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Professor Jeffrey C. Alexander, Yale University

violence •

[a new approach]

Michel Wieviorka



Violence

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Michel Wieviorka

Translated by David Macey



Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore • Washington DC

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
PART I TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM	5
Introduction	7
1 Violence and Conflict	9
The Experience of the Workers' Movement	11
The End of the Cold War	17
Limited Conflicts	20
Against Georges Sorel – With Frantz Fanon	21
Conclusion	24
2 Violence and the State	27
Does the State Lie at the Heart of the Problem?	27
The Great Disorder	28
Taking State Power and Creating States	31
From Political Violence to Infra- and Metapolitical Violence	34
The Violence of the Individual	38
Intellectuals and Violence	41
On a Famous Remark by Max Weber	42
3 The Emergence of Victims	49
Birth of the Victim	50
Violence as a Negation of the Subject	59
4 Violence and the Media	67
Terrorism and the Media	68
The Objectivity and Subjectivity of Violence	72
The Violence of Images	75
Conclusion: The Limitations of Classical Sociology	88
Expressivity and Instrumentality	88
What Traditional Approaches Fail to Take into Account	92

PART II THE MARK OF THE SUBJECT	97
Introduction	99
5 Violence, Loss of Meaning, and Excess Meaning	101
Loss of Meaning	102
A Plethora of Meaning	108
Self-Destruction	110
6 The Non-Meaning Hypothesis	114
7 Cruelty	125
Excess, <i>Jouissance</i> , and Madness	125
<i>Jouissance</i>	129
The Functionality of Cruelty	130
The Importance of the Situation	135
8 The Mark of the Subject	144
The Notion of the Subject	145
Violence and the Subject	147
Five Figures of the Subject	149
Foundational Violence	159
Conclusion	165
A Major Dilemma	165
Good and Evil	166
Bibliography	171
Index	181

INTRODUCTION

If we define and desire modernity as a progressive stage in humanity's history or as an advance on the part of reason and a retreat on the part of traditions and obscurantism, two main conceptions of violence fall almost naturally into place. The first grants it great legitimacy and expects it to play, if need be, a revolutionary role. As Frederick Engels puts it (1976 [1878]: 235–6), 'In the words of Marx, it is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one ... the instrument by means of which every social movement forces its way through and shatters the dead, fossilized political forms'. According to the second, violence will inevitably decline as reason comes to the fore. This latter conception has inspired broad socio-historical approaches, as in the major (1994 [1939]) study in which Norbert Elias reconstructed the civilizational process that allowed Europeans to internalize, control and therefore reduce their violence from the Renaissance onwards. It has also provided the theme for more empirical and less ambitious studies, such as Jean-Claude Chesnais's long-term statistically-based (1981) study, which demonstrated that the number of acts of violence has quite simply fallen.

But both the history of the twentieth century – the history of wars, genocides and other mass murders – and the social changes which have for example, seen an almost systematic rise in the statistics for delinquency in Western societies since the end of the Second World War, suggest that we must be wary of images of a general decline in violence in the contemporary world. That suggestion is consistent with the broader picture. The exhaustion of the workers' movement and its 'grand narrative', and the return of God and the rise of ethnicity, urge us by the day to abandon evolutionist modes of thought. We can no longer see contemporary modernity as the ever-more triumphant march of peoples and nations as they automatically advance towards further economic and political progress. Some thinkers even take the view that we are no longer modern but post-modern, whilst others (Eisenstadt and Schluchter, 1998; Göle, 2000) prefer

to defend the idea of 'multiple modernities' and reject both the idea that all societies are moving in the same direction and the view that there is 'one best way' to go forward. The vast majority of those who try to reflect upon modernity or contemporary post-modernity have one thing in common, namely an idea that Alain Touraine (1995 [1992]) has definitely formulated more clearly than anyone else. In his view, the characteristic feature of modern times is certainly not the progress of reason but, rather, the dissociation that divorces reason from cultural identities and passions, including religious identities and passions.

