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VIOLENCE AND THE SUBJECT

Michel Wieviorka

ABSTRACT Violence confronts us increasingly, everywhere: how are we to make sense of it? Its ubiquity begs the question of analytical differentiation. This article seeks to open the field by suggesting a fivefold typology: violence as loss of meaning; violence as non-sense; violence as cruelty; fundamental violence; and founding violence. The idea of analytically differentiating between types of violence cannot avoid the fact that sometimes victims are also perpetrators in other ways, and that even violent activity is not conducted only by essentially violent subjects. Violence needs to be connected to modernity and to problems of identity formation and not only to personal or collective risk.

KEYWORDS actors • desubjectivation • perpetrators • subjectivation • victims • violence

Violence evokes three main types of response from its witnesses. These correspond to the three major analytical approaches specific to political science and the social sciences. A *first* approach consists in seeing violence as a response, the behavioural reaction of actors expressing, for example, their frustrations in a situation that has become unbearable or too unfavourable for them. There are numerous studies in the field of sociology, social psychology or political science that insist, for example, on the idea of relative deprivation, as Alexis de Tocqueville (1967) anticipated when he observed that popular discontent rises to the point of violence when prosperity increases. He noted that

those parts of France which were about to become the chief centres of this revolution were precisely the parts of the territory where the work of improvement was most perceptible (. . .) So it might be said that the more intolerable the French found their position, the better it became.

A *second* very different approach, is to see violence as a resource mobilized by an actor. In this instance, the actor is defined by calculations, personal

or collective strategies, violence is instrumental. This theory is close to utilitarianism. Since the late 1960s, sociologists, historians and political scientists in particular have developed and used what is known as resource mobilization theory, which insists on the rationality of violent actors, for example in riots and in crowd behaviour. Finally, a *third* important approach explains violence in terms of the predispositions that make it possible, viewed in terms of the culture that permeates the protagonists, their particular type of personality, which has been shaped by this culture in education and in the family. There are numerous illustrations of this type of paradigm ranging from Theodor Adorno's *Authoritarian Personality* (1960) to Daniel Goldhagen (1996), who sets German antisemitism and its historical depth at the core of his analysis of the behaviour of *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.

Of course, there are other possible approaches, some of which deserve to be at least mentioned here. Most of them have in common a feature that they share with those which I have chosen to quote: the explanation of violence that they propose never explores to any great extent the processes of subjectivation and desubjectivation which are, as I want to demonstrate, at the centre of the phenomenon. To put it differently: if we focus our analysis on the subject, we can shed light in a useful and sometimes innovative manner on this deeply significant question of violence.

1. VIOLENCE AS LOSS OF MEANING

In some situations, violence seems to correspond to a loss of meaning, to a vacuum that it fills. Two distinct scenarios merit examination. In the first, violence seems purely and simply to replace meaning that is either absent or in some way defective. For example, in some terrorist situations, violence corresponds to the decline of a social relationship, a conflict, or, symmetrically to its initial phases; this is the case in the social and political history of France, if we take the anarchist terrorism that preceded the formation of the working class movement at the end of the 19th century. Violence here is an indication of loss or of expectation of meaning. It is a form of subjectivity with no particular social or political content; it corresponds to an emerging social problem which has not yet taken the form of an institutionalized social conflict in the making.

In the second scenario, violence may correspond simultaneously to the fading or the disappearance of meaning, and the adoption of a new meaning by the protagonist of violence on which his or her involvement or practice is based. In this instance the bearer of violence maintains an intense subjectivity diametrically opposed to nihilism as he or she comes back to life in a new social and political space, quite different from the one in which he or she was originally constituted. This is the case for example with certain extreme forms of radical Islamism, when terrorists have disengaged themselves from the social and political relationships in which they were moulded

to public life, and have moved away from the internal problems specific to their original society to the extent that they destroy themselves in their aim to attack the United States, believing that this will ensure their salvation, recognition and happiness, including sexual bliss, in another world. Here violence goes along with an excess of meaning, a plethora of meanings; it enables the protagonist to contextualize him- or herself in a metasocial space, which is partly dreamworld, partly religious in the realm of the hypersubjection in which the personal subject asserts him- or herself not here and now, but mainly elsewhere and in another temporal realm.

2. VIOLENCE AS NON-SENSE

Would it not be better to speak of non-sense, rather than loss of sense or meaning and profusion of meanings? This discussion is at its most forceful and, at the same time, its most horrible, in the case of Nazi barbarism.

