

# Systemic Violence

## Typicalities and Peculiarities of Violence in Our Time

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*Excerpted from a presentation by Wolf-Dieter Narr, Free University of Berlin*

Violence is everywhere. It is a universal phenomenon. Vertically and horizontally: *Urbi et orbi*. It seems to be almost an ontological given, an essential part of the human condition related as it is between natality and mortality.

Violence is everywhere today. It is implicit and lurks explicit in all kinds of aspects, configurations, dimensions and contexts. It ranges from collective violence in the extremes of wars, i.e. mass murder and genocidal “purges”... to violence in cities and families, particularly and especially apparent in the violence of male “people” against female “people.”

This extensive and intensive universality of violence notwithstanding, there is quite an

astonishing silence about violence at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century—at least in Western societies and their social sciences. Or to put it more correctly: according to the established mainstreams of thought and their formulas of power, violence is always a phenomenon of the generalized and the specific other. Violence is the expression of the individual and/or the collective outsider, or of marginalized people here and there. Therefore it has to be criminalized and punished either by humanitarian “interventions,” the present day just wars for example against the “rogue states,” or by criminal law procedures of various kinds, that is to say as the defense of given normalities against the permanent threat of the challenges of abnormal, i.e. anomic, behaviour.

Do utopian dreams of non-violent behaviour patterns become true? The slow, but steady expansion of civilization in a civilizing manner seems to be nothing else but the implementation of human progress hoped for since paradise lost. Taking as a symptom the astonishingly (from another point of view, the depressingly) joint language of the political personnel at large, and the (therefore) influential representatives of the social sciences, there can be no doubt: “We,” the “West,” the “North,” the OECD countries, these wonderful tandems created out of liberal democratic constitutions and freewheeling capitalism, move ahead—always—in the right direction. It is risky of course, but with risks to be taken, to pursue the golden path of global growth and its worldwide welfare dividends. “We” are moving toward a “global civil society,” its individuals competing for higher and higher achievements. The Olympic Games are both a metaphor and a “reality,” the real thing at one and the same time.

To give a hint for a possible proof of the general assertions I just have made: if one would try to summarize most of the literature on all kinds of global trends and global transformations, one would have to state two facts. First, the lack of any analysis of the inbuilt violence in regard to the main factors and driving forces of globalization; second, all indications in regard to the big problems ahead notwithstanding, an overwhelming “new positivism” exists, as I call it, of the will to power of “positive thinking”. It goes without saying that this kind of “positivism” is part of the almost structurally deceptive (pseudo-) politics in these media times. But this kind of “positivism” is part and parcel of the mainstream of the social sciences too, which encompasses about 99% of all kinds of activities that could be labeled social scientific. Insofar one could safely state: “we”—of the West/ North, of course, are living in safe quarters in the middle of our cities and faculties—“we” are all positivists now.

### *What about “violence”?*

Equivalent to its universal chameleon and Proteus-like expression there is no term “violence,” let alone a concept, which could be used comparatively *distincte et claire*. As soon as one begins to determine the term, and as soon as one tries to be precise, to limit its aspects, dimensions and meanings, one faces the danger of covering up, of accepting quite a few non-decisions, i.e. premises which have to be taken for granted and which make one accept as given the dominant or opposing concept of “reality” and the advantages or disadvantages of this “reality”. It is not by chance that in one of the leading German dictionaries the overview about the various meanings and the multitude of uses of the term “violence”—in German



*Gewalt*—is probably the longest one (Cf. *Deutsches Wörterbuch* of Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm, Munich 1984 Vol.6, pp. 4910–5234).

As a political scientist and someone analytically and primarily concerned with the modern state (and its “monopoly of the legitimate use of coercive power/or physical violence”) and normatively oriented to what I call a materialistic concept of human rights, I tend to focus primarily on violence as a “physical fact”. But as soon as I limit my focus on violence to its physical expressions only, I would not be able to conceive of the meaning of the modern state and its pretension, to possess “the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical violence.” I would fall into the trap of the—seeming—immediacy of physical violence. All its mediations and cover-ups, all its institutional, even its structural preconditions and contexts would escape my sight. Out of these extremely sketchy thoughts so far let me pose a necessary cautionary conclusion that might be an adequate beginning: there can be and there should not be a clear-cut definition of what violence is all about. Such a clear-cut definition would not enable us to come to grips with the multi-headed, labyrinthine-like intriguing phenomenon of violence. It would make us insensitive and indolent toward violence—even in its physical expression, and especially in regard

to violence as an extraordinary mediated phenomenon. The levels and escalators of mediation increase quite a bit in the process, which is called modernity or civilization.

There are quite a few dangers implicit in the use of the term violence in such an undetermined manner. First, as a vague term it becomes acritical. It cannot be used for analysis, which has to specify some conditions, if not causal factors, more than the other ones. Otherwise “the man without qualities” (Robert Musil’s novel) will be matched by an oxymoronic analysis without qualities, i.e. its exclusion. Michel Foucault’s universalization of the term “power”

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is in danger of having such an effect. It enables us to discover all kinds of power everywhere. That’s an enormous analytical progress. At the same time, it disables us to point out specific power relations in order to give a rank order to them. It tends to make us “Polyphemic”. Asked what we would have to criticize, we cry, “power”; asked what our criticism is all about, we cry again “power.” Then why should we care about it, if power is everywhere and, therefore in a way,

nowhere?

My last criticism of a catchall criticism, which becomes acritical, links the first with the second objection, i.e. the “postmodern” one. If almost all social events have something to do with violence, if everybody has to construe his or her concept of violence him-, or herself, why care about it? Everybody construes his/her own term and deconstrues all the other ones. What a joyful game of irrelevant terminological tennis. Everybody wins and loses at least once in a while and according to the circumstances.

This postmodernist stance misses examining itself as could be proven epistemologically even on its own premises. The latter are naively kept secret—the pretentious attitude of reflection notwithstanding. No doubt, Nietzsche has definitively taught us these dangers. There is no recognition possible without a specific “subjective” and even a personal perspective. But what we face as “reality,” as a “natural” and as a “cultural” one is not just arbitrarily composed. It cannot be construed just as we like it. To use an Orwellian phrase: all phenomena of violence are equal, but there are some violences, their conditions and their effects, which are more violent and more “equal”—that is, influential than the other ones. And this inequality, this hierarchy between various forms of violence—that is it what counts, analytically as well as normatively.