From that perspective, there is no particular reason why there should be a decline in violence. On the contrary, violence can appear and spread in countless spaces. It can be encouraged both by reason, which turns it into an instrument to be used by actors for whom it is a resource or a means to an end, and by identities and religion, because it is part and parcel of their demands and aspirations which can sometimes be unlimited. With every passing day it is becoming difficult to articulate the dichotomous registers that constitute modernity, no matter whether we describe them as body and soul, reason and the passions, action and being, instrumentality and identities, or the universal and the particular. The gap between these registers can also lead to increased violence.

The more we look at contemporary modernity, or post-modernity if we prefer to put it that way, in terms of a splitting or dissociation, the greater the danger that we ourselves will be divided in our approach to violence. We must therefore consider, on the one hand, its objectivity, including its empirical objectivity, its factuality (possibly in quantitative terms – the number of people killed in wars or terrorist attacks, the statistics for delinquency, crime, and so on), and we must on the other hand recognize the way subjectivity influences how it is experienced, lived, observed, represented, desired or undergone by individuals, groups and societies. There is no avoiding the need to adopt this double perspective, which makes it remarkably difficult to define violence. An objective definition will, for example, speak of a violent assault on the physical, intellectual or moral integrity of an individual or group of individuals.¹ It will, however, quickly be objected that this definition forgets the subjectivity – individual or collective – of the author, victim or observer. We simply cannot ignore the fact that what we describe as violence is subject to considerable variation in both space and time, depending on which individuals and groups are concerned. The objective, or objectifying, point of view implies a strictly universal perspective, as it claims to be applicable to everyone and at all times. The subjective viewpoint, in contrast, is relativistic as it changes, depending on the position of the individual who is speaking. There is therefore a danger that we will find

ourselves in a difficult intellectual dilemma. The specific feature of the contemporary era is that it confronts us with this type of divorce, which constantly threatens to paralyse or subvert the analysis, and to make any action designed to respond to the challenge of violence delicate, or even counter-productive. We will return to this point in our discussion of the media in Chapter 4.

Before we even begin to explore the huge topic of violence, we have to recognize its diversity. The word 'violence' is in fact applied to countless phenomena, and used to describe all sorts of events and behaviours, both individual and collective: delinquency, crime, revolution, mass murder, riots, war, terrorism, harassment, and so on. Its spectrum of application can be extended almost to infinity, depending on whether or not we include its moral, and not simply physical, dimensions, and depending on whether or not we follow Pierre Bourdieu by introducing the notion of symbolic violence – the violence used, in this perspective, by a dominant system such as a state or actors that are so powerful as to prevent the dominated from producing for themselves the categories that would allow them to understand their own subordination.² This book is not devoted to one or more given forms of violence, and is primarily interested in its physical modalities, and especially those that prove to be most murderous. Although the author has devoted several empirical studies to the phenomenon, the ambitions of the present study are much more theoretical. It seeks to provide a coherent and sophisticated set of analytic tools that will allow us to approach the question of violence, to understand the logics of its appearance and spread – and, perhaps, to resist it.

These analytical instruments are not just described one after the other, as though laying them out side by side was enough to provide us with a toolbox. This book is based upon something that became obvious to its author in the course of his research: in either the 1960s or the 1970s, we entered a new era which both demanded and authorized the use of not only the classic modes of approach, but also of new ways of thinking about and approaching violence, if we wish to understand it. There is something mysterious about violence, which is never reducible to the explanations that the market for ideas offered us in the 1970s and the 1980s. That strangeness, which is what gives literary and sometimes journalistic accounts of violence their power, is the very thing that makes the phenomenon still more intolerable. And ultimately, that is what defines it best. That, at least, is what we have to deal with here, as we first (in Part I) demonstrate the need for a new paradigm and then outline an original approach that gives a central role to the subjectivity of the actors and to the processes of the loss of meaning or the over-production of meaning that give rise to violence.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Yves Michaud (1978: 20): 'We can speak of violence when, in an interactive situation, one or more actors act, either directly or indirectly, either once or on more than one occasion, in such a way as to attack, to some degree, either the physical or moral integrity of an individual or group, their property, or their involvement in symbolic and cultural activities'.
- 2 For a critical discussion of this notion, which runs through all Pierre Bourdieu's work, see Addi (2002), and especially Chapter 7, which deals with symbolic violence and the political field.

