

For a sociology of reconciliation and conflict: An ascending ethic of reconciliation?

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Ari Sitas locates the potential for synthesizing a number of alternative formulations in terms of structures of thought, political, ideological and social movements, which have the potential of uniting as a global force for change, the ethic of reconciliation. His reading of the global setting is that there exists a logic of convergence towards an ‘ethic of reconciliation’ (herein referred to as the Ethic): he articulates the case that there is already a force based on the disposition, a tendency which makes the Ethic a real challenger to the current hegemonic logics of the real politick of power which inevitably under the current globalizing world leads to what Sitas refers to as ‘the logic of fragmentation’. While I am fully persuaded by and committed to the cause of the Ethic, which has certainly emerged as a powerful cause at the level of ideas, critical thinking and peace-seeking as various institutions and some movements adopt some variant of it, I remain to be persuaded as to the power it actually has so far acquired as a force for change. This is essentially a call for a further enquiry as to the sociological underpinnings, which is a subject Ari Sitas nicely begins to set the frame for in both the shortened version as well as the longer essay of the Ethic. This is my central criticism of this great work, even though I have a number of issues with each of the arguments which would sharpen the case for the Ethic.

Sitas takes us through the dialectic of violence vs non-violence, convincingly illustrating how the ‘success’ of those who advocated the necessity of violence to overcome oppression, colonization, exploitation, etc. has been short-lived. The use of violence had generated at some point such structures of power or contradictions in the system which essentially undermined the emancipatory, revolutionary and progressive potential of these forces/movements: without an Ethic, once in power or on the way to power, systemic factors generate more and/or new types of violence, oppression, etc. He concludes that violence leads to more violence and resistance need not be violent; this is the basis for reversing Fanon’s dictum: ‘violence has not been cathartic’. I am fully in support of Sitas’s critique of violence and this argument tallies with the knowledge generated by whole range of thinkers who critique the ‘mimetic assimilation’ of the resistance forces, who eventually adopt the methods and structures of what they are supposed to oppose. Sitas takes it further by arguing that this requires that we take a leap forward: the Ethic is the inexorable logic of learning from this experience. My response to this powerful argument is ‘yes, but . . .’. Despite the force of the argument, a reading of the violence in the world today reveals that there are powerful systemic factors which reproduce and generate old and new forms of violence across the globe. New forms of violence are constantly being generated and this reflects a global systemic logic in the globalized world, which is being simultaneously becoming more unified and more fragmented. The erosion of the ‘Law of War’ and the blurring of the distinction between ‘civilians’ and ‘soldiers’ in (post)modern warfare (‘Fight against Terror’, etc.), not only puts the regulation of war in flux but brings more volume and more intense forms of violence closer to home. Sitas’s powerful critique of violence is an argument and a call for an Ethic, as a logical political/ideological and a moral response to the accentuation of violence today across the globe and within the conflict zones of the world. However, this does not mean that such a claim, which assumes the form of a logic necessitating its realization, is or will necessarily become more realizable. This is essentially an empirical question: is the Ethic actually becoming more realizable today?

Another argument put forward derives from the experience of the West's domination over the last few centuries: this domination or 'success' has generated a new force for 'self-reflexivity'. The limits, excesses, contradictions and unintended consequences have generated powerful critiques in terms of systems of thought and social, political and cultural movements of different sorts. Sitas sees the potential for a convergence of all such forces as the basis for the Ethic as a serious contender to the current hegemony. This is linked to the collapse and critique of Stalinism and the crisis of the Leninist model in socialist thought, politics and praxis: Sitas' argument here is robust as a critique and the process of socialist/post-socialist reflexivity drawing on the experience post-Soviet era, together with the wider self-reflexivity of the West and the learning and drawing on post-colonial thinking and praxis, provides a sound basis for the Ethic. However, there is a problem with automatically translating this inexorable logic as necessarily leading to the emergence of a new force ready to take off. Gramsci's old dictum 'the old is dying but the new is yet to be born' is still relevant; we may however claim that Sitas is articulating the birth but the 'movement of movements' capable of driving this Ethic forward is still young, if not embryonic, or at least not able yet to mount a serious opposition to the hegemonic forces of the world. Of course movements mature with conditions; and as conditions are constantly being transformed we cannot be certain about predicting the future. We can however make an assessment of the balance of forces as they stand today in the globe. I would like to make two points here:

