 'violence' of a wife's response to a muddy footprint on the kitchen floor.) Basically, then, the concept of violence, like Reason" serves as a rhetorical device for proscribing those political uses of force which one considers inimical to one's central interests".²⁰

The denunciation of physical force within the discourse of Reason, therefore, as irrational, immoral and illegitimate as a way of resolving conflict, enforcing decisions or achieving ends, serves an ideological function of ruling out the only instrument of power available to those social classes whose subordination it ensures and relies on. It is always *those who hold power*, that is, those who have the ability (the social power) to enforce decisions, who insist on the correctness of 'rational methods' (husbands, fathers, university directors, department chairmen, property owners, teachers, doctors, etc.) for settling disputes and challenges to the *status quo*; who declare the use of physical force (though not the use of mental coercion, for that is a mechanism of *their* power and therefore serves their vital interests) to be violent and therefore irrational and inappropriate. (Except, of course, when it is named 'counter-violence' as is done in the cases of prisons and asylums—more 'rational' methods of social control.) This should not surprise us, for physical force is a means to power, ultimately that upon which all power, even the 'legitimate', is based; and argument is not. Physical force must therefore be suppressed if present power structures are to be preserved.²¹ Argument, on the other hand, is to be encouraged for it poses no direct threat to the ruling order. It merely postpones change indefinitely, distracting opposition, while maintaining prevailing power relations.

The appeal to argument, 'rational methods' and Reason should be seen for what it is: an essentially *defensive* tactic i.e. a tactic of those who are defending their power. For they are not, in their turn, required to support their position or their stipulation against physical force with reasons. Their characterization of some forms of force as *physical*, and others as not; of physical force as *violent*, and others as not (e.g. the force of argument, the force of law); of violence as

REASON AND VIOLENCE

exclusive of Reason; of Reason as right and therefore the only permissible means to social ends . . . All these are *a priori* unsupported themselves by 'rational argument'—for they cannot be. Their legitimacy and authority, like all legitimacy and authority, is founded in *Rule* not Reason, *Force* not argument and *Power* not persuasion. Far from being the "precise opposite of power and violence" as Popper proclaims, Reason is its equivalent, and one of the most effective means of its exercise and mystification.

C.E.G.E.P. de l'outaouais

Notes

1. Popper in his 1947 address "Utopia and Violence" reprinted in *Conjectures and Refutations*, 1963, voices these assumptions about reason. "I am a rationalist" he says, "because I see in the attitude of reasonableness the only alternative to violence"... "I believe that we can avoid violence only in so far as we practice this attitude of reasonableness when dealing with one another . . . I choose rationalism because I hate violence". "Reason is for him the precise opposite of an instrument of power and violence; he sees it as a means by which these may be tamed". In "Reason and Revolution", in *Archiv. Europ. Social*, XI, 1970, he reaffirms this commitment claiming that "reason is the only alternative to violence so far discovered". For a discussion of Popper's views see Roy Edgley, "Reason and Violence" in Korner, *Practical Reason*.
2. I am thinking here, of course, of the Frankfurt School of thought.
3. I also believe that Science and the Family are constitutively and not accidentally violent. For a discussion of this claim with respect to Science see my "Women and the Ideology of Science", in *Our Generation*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring, 1982.
4. "There is no universally agreed or uniquely correct sense of reason", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards.
5. See "On Violence" in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections, Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, 1968, from which the subsequent quotation was taken.
6. Reason rarely eliminates that which it is not for it usually requires the emotion (the caring of women for example) or the physical strengths and skills of others (the labour of colonized people for example), which it denounces and alienates from itself, in order to be at all. (C.f. the Master—Slave relationship in Hegel and de Beauvoir's elaboration of it in *The Second Sex*).
7. Historically, Reason emerged as the norm and law of knowledge, truth and right around the time of Pythagoras when the separation of knowledge and philosophy from the techniques of production kept pace with the rise of slavery and an increasing contempt for manual work. "It was found extraordinarily fortunate that the secret constitution of things should reveal, not to those who manipulated them, not to those who worked with fire, but to those who drew patterns on the sand." Indeed, it becomes difficult to hold any other view of the origin of knowledge—that knowledge could be arrived at by interrogating nature directly, for example—"when all the implements and processes by which nature is made to obey man's will" (sic.) have become the province of slaves, subordinates and social inferiors, like women. See Benjamin Farrington, *Greek Science*, from which these quotations were taken.

GERALDINE FINN

8. This is Foucault's language. See his *Power/Knowledge*, for example, published recently by Pantheon Books. The ideas in this paragraph are explored more fully in my paper on "Women and the Ideology of Science" cited above.
9. Categories are like definitions. They oblige us to represent reality in predetermined ways and exclude us from knowledge and/or rationality (and power, of course) when we do not. They dictate unchanging patterns of both natural and cognitive events and processes and they fix the truth—and therefore power. For a further critique of categories and definitions see "Women and the Ideology of Science", op. cit..
10. It is a historical question, whether the discourse of Reason coincided with the emergence of dualistic thinking. As far as I can tell it did—in the history of 'Western' thought both appear along with Pythagorean idealism. But this point requires further consolidation.
11. Just as God, the Almighty Mind or Logos of the world gets his entitlement to rule over Man from His supposedly superior Rationality, uncontaminated as it is by any contact with the flesh or matter of any kind.
12. For a thorough and truly ovarian analysis of the thesis proposed here see Mary O'Brien's *The Politics of Reproduction*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.
13. It is, in fact, an aspiration of Godliness which the existentialists, in particular Sartre, have documented so well and transformed into a metaphysics.
14. It seems that all male thought is dualistic, including mythological thought. The extension of this analysis to so-called "pre-rational" or "pre-scientific" thought remains to be done. I am inclined to think that Reason replaced the Phallus as the talisman of men's difference and power, as a symbol and expression of their alienation, and as an instrument of their control over women, nature and progeny. But again, this hypothesis requires further consolidation.
15. I use the term "ideology" here very much in Althusser's sense of the term whereby ideology is an apparatus of power which alludes to reality in an illusory way. Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of "subjects" to the world and each other, but it can be decoded to reveal the truth it is mystifying and reifying and which is its condition of possibility.
16. I am paraphrasing Margaret Benston here, see her "Feminism and the Critique of Scientific Method" in *Feminism in Canada: From Pressure to Politics*, ed. by Angela Miles and Geraldine Finn, forthcoming from Black Rose Books.
17. This point is dealt with more fully in my paper on "Women and the Ideology of Science" op. cit. where it is extended to include a critique of Humanism.
18. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards.
19. Robert Paul Wolff, "On Violence", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66,1969.
20. Wolff, op. cit. p.613
21. Not only physical force of course. The power of emotion and feeling must also be discredited for the holders of power are human after all and powerful emotions as well as physical force are also capable of rocking the boat.