Part I

TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM

INTRODUCTION

The concrete forms of violence that give every era its 'repertoire' (see Tilly, 1986) vary from one period to another, as do the representations to which it gives rise. This idea, which has yet to be developed, finds its most complete expression when it is possible to discuss both violence, as defined by a specific era, and the general characteristics of the context in which it operates. It then becomes legitimate, in certain historical conjunctures, to speak of a 'new paradigm' that can deal with everything pertaining to the phenomenon and the preconditions for its expression.¹ In this perspective, the conceptualization of violence must take into account its tangible manifestations, the actors and issues involved, the discourses that refer to it in both public opinion and the media, the policies that attempt to deal with it, the way the law adapts to it, and the ways in which the social sciences approach it.

If we are to discuss violence today, we require a new paradigm, which means that we need to use new theoretical tools. And in order to produce, or at least update our analytic categories, we must first take stock of the profound mutations that make earlier categories unsuitable, inadequate or secondary, so great have been the changes that have taken place, often at a breath-taking rate, in the overall landscape at every level: global, international, social, local and individual.

We will take as our starting point the 1960s, which in many respects signalled our entry into a new era characterized at the international level by the US's war in Vietnam and, in many societies, by the various political, social and counter-cultural movements whose fallout would lead to the temptations of terrorism, by the importance of guerrilla movements and by the continuous increase in delinquency in Western societies, but also by new ways of looking at violence, especially in the USA, where the Johnson Administration appears to have discovered that the phenomenon had historical and social dimensions internal to American society. This era was characterized by significant experiences of political violence, by certain intellectuals' commitment to that violence, and by the importance of

revolutionary ideologies. That era is well and truly over: we have entered a different period, some elements of which were already being outlined at the end of the 1960s.

Note

- 1 For an initial formulation of this idea, see the special issue of *Cultures and Conflicts* edited by the author (Wieviorka, 1997).

VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT

When life in industrial societies was structured around the basic conflict between the workers' movement and the masters of labour – the class struggle – and when international relations all over the world were overdetermined by the major confrontation between two blocs known as the Cold War, the arena of violence exhibited characteristics that are not necessarily relevant today. The very notion of 'society' now seems to be coming under attack because there is no longer any central principle to structure conflict. In the case of many countries, the adjective 'post-industrial' is almost as obsolete as 'industrial', and we tend to speak, rather, of networks or a globalized economy. Inter-state relations are no longer determined by the face to face clash between two super-powers – the United States and the Soviet Union – that were able to avoid escalating things to extremes.

But even before we develop this idea, we should, perhaps, emphasize its ambivalence. It in fact combines two registers and, if it is pertinent, must have both a sociological value and an historical import. On the one hand, it requires us to accept that, rather than going hand in hand, violence and conflict are the products of distinct or even contradictory logics. That is a sociological point of view. On the other hand, it offers us an historical balance sheet: as a result of the decline of the workers' movement, which was the main incarnation of protest in industrial societies, and the end of the Cold War, violence now takes on unexpected and broader dimensions and forms. Those dimensions and forms are on a different scale and have new implications.

We do not need to dwell here on the notion of violence, which has already been touched upon in the Introduction (and elsewhere; see Wieviorka 1989, 1999). It is, however, very helpful to specify what we mean by the word 'conflict' which, like so many terms in current usage, quickly becomes confused because it refers to so many different social and political experiences as well as interpersonal or intra-psychic experiences. We will speak here of conflict in the restricted sense of an unequal relationship between two individuals, groups, or ensembles that compete,

within the same space, with the aim or purpose not of liquidating an adversary, and the relationship itself, but of modifying the relationship, or at least strengthening their relative positions.

