Power and Violence: The Making of "Modernity," a Conversation with Malcolm Blincow

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Abstract: Political anthropologist Malcolm Blincow, recipient of a York Award for teaching, developed a reputation for taking seriously the anthropology department's principle of "making knowledge count" (to borrow the title from the edited collection by one of the department's scholars, Peter Harries Jones). My conversation with Malcolm focused specifically on some of the thinking that informs his popular third-year undergraduate course, Power and Violence: The Making of "Modernity." Without recourse to reductionism, Malcolm's own personal and professional history as a political anthropologist may have shaped the specific interests and concerns that are reflected in the development of this course.

Keywords: power, violence, modernity, interview, knowledge, Malcolm Blincow

Résumé : Malcolm Blincow, anthropologue politique et récipiendaire du Prix York pour l'enseignement, s'est forgé une réputation enviable en considérant sérieusement le principe, cher au département d'anthropologie, selon lequel « il faut que la connaissance compte » (on a emprunté ce titre à une collection d'ouvrages dirigée par un enseignant du département, Peter Harries Jones). Ma conversation avec Malcolm porte plus précisément sur une partie de la pensée qui compose son populaire cours de troisième année du premier cycle, « Pouvoir et violence: la création de la "modernité" ». Sans verser dans le réductionnisme, notre conversation révèle comment l'histoire personnelle et professionnelle de Malcolm, en tant qu'anthropologue politique, a formé les intérêts et les préoccupations spécifiques qui apparaissent dans son cours.

Mots-clés : pouvoir, violence, modernité, entrevue, savoir, Malcolm Blincow

Introduction

Malcolm Blincow is known, among other things, for his passion and commitment to teaching and for the general principle of making knowledge count, to which the anthropology department aspires. Among the principles that may be discerned in his teaching is a critique framed by a set of principles that fall variously under the umbrella of concerned scholarship and commitment to social, political and economic justice, broadly conceived. One such course where these broad principles might be discerned is his Power and Violence: The Making of "Modernity." As he describes in his syllabus, the course deals with issues concerning the "massive and unprecedented proliferation and use of organized violence" that is "deeply uneven," "increasingly globalized" and "normalized."

On the eve of his retirement from York University, I wanted to interview Malcolm on some of the pedagogical principles, practices and orientations that have come to shape and frame his teaching. But that seemed too broad, and he had little interest in being interviewed. Accordingly, he agreed to have a conversation in which I wanted to focus specifically on the aforementioned course. The conversation took place over a cup of tea at my dining table in the autumn of 2012. He baulked at the idea of me using a tape recorder but was persuaded to let me do so. Below is the edited transcript of that conversation. In this conversation, I attempt to get beyond just the course, to also engage with the larger philosophical, political and personal thinking and histories that add up to a larger trajectory of which the course is a very small manifestation.

The Interview

Daniel Yon: Your course brings into focus your interest in past and contemporary forms of violence. As a political anthropologist, you have been consistently interested in the place of violence both in and in relationship to anthropology—that is, how to think about and engage

with questions of violence. May I begin by asking you to elaborate on this disciplinary relationship between violence and anthropology?

Malcolm Blincow: I think as anthropologists what we've got to attend to is the fact that we are always moving back and forth between our own attempts at thinking through what we posit as more or less universally applicable concepts and the attempts of particular groups of people, institutions or social entities of one sort or another to establish their own concepts hegemonically, not just locally but also extra-locally and even, for some, universally. Basically, speaking from the vantage point of a political anthropologist, I guess one can see the state form as in one sense a very initial attempt to try and do that by expanding a political form beyond the arena of the local into a cascading series of spatially dispersed but incorporated entities within a larger political unit of some kind. But then, of course, from that initial state form, there is a move into empires of one sort or another and then ultimately into the kind of empires of modernity (which I think are different than traditional dynastic empires). So, to return to the issue of dominant and local epistemologies of power and violence, I was thinking of attempts by modern state and empire forms to universalize their own locally dominant epistemologies but where they have to do so by incorporating (if not eliminating) the local. But this process is never entirely successful, since the local has its own form of hegemonic or dominant epistemology of power and violence as well.

DY: In one of our conversations, you talked about why anthropology is well placed to get at these questions. Can you speak to how and why the discipline is "well placed"?

