

Violence today

Violência hoje

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Abstract *In this paper, the author seeks to approach contemporary violence in its most different expressions, including the use of the most recent developments in biology, bacteriology, chemistry and nuclear physics. The central idea is that violence changes, and with it the way it is perceived and how we react to it. The text, besides putting violence into a historical context, analyzes 1) the big transformation(s) in the world: the end of the cold war, the new industrial structure and its consequences for the decline of the labor movement, globalization and the new forms of victimization; 2) in the second part, the author points to new approaches and characterizes novel contemporary subjects.*

Key words *Violence in history, Violence and subjectivity, Violence in our times, Violence and globalization*

Resumo *Neste artigo o autor busca conceituar a violência contemporânea mostrando as mais diferentes perspectivas com que ela aparece, inclusive como terrorismo e suas novas formas de expressão que utilizam os mais recentes desenvolvimentos da biologia, da bacteriologia, da química e da física nuclear. A idéia central é de que a violência muda, mudam suas percepções e os comportamentos em relação a ela. No texto, além de uma contextualização histórica, são analisadas 1) as grandes transformações do mundo: o fim da guerra fria, a reestruturação produtiva e suas conseqüências para o declínio do movimento operário e a globalização e as novas formas de vitimização; 2) a seguir são apontadas as novas formas de abordagem e a caracterização de novos sujeitos, consonantes com a contemporaneidade.*

Palavras-chave *Violência na história, Violência e subjetividade, Violência e contemporaneidade, Violência e globalização*

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Introduction

Today, we are threatened by new, emerging forms of violence, the imminent risk of biological, bacteriological, chemical or nuclear terrorism for example, the acts of martyrism, one sacrificing the own life on taking the life of others, destruction and self-destruction going hand in hand, etc.

Violence changes and this change in itself is one of its expressions. The numerous and frequent attempts to present the phenomenon in an objective and quantified way notwithstanding – statistics of crimes, delinquency, riots, etc. – violence is highly subjective, it is what a person, a group, a society at a given moment regards as such. This leads us to a number of interesting questions: in France for example, throughout the Eighties and Nineties, one wondered if it was violence that was increasing objectively or if an increasing feeling of insecurity led to this impression, independently from the facts. The perception of violence is related to other elements than the phenomenon itself in its apparent objectivity. The same brawl among young people for example will be perceived as banal and of no importance in a neighborhood with full employment, where people are not particularly concerned with their future, but as extremely alarming where unemployment and distress among the population are eminent.

Today we cannot deal anymore with the question violence the way we would have done only twenty or thirty years ago. The world has changed considerably. But do we have forms allowing us to approach this phenomenon in a new or renewed way?

The big transformations in the world

The end of the Cold War

Let us have a look on the planet the way it presented itself in the Fifties and Sixties of the XX century. Basically, it is structured around a central conflict opposing the two super-powers of the moment, the United States and the Soviet Union. Since the Yalta agreements signed just before the end of World War II, the world is divided into two spheres of influence. Thenceforth the Cold War constitutes a major confrontation but, despite uncontested but localized military operations, it does not come to involve a direct, armed conflict. The Korea

war and after that the Vietnam war will not directly engage the two super-powers nor will they lead to a generalized world war. They remain localized. Between the two blocks, nuclear weapons ensure certain prudence. The perspective of their use exerts a dissuasive effect. Neither of the parties would come to extremes, even in moments of utmost tension such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. War violence is thus limited all over the world because each country finds itself inserted in the more or less clear orbit of one of the super-powers and everyone is aware that a localized war could end in a worldwide conflict.

A report of the Human Security Centre of Vancouver, published in October 2005, recalls the great number of “proxy wars” in the Third World during the Cold War, local but sometimes very deadly violent conflicts. Thus, one should not imagine this period very idyllic, but the fact is that the Cold War prevented a world war. The same way, it exerted a controlling effect upon international terrorism, above all carried on by actors claiming the Palestinian cause, which however never came even near to the point reached by terrorism today.

Thus, let's say it in one sentence: the end of the Cold War (a convenient date in this connection would be the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989) makes the world orphan of a conflict-controlling principle, which much more avoided than favored or facilitated military violence.