1. The collapse of the USSR and its allies has not brought about any restraint on the part of the 'global hegemon', in spite of the challenges facing the USA. In fact, one can locate an intensified thirst to dominate militarily: empires can be more ruthless during their demise or when they face challengers. Nor has there been any restraint exercised by the dominant classes in the making of economic policies: the dominance of neoliberalism since the late 1970s has not been dented even after the current economic crisis. The Ethic is yet to touch the powerful of the globe when it comes to geopolitics and economic policy-making.
2. Despite the failures, even collapse of various movements, systems of thought and ideologies, there is considerable resilience to change by organized forces, which survive long after the initial reasons that brought about their specific form are extinguished. The logic that led to the emergence of forces of resistance, emancipation, revolution, etc. does not necessitate that these forces take the specific organizational form; rather this is contingent on historical reasons. However, once they do shape in a particular organizational form, they generate their own 'logic', which can be oppressive, undemocratic, authoritarian, sexist, etc. Stalinist organizational logics survive and generate bureaucratic logics, even after they abandon or 'purge' the ideological ghost of Stalinism. At the level of ideas, the response to the collapse of the USSR and what was branded as 'actually existing socialism' has brought about an ideological gap, crisis and tension within the generic Left, extending beyond the Communist movement. But within the Communist movement (i.e. the section that split in the second international as the Communist as opposed to the Social Democratic movement), only a small section of those movements have actually renewed their thinking or genuinely tried to do so, in terms of being reflexive about the past. Joe Slovo's eloquent response to collapse, which contained some key elements for renewal, seems to have proven to be only of transitional nature, as Communist movements retreated into either of the two major ideological trends:
 - a. Many have become indistinguishable from social democracy, which itself has been transformed into a flora of 'soft' apologetics for imperialism (e.g. Blair's support for the invasion of Iraq) and neoliberalism (almost all European Social Democratic parties were the driving forces for the neoliberal policies since the 1980s in what has been branded as 'third way'). Even the great Eric Hobsbawm considers this as inevitable. Or,
 - b. Some other sections have become nostalgic of Stalinism and/or are joining forces with nationalistic forces and 'patriotic small capital' to fight against the grand 'conspiracies' of big capital and imperialism. Ideologically the Left is fragmented as ever and the anti-

capitalist, anti-globalization movement is yet to generate an alternative to the dominant forces to reckon with. It is a force on the defensive and the logic of the Ethic is certainly part of the movement, but I would hesitate to claim that it is dominant even within this disparate and fluid movement. The Ethic can be located as central to certain movements rooted within national contexts and certain global networks.

The third route of genuine renewal of the Left has only surfaced in rather exceptional or marginal circumstances at the level of mass movements. Perhaps certain aspects of Latin American socialism, together with indigenous movements and other social movements in the South and radical thinkers all over the globe can be part of Sitas's reflexive critical mass receptive to the Ethic. However this is an emerging dynamic with a potential rather than an emergent force.

Another important innovation Sitas makes is by merging art, literature and sociology in the shaping of his Ethic of Reconciliation. Art is a powerful source which has traditionally hitherto been undervalued or seen as a mere epiphenomenon. Art is brought forward and I fully endorse this. Where I beg to differ is that I can see, and I am sure Sitas can see more than me, as much 'logic of fragmentation' as 'logic of reconciliation' in art and literature on a national and global level. In fact, one can argue that as per Benjamin 'art in the age of mechanical reproduction', commercialization, network society and the globalization of multimedia is reproducing more fragmentation, polarization, alienation and depoliticization rather than reconciliation. If Sitas is referring only to a section or fragment within art and literature, which is critical, reflexive and progressive, I would totally agree with him: but there is a 'war' within art and literature. Art and literature have historically and are serving power, nationalist-chauvinist causes, racism, sexism, etc. Spain produced Lorca and Dali; South Africa produces the Dennis Brutus as well, as the Coetzee; poetry produced Neruda and Ezra Pound; philosophy produced Sartre, Adorno as well as Heidegger and so on. I regret to note that unfortunately Macondo *is* being bombed, despite the fact that you cannot morally bomb it!

Biographical Note

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