MB: I don't think we are best placed, necessarily, to get at the larger ones, the more spatially dispersed attempts at hegemony, the states and empires, the truly universalizing ones. I think particular understanding comes especially from historians, historical sociologists, human geographers, political scientists (the deeply informed ones!) and other social scientists. But what I think we are able to do, because we have this as a much stronger emphasis, is to move between the local and deeper/wider dimensions of time/space. It's because of this necessity in our approach to the world that I think we are well placed to get at these questions. I think it is much, much more difficult for people who are well acquainted with the study of deeper and wider temporal and spatial scales to be able to move into the local. Such practitioners, for example, human geographers who work at the local level do extremely careful, wonderful work; but, as a discipline, I think we are better placed.

You have to be a very particular kind of sociologist or human geographer or historian to be able to get at both elements. So, I think we are much better placed as a discipline in trying to get at those questions. It is not that people in other disciplines can't and don't do it extremely well—sometimes, frankly, far better than anthropologists—it is just that, as a discipline, I think anthropologists are better positioned to be able to try and do that.

DY: What are some of the significant works, or who are some of the significant people, who have been quite influential in your own thinking about these issues?

MB: It is from a lifetime of just reading, reflecting and discussing; often, of course, you get influenced by people who you lose track of but who have been influential at one time or another or who just become part of your own mental and political universe and then forgotten. I think, for me, what's been most important has been particular teachers who moved me into certain perspectives, rather than my reading of particular persons. I think that's been more important for me, so it is not as if I haven't been influenced by particular thinkers, but I see the catalyst as being particular teachers who, through their teaching, have introduced me to particular tracks of reading and thinking. That's also a result of having been in particular kinds of locations at certain moments in time, for example, being in Manchester for graduate work from 1965 on. And it wasn't just my teachers in Manchester but also a group of students I was with then, in the middle of the 1960s, in the midst of the process of decolonization, not completed, especially in Africa but also other parts of the world, and the ongoing imperialist interventions, especially in Vietnam. So, both certain teachers, fellow students (some of whom have remained very good friends), the time and place, it's the combination that was absolutely critical.

DY: Who were these teachers?

MB: Well, at McGill, it was, I would say, basically two. One more, in just a very straightforward way, who taught me a lot of anthropology, in a very neutral sense, but who taught me extremely well. That was Richard Salisbury; he was Marilyn [Silverman]'s PhD supervisor, by the way. But when I had Salisbury, as an undergraduate teacher, he wasn't yet engaged in the James Bay Cree Project, where he certainly became more politically assertive. But the one who really influenced me at McGill, indeed, influenced a whole number of us, including Marilyn, was Peter Gutkind. He was an Africanist who had done his doctoral fieldwork and dissertation on the Ganda Royal household. He was also very politically engaged. Whether or not he was a

Marxist, I don't know, but he certainly was a man of the radical left, totally committed to the national liberation movements in the non-western world, Africa in particular. He was very engaged with his students, whom he expected to be involved in scholarly work but also thoughtful, politically engaged work in the classroom ... and outside of it too! He was very active in that way. He was very important for me as the first who got me to begin to think politically, not just about anthropological issues but more broadly, in a different kind of way than I had ever been used to. So, Peter was very important. He was later shabbily treated by the department at McGill because he was a maverick and somewhat eccentric; somebody who wouldn't tolerate bullshit and nonsense. The McGill department had changed quite a bit, becoming increasingly dominated by a bevy of "Chicago Boys" with a particular version of the rising power of American cultural anthropology worldwide; he was cornered and left isolated and didn't live out a very happy scholarly career there. In fact, the department refused for many years to allow a scholarship to be created in his name. It was only because a couple of graduate students of his finally went to see higher-ups at McGill that they finally got a scholarship set up in his name.

DY: And Manchester followed McGill?

MB: I went there [Manchester] for a number of reasons, including the fact that it was meant to be the most new and interesting department in Britain, though obviously not the most established or reputable. Clearly, the LSE [London School of Economics], Cambridge, Oxford, London and the School of African and Oriental Studies were. But Manchester was seen as doing interesting things and being much more politically engaged, and so, for a number of reasons, I chose to go there, not least the fact that I also got a studentship for two years!

DY: Who in particular at Manchester would have had an impact comparable to Salisbury and Gutkind?