In a book that caused considerable controversy (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 1964), Hannah Arendt, after having followed the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, formulated the idea of the banality of evil. She explained that, if one took the case of Eichmann, the extreme violence of the Nazis was the outcome or expression of a culture of obedience. This is an idea that originates as far back as the celebrated *Discours de la servitude volontaire* by Etienne de la Boétie (1993), and which makes of the executioner a sort of bureaucrat 'who would have sent his own father to his death if he had received the order to do so'. This idea is also to be found in the well-known experiments carried out by Stanley Milgram (1974). In these, he purported to demonstrate that when placed in a situation of obedience to a legitimate authority (in this instance the authority was scientific), agents may very well carry out the worst forms of barbarism, administering electric shocks to victims without there being the slightest idea of satisfaction of an aggressive impulse, sadism or cruelty.

In this perspective of obedience to authority and submission to authority, the executioner is neither subject nor, less still, engaged in a logic of hypersubjection. He is defined by passivity, by indifference to his own gestures, and is reduced to being the agent of bureaucratic instructions. Here we are dealing with a desubjectivated or non-subjectivated person who is a link in a chain in victimization which reminds one of a system without actors apart from the leader or leaders. The executioner does his duty, as Eichmann said repeatedly during his trial; Arendt says he is not stupid, he is unaware, 'and it is uniquely his unawareness which makes of him one of the major criminals of his time' (1964: 314). He is incapable of reflexivity, of distancing himself from his acts.

The thesis of the banality of evil makes of violence a rational, cold, instrumental form of behaviour, which ultimately has to fight on two fronts. On the one hand, this cold violence conflicts with possible moral values,

something of which the Nazi leaders were well aware. Hannah Arendt quotes Himmler speaking to those in charge of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the SS and the police chiefs who were to carry out the mass massacres. Himmler says to them: 'We know that what we expect of you is "superhuman": you will have to be superhumanly human'. Arendt points out that the Nazi assassins were not by nature assassins, 'were not sadists'. The Nazis even attempted to systematically eliminate those who took physical pleasure in their actions. Instead of saying: 'What dreadful things I have done!', the assassins were able to say: 'What dreadful things I have had to do in carrying out my duty; how difficult this task has been for me' (1964: 122). This leads us to the second front on which bureaucratic violence has to fight: that of sadism, cruelty and hatred. And here the historical, material relevance of the thesis of the banality of evil is hotly challenged, because, on the contrary, countless documents reveal on the part of the executioners, if not sadism or cruelty – though this existed as well, as Primo Levi (1989) has shown – at least hatred. This is the strength of Daniel J. Goldhagen's book (1996) which also caused a considerable stir, for he puts hatred of the Jews at the core of the analysis of their destruction by the Germans.

But do not let us move too quickly. Insofar as the thesis of the banality of evil does afford an explanation, if only in part, could it not be backed up by the theme of obedience to authority, as well as by other theses which are allied thereto, for example that of conformism? Some killers may participate in the massacre so as not to leave their fellow soldiers to do the dirty work all alone. This is what Christopher Browning (1992) suggests in an equally important book. A division of labour would not give the agents an overall view of the extermination project. The main characteristic of this thesis, therefore, as of all those which in the last resort exonerate the agents from any sort of moral responsibility for their actions, is to make non-subjects of them.

3. CRUELTY, SADISM AND GRATUITOUS VIOLENCE

In other experiments, or the same seen from another angle, violence seems to be disconnected from any meaning and no longer to correspond to the pleasure or the impulses of its protagonist. It is disconnected from any meaning other than the enjoyment that it procures; it can only be understood in reference to itself. An example that is often quoted is that of Gilles de Rais, the author of abominable crimes involving children in the 15th century, referred to by Georges Bataille, and more recently by Wolfgang Sofsky (1996). Cruelty here seems

to have some sort of meaning which transcends it (...). Here we find the enjoyment of the excess, the mocking contempt for the suffering of the victims, the overstepping of the affect. We find here the indifference of the habitual, the repetitive ritual of the staging, the ordered sequence of the slaughtering. We find here creativity in the excess. (Sofsky, 1996: 46)

Another example, on rather a small scale when compared with the example of the Nazis, to be sure, is that of the descriptions that Bill Buford (1991) gives of the British 'hooligans' when they take advantage of the occasion afforded by a football match to travel to the town in question. They are not very interested in the football match and its result but rather spend their time in extremely violent street fights, in opposition to all those they meet on their way.

