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## Violence: A Slippery Notion

### Abstract:

Violence works at the same time as what we find in the world according to our best description of reality, and as what we fight and reject, hoping for a more peaceful world. It may also be what we recommend, as the only way to change things, or even what we celebrate, as the key resource of true art. Sometimes we even think that adequate theory arises from violence against given paradigms. How can it be so? Do we really understand what we refer to when we speak about violence?

### Keywords:

violence, language, capitalism, evil, suffering, Lyotard, energy

The issue of violence is too easily considered to be fundamental in contemporary philosophy. We urgently need a critical evaluation of the way we usually “label” thoughts, texts and practices by the word or concept of violence, which is often used as a flagship term.

As a matter of fact, violence works at the same time as what we find in the world according to our best description of reality, and as what we fight and reject, hoping for a more peaceful world. It may also be what we recommend, as the only way to change things, or even what we celebrate, as the key resource of true art. Sometimes we even think that adequate theory arises from violence against given paradigms. How can it be so? Do we really understand what we refer to when we speak about violence?

In our reading and in our use of violence, we clearly have to recognize the influence of Marxism, which has been so important in shaping our intellectual world since the nineteenth century. *The Communist Manifesto*

teaches that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,”<sup>1</sup> making in some sense violence the core of human history. At least it is so if we understand the meaning of “struggle” as always enfolding violence. At another limit point, we also have Mao ze Dong’s famous saying: “A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.”<sup>2</sup> Such quotes show that violence is not only the actual content of human history, but also the resource for human history to manage the leap “from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom,” to evoke Marx again.<sup>3</sup>

That’s our luggage, where violence is at the same time identified as the essence of historical reality and process, and as the key for escaping our historical damnation by winning for ourselves the truly good society. Sadly enough, Nazism did not see things differently. In one of his talks, Hitler said that what moves historical avalanches always is the power of the masses incited to action by the violence of speech.<sup>4</sup> And we are very well informed that the path towards the new *Reich* (anticipated to last a thousand years) was the path of war.

It is very difficult to set ourselves free from this kind of vision. Even after (possibly) having resigned from Marxist convictions, we cannot help understanding history and becoming in a post-Marxist way. Sometimes we are even tempted to acknowledge violence as the big actor of history, as the big way for the new to find its way through the present. For example, a lot of people of both genders still think that love cannot happen without some original violence, helping it to overcome conventions and habits.

Let’s interrupt such an evocation of our common “pro-violence” prejudice in order to try and analyze what a good definition of violence could be.

## A Definition?

I can hear two semantic components in the word “violence.” One of them is connected with the Latin *vis*, which we would roughly translate as force or strength. That someone did something *magna vi* means that he put great energy into it. Our first component could be described as the energetic component. Still, there is an ambiguity here, between energy and force. In classical Newtonian mechanics, we distinguish a force  $F$  and its work along a path ( $W=\int F \cdot dl$ ): only  $W$  is energy. Energy is the way force expresses itself when it works. Is violence energy or force? Which means: do we understand violence as impulse, disposition, or expense, result? I think that for us the word “*violence*” refers to the actual expense of force. Sometimes we say that we felt violence held in the eyes of someone, which proves that violence would correctly refer only to the exteriorization of such a contained tendency.

The difficulty with the notion of energy is that it is more or less universal. We may see everything as energy, or we may account for everything in terms of energy. Einstein’s equation  $E=mc^2$  has made the point quite famous. We can enter such a perspective without borrowing from physics, though: our spontaneous metaphysics is happy to consider the world as the eternal flow of energy, and things or *concreta* as tempo-

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1) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

2) Mao Tse-Tung, “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan (March 1927),” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. I (Foreign Languages Press: Beijing, 1954), 28.

3) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 25 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 266.

4) “Die Macht, die die großen historischen Lawinen religiöser oder politischer Art ins Rollen brachte, war seit urewig die Zauberkraft des gesprochenen Wortes. Die breite Masse eines Volkes unterliegt der Gewalt der Rede.” Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Munich: Auflage, 1943), 116.

rary stabilizations of such a flow. Hence everything would be violence, actually fleeing from or temporarily held behind the borders of things (potential energy, potential violence). Such a metaphysics does not fit our moral-political purpose, but it helps at universalizing, which is part of our strange and enthusiastic use of the word “violence.”

The second component of the word, as I hear it, is harm, or hurting. We speak of violence each time someone has managed to hurt, to inflict a wound. It is about persons, and the borders of their body or mind. It is about how behaviors coming from persons may invade other persons and cause suffering. According to this second component, the issue of skin becomes crucial. Violence leads to marks on the skin, showing that thrown energy was on the verge of trespassing the barrier of skin, of entering the body. We may also think of psychological invasion as violence, interpreting skin and wound at that higher order level. And we do so, speaking of someone inflicting narcissistic wounds, for example.