MB: Well, peculiarly, most of the teachers there did not appear to us to be in any way particularly radical, either in what they specifically taught or even, necessarily, in the kind of anthropology that they taught—although, interestingly, several had been members of the CPGB [Communist Party of Great Britain]. On the other hand, there was certainly an undisputed emphasis on the significance of class and of politics as central to any kind of anthropology (whether one's topic was development, religion, kinship or whatever) and on the absolute centrality of long-term, detailed, engaged fieldwork. They were certainly excellent teachers. So I think what happened to me at Manchester was that my teachers—among them, Max Gluckman, Emrys Peters, Martin Southwold, Basil Sansom, Ronald Frankenberg, Peter

Worsley—superbly refined a huge amount of anthropological knowledge and practice for me, especially through the many full departmental seminars we had (these seminars were the real learning crucibles). Manchester's political reputation was, to some degree, still played out in some of the topics that faculty and students chose and the kinds of political orientations they brought to them, but, interestingly, there wasn't as explicit a political commitment in all this as there was when I worked with Peter Gutkind. Not at all. Nevertheless, retrospectively, as I think about it, what was crucial in the Manchester approach was a recognition of the centrality of politics to all anthropological questions, real down-to-earth politics—the politics of power. It's an emphasis that has been sadly neglected in recent anthropology, in spite of—I would say, paradoxically, even because of—the dominance of an appeal to supposedly ubiquitous forms of "power." No, apart from that, I think my more explicit political learning and engagements, both within the discipline and outside it, mainly occurred with my fellow students, about a dozen of us, if one includes the sociologists and anthropologists in that core. We were very diverse, about half from Britain and the other half from Nigeria, Malaysia, India, Latin America, the United States and Canada. So I'd say it was a whole combination of factors: the historical moment, the place, teachers, fellow students—all were catalysts for my own developing stances as an anthropologist.

DY: Your doctoral fieldwork was undertaken in Morocco. I know that your interest is not confined to North Africa, the Mediterranean and the Middle East, but, thinking back, was there anything formative about those days that came to shape the way you think of power, violence and modernity today; or even, the other way around, in the way you might take these concepts that you teach about today to reflect upon what you did then?

MB: Aha, right, yes! I think it is more the latter. I began to see myself as a political anthropologist at Manchester. That's what I was clearly most interested in. In fact, my undergraduate degree at McGill was in anthropology and political science—at that time at McGill, one couldn't do an honours degree in anthropology alone; it had to be combined with another social science discipline. Most people combined anthropology with sociology. I was one of the few who did an alternative to sociology, and I chose political science. I had to declare a joint honours degree for my second year at McGill, so I must have already been interested in some way in politics even before I took a course with Peter Gutkind. What Peter did was to sharpen and deepen

my interest in politics, to see the significance of colonialism and the anti-colonial national liberation struggles and movements of the day and the analytical relevance of a critical analysis to all of this. So politics has been there from quite early on; it just got sharpened in all kinds of ways. And that was true of Manchester as well. So, from my early days, there was an interest in political anthropology, and that's what I chose to do for my research in Morocco. Initially, the topic I chose to research was aroused through a curiosity about a specific issue in the politics of religion: how certain types of religious figures became critical political mediators in local-level conflicts and disputes (in fact, this was a classic Manchester topic). But then, when I got to the field and saw that the issue was not currently as significant as it had been historically, I moved into an interest in the politics of development. In a way, I could hardly avoid this; it was *the* dominant issue in the area I'd originally chosen for my initial study but had to abandon. It also helped that there was some archival and a small but excellent secondary social science literature on the area, as well as current development studies that had been recently conducted by UN agencies as part of a major irrigation/development/land reform project. I decided I wanted to trace out the historical politics of colonial settlement, its ongoing impact in the post-independence period after 1958 and then the subsequent impact of national and international development programs, with a particular emphasis on how all of these impacted the twinned connection between land and labour regimes. So: a study of the changing dynamics of the politics of land and labour as refracted in different historical periods through the conversion of land and labour regimes by new legal instruments, agricultural forms of production and the availability and mobilization of labour. Having started out with an interest in the politics of religion, I abandoned the topic because the specific phenomenon I was interested in in the area I had chosen to do my fieldwork was not as politically significant as it had been in the pre-colonial and early colonial period.

I suppose I could have studied religion as such, but this had never interested me. The other reason I didn't is, quite frankly, that I have a "tin ear" for religion. I had eventually abandoned my own earlier teenage religious beliefs out of boredom. So that was another element, and although theology does interest me as a speculative philosophical system, basically religion just bores me to tears. And, to be honest, an additional reason was that my linguistic competence in Moroccan Arabic was limited. I am not a good linguist, and I think in order to deal with religion well, you have to have a fluent understanding of the language, and while I had a basic everyday conversational capacity with Moroccan Arabic, I certainly had nothing remotely close to fluency. So I wouldn't say I had any sense of thinking of these larger issues of Islam and "modernity" that are so important today, though it has to be said that a number of key anthropological studies on Morocco from this period certainly were important precursors to that interest today.