But to return to Nazism: when we read Browning's books and, even more so, Goldhagen, we are struck by the number of occasions that correspond to cruelty, to an excess compared with what could be expected from violence corresponding to specific aims. Even if we agree with Goldhagen's central thesis, that it is 'the ideas about Jews which have been widespread throughout Germany, for decades, which have led ordinary Germans to kill unarmed, defenceless Jewish men, women and children in their thousands, systematically and without the slightest pity' (1996: 17), we still have to account for this apparently superfluous or useless excess of cruelty of which we have countless examples. Browning recounts one such incident in connection with an action (27 June 1941) in the battalion that he studied:

blows, humiliations, beards burnt, free shots at Jews taken to the market place or the synagogue. When several leaders of the Jewish community went to the headquarters of General Pflugbeil's 221st security division and begged him on bended knees to give them army protection, a policeman of the 309th battalion opened his flies and urinated on them while the general turned his back on the scene. Then, what had begun as a pogrom rapidly became a systematic massacre. (Browning, 1992: 26)

On 27 October, another killing was the subject of a report by the head of regional administration in Slutsk (Lithuania): 'it is with great regret that I am forced to insist on the fact that, at the very least, this action was limited to sadism' (Browning, 1992: 38).

My problem here is not to enter into the historical discussion about the nature of Nazism but simply to identify, in this experience, the elements that refer to the idea of cruelty, to sadism or to violence for the sake of violence. We need to discuss whether cruelty or sadism corresponds really to the idea of gratuitous violence, uniquely to the 'pleasure of the expansion of the self' to quote Sofsky (1996: 89). Do they not on the contrary have a degree of functionality, for example, that of enabling the perpetrators to consider themselves as still human by making an animal of the other and treating them as such – a hypothesis which is to be found in the writing of Primo Levi? I will leave the question open and accept as a hypothesis the possibility of mindless violence which has no function other than enjoyment and sadism.

Violence here is unrestrained, a pure quest for pleasure, it is subjectivation in action, it goes further than the initial meanings, it goes beyond them even if it is borne by them and, in particular, if we agree with Goldhagen,

by actual hatred of the Jews. It seems to me that in this strange aspect, it corresponds to this part of the subject that is not translated into a social, intercultural, political or interpersonal relationship apart from one of sadism and, in the last resort, into other experiences, such as sadomasochism. This is this part of the subject that I am tempted to refer to as the antisubject to indicate that it denies the other any subjectivity, that it makes of its victim something animal or subhuman, that it reifies the victim, there where what remains of the subject recognizes in others the same virtualities of subjectivation as it expects for itself, with the same right to construct itself as an individual being.

4. FUNDAMENTAL VIOLENCE

This image of violence should not be confused with another – with what Jean Bergeret has termed fundamental violence. According to this psychoanalyst, fundamental violence is not a question of aggressiveness, far less of any sort of sadism but of the survival instinct. In his interpretation, this is evident in particular in juvenile forms of behaviour, what is sometimes known as urban violence; it also refers us back to the non-social part of the subject. But here it is not defined by the active negation of the other as subject, even if the outcome may be his or her destruction, or challenge to his or her physical integrity. It is the expression of persons who feel that their existence is threatened and they are in danger of death. This violence gives an image of the subject in an ‘unrefined’ state; it emerges because before even attempting to construct him- or herself, the individual person must exist, must protect his or her physical being, must save his or her life and thus conserve the possibility of becoming the actor of his or her existence at a later point in time by refusing the prospect of being crushed or negated. Fundamental violence as defined by Bergeret does seem to me to constitute a form or an elementary stage of the subject.

5. FOUNDING VIOLENCE

When we interviewed young people who had participated in urban riots in the 1990s, they often said that violence had given them the chance, sometimes of a lifetime, of escape from an everyday life that was absurd, had no horizon or perspectives and was dominated by boredom. They often said that these were strange times; from that point they went on to make other discoveries, to see life differently, to get involved in social, cultural, political and religious activities that were totally unthinkable before. Some got actively involved in running associations that were often controversial, transforming the diffuse expectations of young people into a conflict with the local authority; others became interested in their bodies and did dance or sport, while others discovered Islam, or created a music group with friends, and so on. Here, violence is the factor that triggered off subjectivation. This reminds us

of Frantz Fanon (1964), who explained that it is in the violent rupture with the colonizer that the colonized cease to be mere things and become human beings.