The connection between both components is rather self-evident: it takes energy for hurting or damaging. Wounds are the result or impact of the “flow out” of some energy.

Still, there is a third component: seduced by verbal affinity, which anyone speaking a partly Latin language can hear, we also receive *vita* in violence, that is to say *life*. Such a reading sounds like an interpretation of the first reading. We are ready to understand violence as the energetic content of life, and even, to understand life as only truly life when it releases its violence, which would be equivalent to allowing life its freedom. Freedom would always express itself as violence, because true freedom would always mean overcoming the limitation of something or of some law. In such a reading of life as violence it is not disclosed whether harm is also taken. Do we mean that life, as requiring freedom, has to go through hurting, because overcoming limitations cannot but mean hurting those who keep the border? Or should freedom be violent without ever hurting? Nothing from the whole package of such a reading, supporting our third semantic component, is necessary, but I think we all recognize in it conceptions that many people spontaneously bring to the fore.

It appears that violence as a notion stands at the crossroads of universal ontological perspective (energy) and ethical care (damage). Reading life as a legitimate expense of energy, a legitimate trespassing of itself and of any limiting device, amounts to eliminating the tension between both dimensions. Energy becomes good per se, as expression of life, and even hurting other people may appear as part of such “ontological good”, the good of life’s self-expression. We all know that the divinization and absolutization of life comes with a great ethical risk. We cannot but remember that the Nazis used to preach such a gospel, calling people to forget about the moral victimization of life, and to let its good and natural strength express itself (manufacturing and fashioning Nietzschean philosophy).

In any case, this position of violence at such a juncture point explains why it is so difficult for us to deal with the notion, both at the epistemological and at the ethical-political level. Let us now have a quick look into our difficulties with violence.

### Using the Notion of Violence

What we know about violence is, for example, that the threat of violence can “persuade” us to do anything. Isn’t it hilarious, someone says that they would never ever do such and such, and ten seconds later, getting a gun pointed at them, they do it? The comical side of violence has been used in many movies. It is strange to think that a lot of serious scholars still keep on associating violence with freedom. Is it really possible to think that the flow of violence in us and towards the world is the “way of freedom”, and that nevertheless it becomes its very negation when used as a terror weapon? Some think it is indeed possible. This only shows the same power in its two incompatible aspects.

Another thing we know as well, from the same “historical” experience, is that violence works as a kind of contagious disease. When we meet violence, we are tempted to enter it, to become part of it.

We see that in movies, for example, in the classical scene where a big fight arises in a bar, and a few seconds after two people came to exchange violence in the context of some disagreement, every attending customer takes part in it. That scene appeared very often in westerns.

We see that in René Girard’s thought. He describes an original “sacrificial crisis”, which amounts to the discovery by human collectivities that one murder calls for another murder, and so on, the logic of such unfolding meaning that any community can vanish by self-destruction at any moment.

And the same contagion was positively mentioned in Georges Sorel’s description of the strike picket. Seeing workers opposing their bodies to the ones wishing to enter the factory and work inside it, they feel included in a corresponding violence, and in such feeling the mythical unity of the working-class surfaces. Shared violence is what unites us (and what gives us the force for building a new world, one understands).<sup>5</sup>

With respect to such figures of violence, we understand the role and importance of language. Language, as a matter of fact, appears as the other of violence, for at least three reasons:

1) Language does not use much energy, it does not run on a heavy expense of energy. Language seems similar to our computers: we do not even take them into account when anticipating our electricity bill (what counts more are the dish washer, the laundry machine, and maybe our electric heating system). We manage to speak, and even in a quite living and dynamic way, when we are ill, at bed, exhausted.

2) Language seems to escape the bodily level of experience. Surely, we produce the sound of words with our body, but our words cannot physically harm our addressee. Production of words and reception of words is always lived at the semantic level: I do not emit successively the sound of “h”, “o”, “u”, “s” and “e”, I utter the meaning “house”. Similarly, I never come back to the distinguishing the acoustic components that come to my auditory reception, I immediately receive the meaning as such. Linguistic exchange happens by definition at the non-bodily level of meaning.

3) Language seems to include a kind of a priori recognition of the other person: as far as I address her/him, they are posited in my framework. Does it not preclude hurting?

And in a way, what we call civilization is very much about replacing violent intercourse by linguistic procedures. In contemporary society, we may think of the systematic and maybe fake politeness of discourse in the consumer context: employees in charge of sales go through learned linguistic patterns, sounding awfully nice and even sweet. Still, it is true that social rite is made of language and has managed to suppress a lot of violence, leading to a world that is most of the time peaceful (even if we only consider the exceptions to that order).