DY: But you've come to think a lot about religion in recent years, particularly, for example, with respect to the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively.

MB: Yes. But there I would say that one has to see religion as being what I referred to earlier as one of those local-level epistemologies (sometimes dominant, other times not) that are absolutely fundamental for understanding politics, and especially so when they are made into axes of contestation by dominance-seeking epistemologies of empire, which in the examples you cite, let me say it frankly, is "western empire" and its current auxiliaries. These phenomena wax and wane anyway, so that we have to keep in mind that the role of Islam (or variants of Islam) as a political force waxes and wanes, let alone its variable significance in other aspects of everyday life. To that degree, I think it has to be attended to and understood.

DY: The social and cultural organization of violence, that is, how violence is embedded in everyday social relationships and practices, as well as in specialized institutions, what are you thinking about when …

MB: Before I take that up, let me go back to the first idea or theme, the one about epistemologies and ontologies. I could have put it more simply, I guess, but in broad brush strokes what I'm saying is that I want students to know how other societies conceptualize the world around them, how people represent the world around them, whether these be through local-level forms of representation or more universal ones or the interface between those two. The emphasis on this first theme essentially derives from the significance of the culture concept ("representation" and the "politics of representation"). But since I also remain steadfastly a social anthropologist, I think the everyday social relationships that people are embedded in are also crucial to socio-cultural life (the emphasis on "practices" from the "culturists" doesn't do the trick here: what is meant by that phrase is almost always the "practices of representation," and that only captures one dimension of all social relationships). In particular, since one of the forms that structure social relationships is social institutions, I especially wanted to get at this aspect because, in

thinking about power and violence, it is crucial to understand how violence gets organized. I wanted to move students' conceptions away from everyday forms of violence—bar fights, hockey games, domestic abuse—partly because those topics are covered in many other social science courses but mainly because, while power and violence are, obviously, often systemic, they are also connected by being systemically organized in specialized institutions. I think that's very important, especially when we think about the modern nation-state and empire.

DY: And you regard the military as a key specialized institution of violence?

MB: Exactly. So I wanted the course to focus, not just on violence per se, as part of the rise of the modern nation-state but, more specifically, as the sociocultural organization through which military force is organized and institutionalized in all sorts of ways. I mean, that's the simplest way in which it gets institutionalized, but you could also think of it getting institutionalized through patriotic appeals, for example, through patriotic pedagogy in the extension of schooling to "the people"—all of which brings one back into the politics of representation, of course, of the first theme's emphasis on epistemologies and ontologies.

DY: You've pre-empted my question regarding the third focus of your course: the increasing incorporation of violence, through the development and use of what you described as "technologies of destruction."

MB: Yes, the first two themes lay the groundwork of culture and social relations in thinking about power and violence. The third theme singles out violence, the overall theme of the course, but emphasizes the particular kind of violence that occurs in the "making of modernity." It's not the fact of violence as such; it is that political violence is organized in a certain way and enacted through certain kinds of technologies of destruction that has been such a key part of the making of the modern and of what it is to continue to be modern—to imagine and live it, to reproduce it. That counter-intuitive insight (counter-intuitive because it is so easy to assume that the modern is characterized by the progressive elimination of violence or, at any rate, its progressive channelling through "the law") was, for me, a political breakthrough, and it occurred very precisely at the time of the First Gulf War of 1990–91, with its explicit doctrine of "shock and awe" that shook me to my political and personal roots. Although I'd never been to Iraq or, for that matter, the Near East, I was surprised by the degree to which I felt this was a personal assault and violation. So it wasn't just about an anthropological and political response. This didn't just come from having

worked in Morocco, although that was part of it, or because of my training and changing political orientation at McGill and Manchester. I think it also very much had to do with the circumstances and experiences of my upbringing in India until the age of 14, in the immediate post-independence period, and a sense that, in some basic way, that emergent world was now still so easily subject to attack. Until that First Gulf War I had basically been teaching political anthropology in a straightforward, conventional kind of way, albeit, since the sub-discipline was growing, I had begun to narrow my focus onto three basic issues—the politics of sexuality, property and violence—which I thought covered the most interesting domains of political anthropology. But with the outbreak of the First Gulf War, I felt that while it was all very well to teach about sexuality and property, the world was being shaped in fundamental ways not only by an appeal to violence but also by an appeal that emphasized its necessity to counteract the ostensible violence of others, to "civilize" others. The hypocrisy of the appeal to modernity as the attempt to transcend political violence—and here political violence was always the violence of and by others—struck me as fundamentally at odds with both the historical record and current reality. Far from modernity having slowly staunched political violence in its ascendance toward "civilization" against the "barbarism" of others, it needed constantly to extend itself and universalize itself through violence—that's what I wanted to try get at.