There is nothing to prove that the process thus set in motion will continue over time and in the same direction. The phase of subjectivation can very well be reversed, and an inversion take place with, for example, the person concerned getting involved in a vicious circle of delinquency which will speed passage into incarceration. We are simply considering this phase during which a capacity for self-construction, a capacity to become involved in an action that will possibly be controversial and to develop creativity is asserted. Here violence is one of the founding elements of the subject. This is something that is totally separate from the elements that social anthropologists often stress when they become interested in violence as a founding element, seeing therein the source, or the foundation of collective life, of the community and the group.

6. SOME CONSEQUENCES

These few remarks are in no way systematic, or definitive of the possible links between violence and the subject. This is an outline of a typology of the forms of this relation, since, in function of the experience (or also, perhaps depending on the stress that the researcher puts on particular aspects of its dimensions), violence may correspond to

- the loss of meaning by the subject who is moving away from a material link with a real world that escapes him, or which takes time to constitute,
- a hypersubjectivity, an overload or a plethora of meanings,
- the desubjectivation of the non-subject capable of giving himself up to the banality of evil,
- the expression or the liberation of the antisubject, who moves on to cruelty, sadism and makes of violence an end in itself,
- or an elementary expression of the subject aimed at conserving his very being or its foundation.

A typology of this sort, even in its bare outlines, by demonstrating that violence corresponds to varied and heterogeneous situations and experiences invites us in the first instance to stop thinking of violence as a single undifferentiated category. It can then contribute to practical considerations aimed at reducing violence and insecurity in a society like ours. Is it not the case that violence is considered a highly topical issue in community life and one of the most important in contemporary political discussions? If violence has such a varied range of meanings for the subject, public policy will have to be drawn up in an equally varied manner; it will not suffice to content ourselves with the elementary division between repression and prevention. This

leads us to question whether certain conditions are more propitious than others to specific types of violence and refers us back to the question of the state – but that is another story.

This typology also invites us to think of the links between the various types of violence and their relation to the subject. How, for example, in practice, is the logic of cruelty countered, or not, by that of the banality of evil and under what conditions does it reappear? One can thus read Browning's book by interpreting the violent behaviour of the 101st Battalion as an experience marked at the outset by moral reticence, or by the disgust that some at least felt at the horror of the violence, while later a dialectic of the banality of evil and of cruelty seems to have possessed them or, if you prefer it, of obedience to authority and sadism.

This sort of typology is also an invitation to develop research on violence by stressing its component elements, not so much in their obvious or banal aspects such as the dimensions of reaction or instrumentalism, their links with culture or with personality – insofar as this type of approach is relevant – but in their extreme, radical or unexpected aspects and those which constitute in reality if not its essence, at least its most mysterious aspects. Sociologically speaking, the central forms of violence are undoubtedly its most extreme forms and not those that are the most significant historically or materially, except when the sociological meanings coincide with historical importance, as in situations such as Nazism and the Algerian war.

Finally, while there does seem to be a critical link between violence and the subject, to date our examination has been from the point of view of the perpetrator. This approach only covers one part of the question as violence only exists because it affects victims. There is no reason why we should postulate a single situation or a homogenous logic here either. If we adopt the victim's point of view, it is also to demonstrate that violence can, depending on the situation, destroy or negate subjectivity, but also in the long run produce elements of the antisubject, forms of personality that will themselves be tempted to reproduce the type of violence to which they have been subjected. This is a classical theme in criminology, as Carole Damiani reminds us. Damiani is a psychologist with the dual experience of working in prisons (therefore from the aggressors' point of view) and with an association for the support of victims (therefore from the other side). She says:

When I worked with the victims, I realised that very little separated the frontier between some of them and the prisoners for whom I was responsible (...). The perpetrators have often been victims and even if there is nothing to prove that one thing leads to another in this field, we can understand that helping the victims is quite simply a way of preventing delinquency, and incest in particular. (Damiani in Bayart, 1996: 9–10)

For the victims, the violence to which they have been subjected can be an element in the formation of the antisubject, but also of the subject. For

them, also, it can play a role in the processes of subjectivation and desubjectivation.

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