When Lyotard began to use the paradigm of language in order to think about and analyze society and the multifarious forms of social conflict, he spontaneously understood violence or terror as those behaviors forbidding others to bring any new contribution to dialog by killing them. Politics in his view was very much about preventing terror in this sense, which meant maintaining linguistic exchange. To say and think that fighting against violence and terror means defending the level of language makes sense.

Still, at the same time we know that violence finds its way within language. We do qualify some speeches as violent. To begin with, a speech act may be violent at the perlocutionary level: it happened that I have howled, and my addressee felt something in their ears and body; or I pictured my addressee as a plump person, and they suffered at the psychological level. We could characterize such speeches as violent, because there is inflicted harm. In the first case, harm comes through energy expense, but not in the second case.

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5) For a quick and synthetic view of Sorel’s ideas, see Marc Crépon, “Les promesses d’un mot: la grève générale (Sorel lecteur de Nietzsche),” in *Le moment 1900 en philosophie*, ed. Frédéric Worms (Lille: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2004), 401–413.

As a matter of fact, we are ready to speak of violence even in apparently weaker cases. I will give two academic examples. Recently, in a meeting of our research team, one of my colleagues mentioned, “the research interest of A” (A being another member of the team, attending the meeting). Our colleague felt afterwards that such way of speaking was violent because he seemed to take the researched field of A as easily and immediately graspable, because he did not clearly picture it as a plural and rich field. His guilt is explained in part by the ritual hyper-politeness of mutual assessment in such circumstances. Still the interesting idea is that violence, here, means assigning things: language is violent when it attributes its identity to what should not be too quickly or too easily assigned.

Another example: the first time I heard my friend and colleague Frédéric Worms say that according to him the fourth moment of philosophy in France, coming after the moment of structure, difference and identity (the 68 moment), was the moment of life and justice, I told him I felt the very decision of pronouncing the meaning of our shared present as such was violent. And many years later, he told me that he vividly remembered what I had said. As I came to understand, he had felt my violence imputation as violent. Again, the issue is about assignment. I reacted in that way because, in my eyes, the way we should qualify the ongoing moment was a sensitive issue for any living philosopher, and we could not assign anything without caring for others (clearly, a strong reason for my uneasiness was that I did not recognize my work as coming under the labels of life and justice!).

Perhaps we are ready to see such utterances as violent. But is it so easy to accept it? Do we not have a strong difference between violence in the sense of inflicting harm in an energetic way, and violence as linguistic assignment? Especially when we consider the fact that linguistic expression will never refrain from assigning, how could our speech not declare that something is such and such? Can it be always violent to say so?

We see the difficulty better if we consider another important example, well known in our political tradition: the notion of “violence of the system”. It is a classical justification for “revolutionary” violence to picture it as a mere answer to the silent and usually invisible violence of the system. Quite recently in France the members of the so called “Black Block” – inserting themselves, masked, into demonstrations and taking the opportunity to damage buildings and goods regarded as symbols or expressions of contemporary capitalism (expensive cars or store windows of banks) – have used again this very old piece of argument. Marx was describing capitalism mostly as concealed theft, here it is considered as implicit violence. Even, in some cases, it is analyzed as mass murder: I have heard people seeing capitalism as having without any issue decided poverty and death for the whole African continent.

Here the issue is, for our present reflection: can we consider the violence of language or the violence of capitalism as the same kind of violence we tried to define until now? Capitalism, if it is something, is a system or a rule for producing and exchanging goods. More or less a habit, in the best case resting on some social agreement: a habit which gives rise to technical performances, resulting from applying its rules. Capitalism would be something like a social language, strongly entrenched in European humanity at least. When we say that capitalism is violent, we mean that its rules do not care for the bad consequences that people suffer from it: banks are likely to enjoy their success even if more and more poor people live on the streets, or even if development forgets African nations. The characteristic feature of capitalism is indifference. Marx already saw it and explained it, but we know it much better today. That is the reason why we cannot expect capitalism to satisfy the demands of ethics by itself or at its own level. Still, capitalism, as this historical habit we just tried to grasp, remains indifferent when it brings people material improvement of their condition. It happened so in western countries during the (long) period of what Axel Honneth calls the social-democratic state, having emerged in the context of the prosperous thirty years after the Second World War. It seems that today, capitalism is developing Africa, not out of generosity, but because it finds there its best path towards growth.



When capitalism harms people, do we find some flowing of energy? Surely, on the whole capitalism uses energy, as is very well known when we reflect upon the connection between an oil barrel's price and international growth. In many ways, it does nothing else than convey and organize various forms of energy, Marx's labor power being one of these energies. But precisely because the leading character is indifference, energy that is conveyed and structured by capitalism is not so to say "thrown" towards victims. People are going to suffer because they work too much, are in bad sanitary conditions, and receive too poor a salary to be able to cope, or, on the contrary, because they cannot find a job. The general form of capitalist sufferance is collateral damage, which is not the same as violence according to the fundamental definition adopted here.