DY: You do insist on thinking about the relationship between epistemology and ontology and the physical expression and brute force of violence; yet you do insist on this separation, for conceptual and pedagogic purposes. Can you say a bit more about why you insist on this separation?

MB: If you collapse the sheer, brute tangibility and materiality of physical violence into questions and practices of epistemology, then you lose something. If you collapse epistemology into the seemingly straightforward facticity of brute violence, then one also misses something. For me, there is no easy answer, which is why I want to keep culture and social relations/sociality, representation and materiality as our key interrelated concepts. I want to keep them going dialectically, where you can't reduce one to the other but where one informs the other, often awkwardly and with difficulty.

I picked up on epistemic violence from Michael Taussig, from his 1987 book *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man.* He makes a fundamental use of that concept, and, I must say, I have problems with using it. It took me a month to read the book—I read it enormously slowly and carefully every day—and then it

took me about another two months to write a long, laudatory but also critical review of it. But that effort was key for me in coming to terms with/against postmodernism. It is a stunning, brilliantly written and provocative book. But, for me, Taussig ends up too much on the "epistemic" side of things; for him, the epistemics of violence trump what I call the brute materiality of violence, and that, in the end, to my mind is just a cop-out of sorts and, at times, a dangerously misleading one. It's a challenge. I don't know where he drew the concept from, but that's where I became acquainted with the concept.

DY: I find your insistence on the separation of the cultural and social understandably quite useful. But my sense is that it is the collapsing of the two into each other that makes violence normal and embedded culturally. I'm not sure why you want to be so insistent on the separation of the social from the cultural. Particularly if we are looking at the useful concepts you are giving us here—technologies of destruction, the symbolic representations—it seems to me they are intelligible and more useful if you can think about them together.

MB: The act itself, the event, is always social and cultural; to collapse them together is, in effect, to see them as the same or, even more problematically, to all too casually collapse one into the other and then say that they are the same! I don't think they are the same, and I think it's best to wrestle with that fact—difficult, awkward, even incoherent as it is at times—rather than to ignore it or smooth it over. If there is an artillery shell or rocket-propelled grenade that lands in this quarter of Homs, Syria, today, how do we describe that act? It's about the brute material world and the world of representations. It is both. You may want, for certain purposes at hand, to emphasize one or the other because that is significant, but overall, as a general rule of thumb, I think it is analytically crucial for anthropologists to keep both aspects in mind.

DY: You talked about the patterns of reconciliation and the non-violent traditions. How much of the course is about peace and reconciliation?

MB: There are often dissident, minority traditions, like the Mennonites or Quakers, just to think of the western Christian tradition, or the famous Gandhi-influenced non-violent movement along the Pahstun tribal frontier in the 1920s and 1930s. I think it is important to talk about them because these ideologies and movements often get ignored or even lost. Or think of the figure of the "conscientious objector," who emerges out of an ostensibly secular western tradition. So there are all these alternative movements or traditions, and I thought it would be interesting to do a course at some stage on them. Not just on pacifism as an alternative to war but a kind of historical and anthropological inquiry into different kinds of anti-war and anti–political violence traditions, within these local or universal epistemologies. So that was what I was trying to get at as the fourth theme of the course; apart, of course, from various individual and interpersonal forms of reconciliation. By the way, I should say that I did not want to take up the various politically ritualized forms of truth and reconciliation commissions around the world, which, while they might have a political value in providing important strands of information, I view more skeptically as forums for long-term communal political reconciliation.

DY: The theme of violence does seem to have preoccupied you in recent years. It has, of course, been there in other courses you have developed over the years. What is it about the present that makes this topic so pertinent?

MB: In the broader sense of structural violence—yes, maybe, to use a term that's used more recently—although I wouldn't have called it that then. But, in effect, yes; if one thinks about it in terms of the issues of the creation of unequal development, the creation and reproduction of conditions of poverty and so on. But, I think, broadly speaking, what really goaded me was that I felt I had to do something about this stuff on violence. I mean it's just so horrendous and so acceptable to the mainstream media, and still is. It's always other peoples' violence; it's never ours. There are always excuses provided, and it hasn't changed. The Assads of the world, the Gaddafis of the world … never NATO, never "the West."

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