After that, new break-lines become apparent, civil wars take a completely different pace, phenomenons of new or renewed massive violence arise. This is how terrorism became “global” – concept to which we will come back later – and the organized crime prospered, also in connection with globalization. Even with a doubtless decrease of 40% after 1992, in the number of traditional armed conflicts between states, according to the report of the Human Security Centre; even with less 80% of very deadly conflicts (those causing more than 1,000 deaths on the battle field per year); even with a decrease in the number of revolutions or attempted revolutions – ten attempts in 2004 against twenty five in 1963 – other forms of violence develop. “Global” terrorism frequently causes more than tens of victims per attack and in addition, in general terms, the percentage of civil victims increased considerably in comparison to military victims. Cruelty took over in every part of the world, including in Europe, where one should think that, after

Nazism, mass crimes of genocide kind would not be seen anymore; the dismemberment of ex-Yugoslavia saw the violence of “ethnic purification”, whereas this country, at the time of the Cold War, rather constituted an element of international stability. The genocide of Grand Lacs caused more than one million deaths and in our days, the Iraquian war goes on with acts of deadly violence being committed day by day, likely to end in a civil war.

The end of the Cold War obviously does not explain everything, and a deeper, geopolitical analysis would have to involve particularly the end of colonialism, the decolonization processes and end of the dependence for good of many Latin-American societies. However, it seems to have played a bigger part. The violent acts of the Cold War, in particular in the so-called “proxy wars”, should have ended there. Its end, thanks to intervention by the United Nations (but also by other actors, in particular non-governmental organizations) in preventive operations or operations for maintaining the peace, should have given way to new contemplations, negotiations and interposition. It should have taught us to deal with conflicts on the basis of negotiation and democracy.

But to the contrary, while the Cold War was restricting organized crime to a certain level and weighed upon international terrorism because the principal actors of this violence often needed “Sponsor-States” for themselves being inside the orbit of the Soviet Union, its end opens the way for more massive expressions of organized crime, and for even shriller forms of terrorism.

Thus, the end of the Cold War does not only inaugurate a new period of military or terrorist violence, but rather transforms such violence. It means, to speak with the historian Charles Tilly, the invention of a new repertory of action, which also appears in relation to the question of nuclear weapons. In the past, nuclear weapons, as already said, constituted a factor of prevention, even of peace. Today they are a factor or at least a symbol of major risks, together with the images of destabilization or regional crisis, in particular in the Middle East and in Asia, along with the new problems of diffusion of these risks.

What we learn from the decline of the labor movement

Now, we will approach a very general idea by analyzing a very specific issue. Initially, in Europe, but also in other parts of the world, industry constituted the heart of collective life, and the social relations it shaped took the form of a structural social conflict, putting the labor movement in opposition to employers. The concept of the “industrial society” cannot be applied uniformly to all countries, above all because for some of them this problem is of no or very little concern. For those, who passed through the experience however, there is an essential point: they have left the traditional industrial era, dominated by scientific management based on massive concentration of unqualified labor.

The history of the labor movement, especially where it was long and important, shows a major characteristic: when the movement is powerful, resting on a strong mobilization capacity, organized in unions and other forms of organized labor, when it is able to negotiate and, as in all different kinds of social democracy, capable of staying alive without submission to a political party, then, the space for violence is tight, virtually null. On the other hand, in times when the labor movement is born unorganized, when problems related to the situation or to the proletarian condition are not put into the hands of labor leaders, and in times of historical decline, when the movement loses its centrality and capacity of action, one notes that the space for violence, terrorism included, grows wider, and that the actors pass to replace the absent movement by speaking on their behalf through violence.

The constant I established in my book *Sociétés et Terrorisme*¹, notably for different phases of anarchic terrorism or of terrorism of the radical left in Europe, deserves to be amplified and put into the form of a general sociological theory: violence finds more space for expression, the more society is not prepared for a conflict, the more the social structure does not provide methods for handling the demands of the actors. In other situations than those bringing us back to the rise or the decline of the labor movement, it is in fact possible to show that violence comes to replace a conflict, i.e. a conflicting relation without solution.

Let us even make a further step and extend this observation: violence is the opposite of the

institutionalizable conflict; it translates the existence of social problems, which are not transformed into debates and social conflicts.

Globalization

The concept of globalization started to impose itself since the Seventies, especially in the years following the end of the Cold War. The term was often used in a very ideological way, covering the idea of neoliberalism as the only good direction economy could take in a world – to say it with the incredibly arrogant words of Francis Fukuyama – marked by the triumph of the liberal democratic model and the end of the great historical confrontations. The concept was continuously and heavily criticized, and seemed to have gone overboard after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when it suddenly seemed that the world was no more, or better, no more only dominated by the power of money, boundless capitalism, markets, financial and commercial flows, but by terrorism and the military answers to terrorism. The theory was also criticized by those who, like Samuel Huntington, had insisted on cultural, civilizational dimensions of the great conflicts of the world, on the idea of an entry into the era of “clash of civilizations”. Finally, the concept was also nourished by the discussions about its political and social consequences, to start with, as said by many experts of the Eighties and Nineties, the weakening of the Nation-States – a thesis today being reconsidered to the point that certain authors like Jean-François Bayart, to the contrary insist on the idea of a direct link between globalization and the establishment or reinforcement of Nation-States.