The case of alleged "linguistic violence" is again different. In the case of perlocutionary violence, we have the feature of "inflicting harm", and even "intentionally inflicting harm", but it does not happen through the flow of energy. In the case of assigning violence, we may not even have inflicted harm (although if we speak of violence, I would say, it is because we imagine such felt harm). But harm does not directly follow from what could be called the gesture of the utterance. It seems to result, more or less like in the case of capitalism, from anticipation of a kind of economy of thought and representation that we see as resulting from the assignment gesture, and we understand that it could harm people as a kind of collateral damage.

One could say, "why should we avoid using the word violence in all cases?" After all, there is a family resemblance between all the uses we have considered, and is not there always this kind of looseness of use when we analyze the meaning of a heterogenous variety? What is the price of such generalization? Before giving an answer, I would like to take a digression, mentioning the way the Talmud justifies the principle that we should not hurt our neighbor.

It does so by referring to the juridical case of a penalty which consists in inflicting a certain number of hits (thirty-nine, to be exact). When considering the possibility that the punisher "overdoes" his punishment, even by, for example, giving only one more hit than is allowed, the Talmud explains that this is forbidden. The text roughly says, "fearing that someone adds, and that his brother gets debased for his eyes." General reasoning then says, "if even when hurting others is prescribed by law it is not allowed to add to the penalty, then any private violence is forbidden." Two things are important here. First, the command against violence arises in a scene that witnesses a violent world: hurting the other person is seen as adding violence to violence. Second, what is pictured is a kind of bond or even of an equivalent connection between the free private addition of violence and a victim feeling depreciated (appearing as depreciated also to their perpetrator).

If we follow such a perspective, it seems that we cannot regard as violence something which is not an arbitrary addition of violence. The context of an energetic world, with a dangerous economy underlying all our processes, is not enough for speaking of violence. True violence, which should be fought against and which is forbidden, concerns an arbitrary addition entering a kind of minimal reciprocal drama, where depreciation of a person answers private arbitrary addition. The core of violence resides in such a drama.

Therefore, our additional case studies are not pure cases. The violence of the system may very well be, at certain crossroads of history, the main thing to consider for genuine humanistic concern. Still, it is not violence strictly speaking, because it does not bring about a dual, personal drama, it does not even enfold a private arbitrary addition. Harm may result here, in some cases, even from a non-violent process.

Linguistic violence would be acceptable violence in the case of perlocutionary hurting. We may have a reciprocal drama in the case of someone letting themselves utter something about the other person being overweight and seeing immediately self-depreciation in their eyes. Still we feel something different: as painful as it may be, such violence is not "violence" in the same way as hitting the other's face with your foot is. It seems to be part of our notion of violence that the body is the sacred basis of any subjectivity. What happens at another level always allows ways for self-depreciation to be avoided.

The violence of assignment does not prompt the drama of putting together, as reciprocal features, the private addition of violence and depreciation of the victim, at least in most cases, or at least in cases where violence of assignment does not coincide with perlocutionary psychological damage. When Frédéric Worms asserts that the new moment of French Philosophy is about life and justice, he does not make a point against me: the reason why I see his intellectual gesture as violence is rather that he did not think of me at all! More generally, violence of assignment is more or less captured in all of the work of Derrida, and it does not mean any kind of dual drama (in addition, it, as we already saw, does not clearly refer to any energy flow). The violence of assignment, in his perspective, is construed as violence of the transcendental. Derrida understands shared language as shaping the transcendental all the time, and as “violent” in the sense that it predetermines uttered and received meaning. Such violence, in his conception, expresses a kind of necessity of meaning, being and language. It is violence in the sense of limitation, prejudice, it is violence because it wrongs something like free play or openness. The metaphor of policing is perhaps always implicitly called upon here, which connects with the usual notion of violence. Still, a priori police cannot be equated with a posteriori police. Limitations coming from transcendental decisions of language do not need truncheons.

The Derridean version of assignment violence helps us to realize that it is quite a different sort of violence, that it brings us beyond our notion of violence, as, more or less, violence of the system was interpreted earlier in the essay. One big tenet or insight of French philosophy in the sixties and the seventies was, as a matter of fact, the analogy of system and language: authors of this period were always using our understanding of structural necessity in order to stage the social system and regularities of democratic-capitalistic societies, and at the same time they tended to describe our being determined by structures in political terms.

We have not answered our original question, which was: 1) How do we speak of violence in so many distinctively different ways? 2) What is the sense of it, what is the value of it, and should we go on doing so?

I think what the preceding reflections suggest is that we should not believe in a mysterious unity of the aspects of violence. Each time we postulate something of that kind, on the one hand we do not respect situations and realities, and on the other hand we take the risk of some form of evil.

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