If we accept what is admittedly a narrow definition, a conflict is the opposite of a rupture. Ruptures occur when two individuals, groups, or ensembles separate and, at best, contemplate the gulf that separates them and ignore one another or, at worst, contemplate the destruction of the other camp. From the perspective adopted here, 'conflict' therefore does not mean war, or at least not the type of war which, rather than being the continuation of politics by other means (to use Clausewitz's celebrated formula), is intended to annihilate an enemy. The notion of conflict adopted here is in some respects similar to that outlined by Georg Simmel.¹ It departs from Simmel, however, not because it describes conflict as non-violent but because, according to Simmel, the 'unity' brought about by conflict may involve the destruction of one of the parties concerned. The sociologist does indeed make a distinction between conflict and violence, as I do, and that suggests that we should think about the difference between the two, even though one may merge into the other. Some conflicts, he explains, do seem to rule out everything but violence. One example is the conflict between 'the robber or thug and his victim':

If such a fight aims at annihilation, it does not approach the marginal case of assassination in which the admixture of unifying elements is almost zero. If, however, there is any consideration, any limit to violence, there already exists a socializing factor, even though only as the qualification of violence. (Simmel, 1955 [1925]: 26)

Some conflicts are stable, structural, or even structuring. Others, which are less long-lasting, can be transformed. They are unstable and or may even be resolved in the shorter or longer term. According to the perspective adopted here, conflict does not involve enemies, as an approach inspired by the thought of Carl Schmidt would have it, but adversaries who can stabilize their relationship by institutionalizing it, by establishing rules that allow them to negotiate, or by finding modalities that allow them to maintain both the links between the actors involved and the differences that divide them. Not every aspect of conflict is negotiable, and there is always the possibility of violence. And yet my general thesis is that, on the whole, conflict is not only not to be confused with violence: it tends basically, to be its opposite. Violence closes down discussions rather than opening them up. It makes debates and exchanges – even unequal exchanges – difficult and encourages ruptures or even pure power relations, unless it breaks out because a rupture has taken place.

The Experience of the Workers' Movement²

Throughout the industrial era, the societies that were fully involved were animated by the protests of workers, many of them deriving from the same oppositional principle and from a central conflict that was all the less violent in that the protesting actors were powerful in their own right, could organize in the long term, and could develop militant commitments that allowed them to negotiate their demands or to bring political pressure to bear without necessarily abandoning their long-term plans to construct different social relations. Let us briefly recall, then, the meaning and import of the protests that shaped what certain post-modern thinkers call one of the 'grand narratives' of modernity.

The apotheosis of the workers' movement

The working-class consciousness is a product of the privations or dispossession suffered by workers who find it impossible or difficult to control what they produce. It is also the embodiment of a project, or a call for a different society. It is an assertion of an unhappy subjectivity, and at the same time of an ability to project itself into the future, to invent possibilities other than those offered by the present, or the here or now. It is capable of imagining a radiant future.

This capacity is embodied mainly in skilled workers who, because of the positive principles they derive from their craft, expertise and skills, have a certain pride and are convinced that they have a role or a social utility, that they deserve respect, and that they must not betray their self-esteem; they are therefore inclined to negotiate. In contrast, unskilled workers who are left to their own devices are, more so than other workers, prone to becoming involved in rebellions that lead nowhere, and to explosions of anger. As Alain Touraine demonstrated in the mid-1960s (Touraine, 1966), and as subsequent research carried out under his direction has confirmed (Touraine et al., 1987 [1984]), this working-class consciousness's ability to integrate and its capacity for action were at their greatest in situations in which the proud consciousness of skilled workers and the proletarian consciousness of unskilled workers came together and could be articulated, especially in the big Taylorized factories that dominated industry from the inter-war period until the 1970s.

During this period, when there were strong working-class communities with a dense social life, and when the labour movement and its struggles led to the establishment of forms of political life, a community life, and intellectual and social debates, violence was not a mode of political action, or at least not in the most serious forms that lead deliberately to a loss of life. Strikes could be hard and long, tensions in the factories could be high, and discourses

could be aggressive, but murderous violence was not a resource that was used by the actors involved, even when they met with brutal repression.

The end of the industrial era

Everything changed when we emerged from industrial society in North America and Western Europe in the early 1970s. Our emergence from industrial society did not come to mean the death of industry or even, as some were rather too quick to prophecy, the complete demise of Taylorism, whose principles still rule the lives of some companies. Its real meaning was that the opposition that existed between the labour movement and the masters of labour was no longer central.