Let us now come to the essence of our concerns: globalization remains a useful concept as long as proposing to contemplate all kinds of phenomena, cultural, social, political and not only economic, and for the role it plays as a combining element between the global, trans- or supranational, and national or local dimensions. This is how terrorism became “global”, by joining planetary, metapolitic and religious aspects, in particular with radical Islamism, with being anchored in the bosom of the societies it affects. In this sense, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 are at the same time inaugurating – although in fact one could name the attacks, which foreshadowed or announced them throughout the Nineties – and exceptional: they are indeed the only one, whose authors

came all from outside the target society, the United States of America. In all other cases, the terrorists arise from a combination – varying of course from case to case – of general, global and local principles.

The authors of the terrorist attacks in London, in July 2005, for example, were driven by a religious and global geopolitical logic but at the same time, their act was the expression of a vivid resentment with their living conditions in the English society. One could make quite similar observations with regard to organized crime, narcotics traffic for example, which operates according to often planetary, transnational logics, but whose mechanism one comes to understand better when considering the linkage of the actors with this or that country.

Another aspect of globalization interfering in contemporary violence is what David Harvey, an American geographer, formulated best when he said that it corresponds to time-space compression. Information, today, on one hand makes its way around the world in an instant, and on the other hand it is as easily stored as recovered. A political declaration, a legal step taken in Brasilia can reach the other end of the world in the same moment, and the same way it can be recovered ten years later by no matter whom, no matter where in the world.

This is how hateful discourse is able to circulate regardless moral or legal restrictions and to nourish campaigns that can take a violent course. We just witnessed such a case, the so called “cartoon affair”, when images published in a Danish newspaper were reprinted a few months later in several Muslim countries, igniting with unbelievable speed anti-Danish, anti-Western or hostile mobilizations against such or such country, which could easily have taken the form of attacks against goods or symbols. In the same way, contemporary anti-Semitism cannot be understood apart from its “global” nature, and from the worldwide dissemination of expressions of hatred against the Jews in words and images, through the internet or the antennas of television.

The era of the victims

The last new characteristic of the contemporary world we will evoke here is the sprouting since the Sixties, of all kinds of identities particularly claiming for recognition and sometimes for repair for crimes their ancestors were victims, presenting themselves in the same pub-

lic environment of violence of which they are victims today. This is in particular the case of movements of cultural, religious, ethnic or national character, movements of the Black and American Indians, of descendants of survivors of a genocide, Jews or Armenians for example, and also of relatives or children of victims of a dictatorial or totalitarian power. These actors can be violent themselves, for example during a stage of “awakening”, as was the case with the Armenian terrorism of the Seventies. These cases, above all, draw the attention to the consequences of violence: negation or violation of the physical and moral integrity of a person, with effects that possibly will be found in the following generations and that turn it difficult to construct oneself collectively and often even as the subject of one’s own existence

In the same way, since the Sixties, movements in several countries drew attention to violence suffered by women, children, the disabled, the old and so on, providing a better understanding of the damage caused by violence.

This leads to a general trend – going far beyond such or such country, such or such experience –, recognizing more and more that it is violence that affects the individual, personal or collective existence and not only, as it is often the case, the social or political order, the State, supposedly holding the legitimate monopoly.

The new approaches

Let us concentrate now on the analytical tools allowing us to approach violence.

The traditional forms of approach

Social sciences proposed for a long time three principal forms of approaching violence. The most traditional is the one insisting on the idea that violence is a conduct born out of crisis, a response to changes in the situation of the actor or the actors, who react mainly out of frustration. This approach finds its highest expression in the work Alexis de Tocqueville, who comments with regard to the French Revolution that violence became manifest exactly at the moment the population had seen its situation improve, “one could say, he writes in his *L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution*², that the French found their situation the more unbearable the more it became better”. But it was especially the functionalist, or Anglo-Saxon neofunctionalist

researchers, who ensured the blossoming of this theory in the Sixties and Seventies with the concept known as relative frustration. The idea of James Davies, for example, widely accepted by Ted Robert Gurr³ is in fact that violence finds its way when the gap between the expectancies of a group and the possibilities of satisfying them becomes considerable and unbearable. Sometimes this sort of approach could produce interesting results, but in the Seventies, different studies revealed its deficiencies and quite limited explanatory character. This is why two other lines of approach were most widely accepted.

A second form of analysis, much more precise than the theories of Gurr or Davies, insists on the rational and instrumental character of violence, its collective dimensions – riots, revolution for example – included. It finds its letter of nobility in the work of Thomas Hobbes, and was considerably developed as from the Sixties, particularly in the work of the historian Charles Tilly. For the defenders of the theory known as “mobilization of resources”, claimed by this author and others like Anthony Oberschall, violence is nothing more than a resource mobilized by the actors as a means to achieve their goals.

Most of the time, this idea is used to explain how actors excluded from the political field use violence to penetrate and keep themselves there. This idea has the advantage of no more reducing violence to an image of crisis behavior, a reactive behavior, it transforms the violent actor into a character aware of the risks of his, consequently conscious, action. The idea pleads not to analyze violence separate from the more general conflict in which it eventually emerges, worker strike, demonstration of the rural population for example. It presents an undeniable explanatory power in fact violence is often instrumental. But it misses the point of what for us is the hardcore of violence by reducing it to a means like any other, money, solidarity for example, it does not say anything about what violence constantly presents in terms of excess or lack – we will come back to this later.

Finally, a last traditional line of approach, in fact a very large one, postulates a link between culture and violence. Certain authors consider culture, or rather civilization, the opposite of violence, for example Norbert Elias in his famous work on the civilizing process, where he explains that modernity began when indi-

viduals learned, in Court Etiquette for example, to control their aggressiveness or violent impulses. Others insist on the link between certain cultures and violence, maybe through socialization and education – as for example Theodor Adorno⁴ in his famous study on anti-Semitism. The problem with the idea of a link between culture and violence is that this theory failed to consider any kind of political and social considerations, as well as the historical density able to distinguish the moment when a personality is formed, from that, where it passes to action.

The traditional approaches to violence must not be forgotten or rejected; they often provide a useful perspective for understanding a concrete case of violence. But very often they lead the researcher to a dead end for passing on the side of so essential dimensions, that one cannot even start a real approach but by introducing a concept which normally has no place in the study of violence, the concept of the Subject.

The human subject and violence

There can be aspects in violence, that suggest the idea of a loss of sense: the actor is expressing a loss of sense, a perverted or impossible sense, he is violent for example, for being unable to construct the conflicting action which would allow him to put forward his social, cultural or political demands or expectations because there is no political treatment for these demands or expectations.

In other cases however one observes not only a lack or loss of sense but an overabundance, a plethora. In certain cases, violence rests upon an ideology, proceeds upon it, finds a substitute sense there. The terrorist acts of the extreme left-wing in Italy during the Sixties and Seventies for example, carried on in the name of the working class, rested upon an ideology falsely assuming the historical mission the proletariat, while the actors in fact were very far from believing in any historical role of the proletariat. Sometimes, what we deal with is a myth, a discursive construction creating an image of possible integration of in truth always more contradictory elements: violence develops here when the myth falls apart, when it loses its direction. Especially religion brings sense to a violent action, which then transcends politics, but ready to quickly fall back to its level.

Very different elements however make violence to a phenomenon not well explained by

the traditional approaches. This is the case when cruelty, senseless violence, violence for violence makes its appearance. When the actor not only destroys others, but also destroys himself, or even when the actor seems to give no sense to his own action, when acting irresponsibly, only by obedience to a legitimate authority – a line of defense used by Eichmann in Jerusalem for example, as described by Hannah Arendt⁵ in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

In face of these different aspects, the introduction of the concept of the human subject can bring a particularly decisive elucidation. Thus, starting from a general definition of the Subject – the capacity of each human being to construct itself, to make its experiences and choices – I came to propose in my book *Violence*⁶ five types of individuals, each one corresponding to a type of subjectivity in relation to violence⁶.

- The fluctuating Subject uses violence for being incapable of becoming an actor. A juvenile coming from a suburb, for example, sets cars on fire because he is unable to express his demands, unable to express his desire to construct his existence.
- The hyper-Subject is the one, which compensates the loss of sense (in case existing) by overabundance, excess is giving him a new sense, ideological, mythical or religious for example.
- The non-Subject is the individual that acts violently without engaging his subjectivity in any way, satisfied to obey like in the famous experiments of Stanley Milgram⁷.
- The anti-Subject is the facet of Subject, which does not recognize the right of the other to be Subject, unable to construct itself but by denying the humanity of his next.
- The surviving Subject, finally, takes resort to this possibility because, regardless all aggressiveness, an individual can feel threatened, even fear for its existence, and passes to act in a violent manner to ensure its survival.

The typology presented here very briefly would certainly deserve to be specified, the terms I use perhaps do not adapt so well anymore – but it must be said that up to now we have no categories for better describing these different types of individuals. It has the advantage of helping us to approach what is the more mysterious, the core of violence: not the frustrations it eventually reveals, not the more or less rational calculations of those, who appear to

this resource in case of need, not the culture from where it arises. It is out of the idea of loss and overabundance of sense that violence is built, the excess and lack it involves; it is the twisted, perverted, or sometimes perverse subjectivity, what makes it possible.

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