The conflict between these two had once informed all collective life, and had given a meaning to other social, peasant or urban struggles, struggles in the universities, consumers' struggle and so on. It was the basis for the political split between left and right, it animated intellectual life, and was extended at an international level by ideologies that contrasted an East that spoke in the name of the working-class proletariat, and a West that was supposedly the embodiment of capitalist domination. As the workers' power became more powerful, it became more institutionalized, and usually took the form of a social democracy that, in many countries, succeeded in taking power without using violence. In the West, it was not the structural conflict of industrial society that gave rise to violence and its political derivatives in the second half of the twentieth century. That violence was, rather, the result of a destructuring of that conflict. This encouraged forms of hyper-institutionalisation and bureaucratization within the trades unions, and unleashed the anger of those workers they no longer represented. It could also lead to far-left terrorism (we will come back to this) or to the rise of more or less racist populist leaders and movements that filled, without any serious collective violence, the political void it left behind. They ranged from Ross Perot in the United States to the Northern League in Italy, from the *Front National* in France to Vladimir Jirinovsky in Russia. What is more important, the end of the industrial era also resulted in a serious crisis within the trade union movement and created major functional difficulties in systems of industrial relations, even when, as in Germany and Scandinavia, they embodied a great vitality. It had spatial effects, helped to generate the phenomena of urban decay, and destroyed many working-class neighbourhoods, from the black hyper-ghettoes of the great American cities that had been orphaned by large-scale industries which were themselves in decline (see the fine studies of William Julius Wilson (1979; 1987), to the *banlieues* of France which, now that they were no longer 'red suburbs' held and organized by the Communist Party, became the theatre of the hate – a theme that provides the title for

Kassovitz's major film – anger and rage of the young people described by François Dubet from the mid-1980s onwards (Dubet, 1987).

In this context, workers whose very existence was shattered by the shock of deindustrialization, job losses, unemployment, exclusion and insecurity, or who were simply frightened witnesses to these things, also lost the points of reference that had once allowed them to have a positive self-image, exploited and dominated as they may have been. They often found themselves prostrate and turned in on themselves, and were incapable of doing anything. Whilst they too paid a high price, their children did not experience the same feeling that their social existence had been destroyed, and were more likely, or more ready, to turn to social violence. In many Western societies, and especially in the working-class areas that were hardest hit by factory closures and job losses, juvenile delinquency and urban violence are largely the products of the exhaustion of the central social conflict that had characterized the industrial era.

In such cases, violence is a combination of a fairly classic delinquency or criminality, and an expression of a feeling of social injustice. It is sometimes impossible to distinguish one from the other. The urban riots that hit Britain and then France in the 1980s and 1990s, or the virulent violence of the skinheads, whose violence reveals a style that is itself disconnected from any content, or any truly social or working-class overtones, were in many respects also products of that decay.

At this point, we need to be careful and to qualify our remarks. It would be a mistake to conclude from the above remarks that there is a direct or one-way link between social or political violence and the exhaustion of the social relations characteristic of the industrial era. The link between the two is neither automatic nor immediate. When there is an upsurge of violence in such a context, we need to introduce mediations if we are to understand it; it is not a necessary or direct expression of decreased social mobility or of the crisis. The riots that broke out in working-class areas in France and Britain, as well as in the big American cities, in the last two decades of the last century, occurred as a result of police brutality or unfair court decisions and were not really protests about unemployment. This was, for instance, the case in Los Angeles in 1992, when a white jury acquitted the police officers who were filmed beating up Rodney King. Young people's anger and hatred certainly found expression in various urban spaces and against a backdrop of social difficulties, but they had more to do with their powerful feelings of injustice, non-recognition and racial or cultural discrimination. By the same criterion, unemployment and poverty do not, as we know all too well from Lazarsfeld's (1972 [1932]) study of the unemployed of Marienthal, immediately or directly lead to social violence, even when they are an expression of a sudden social collapse, as in the countries of the former Soviet empire. They are much more likely to give rise to a passive frustration which, over