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The deterritorialization of violence

A desterritorialização da violência

João Trajano Sento-Sé²

Seen from a remote corner in the periphery of today's world, Wieviorka's propositions about violence sound like a healthful provocation for us to face the challenge of giving intelligibility to a world that seems to detonate all conventional forms of producing sense. I have not the ambition to comment one by one of the different questions raised by the author. What I will do is react with a certain caution given that, as we know, the questions faced by the French when the issue is violence are very different from those we deal with in the big Brazilian cities. Even so, I believe that one can take much advantage from a dialogue like the one suggested here.

Item one: Wieviorka refers to the theory formulated in his book *Sociétés et Terrorisme*, according to which violence takes place in situations, in which we do not avail of channels for an organized confrontation of interests, ideas, visions of the world. Then, instead of conflict, we have violence. The point is good, solid and based on a long and consistent sociological tradition. However, I would like to put it into a little different form.

When we are talking about the threat of terrorism, of arms traffic, of inter-ethnic conflicts, of drug dealing wars and the street gangs of Los Angeles or Cape Town, we are in fact talking about very different dynamics. What in my eyes they have in common is that they show not exactly the absence of organized channels for conflict, but the depreciation of classical mechanisms of social control. In my opinion, this is the background for the different phenomena we today call violence.

The way Wieviorka presents them, the times of the Cold War, the power of the labor movement and other classical forms of collective movements seem much less terrifying, compared to the apparent anarchy we are living today. Wieviorka reminds us the wars of the ancient colonies and the dictatorships of the Third World, whose capacity of producing violence will probably never be quantified precisely,

with manifestations that were terrible but secondary in a world which, in one way or the other, was reasonably organized. Well, I propose that this world that broke apart differed in two aspects from our troubled times.

In the first place, the political, police, cultural and symbolic control mechanisms worked in a way that, in fact, there was a higher degree of tranquility for certain segments of the population of the world. The labor class of the industrial world enjoyed relative prosperity, the upper classes, even in the poor countries, could sleep quietly, seen that violence was confined to Africa, to the jungles of Vietnam or to the torture cellars of the Latin American dictatorships. Violence existed but it was not a problem. What makes a problem not only political or social but sociological? I enounce once more my own proposition: The mechanisms that built the sanitary cordons isolating violence collapsed, the mechanisms of social control where not efficient anymore, violence deterritorialized and consequently potential victimization increased.

This is not a question of denying the changes in the nature of the phenomena marked by violence. Nor is it a question of not recognizing that in certain regions and under certain circumstances such manifestations increased in number and intensity of violence. However, I think it is necessary to mention that the extension of its range of action to beyond the before relatively efficient frontiers has a much greater weight than we usually admit. This is the most relevant factor for considering the changes in the perception of unsafety Wieviorka refers to at the beginning of his text. We are living as we were about to densify the rates of victimization by some frightening modality of violence seeming to be out of control.

When referring to social control mechanisms, what I have in mind are obviously State institutions, but not only. I also refer to a series of psychological, cultural, symbolic and social mechanisms that would not fit into an explicative context exclusively built on the so – judiciously – divulged crisis of the State. I insist on this point because I intuit, among the researchers dealing with the phenomenon violence, a kind of shame to admit that what we had and what we don't have anymore are efficient instruments of social control. This resistance perhaps arises from a certain association between the emphasis given to social control and the defense of descriptivist and conserva-

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tive policies. This, however, is not a necessary association.

For me, in several aspects the social control mechanisms of the period before were despotic, authoritarian and descriptivist. Their relative efficiency should not be confounded with a probable compatibility with the basic standards of justice as refers to Human Rights and the Rights of the People. There is such, at least in principle, some positivity in seeing these mechanisms collapse. What is needed, as Wieviorka observes very well, is the creation of a new language giving sense to a new institutional grammar, reconciling us with the principles to which we are giving importance. It is the nostalgia of the former order materialized in an anachronistic language that nourishes despotic discourse and proposals, not the recognition of the importance of control mechanisms.

The world that fell apart was horrifying and unbearable for its millions of victims. It happens that the standards we use for dealing with this part of the population have changed. Shall we go on trying to convince an Arabian today of the inferiority of his culture in comparison to our civilization of lights (in truth, this would be an attempt implying in a reasonable historical knowledge)? Can we today face homosexuality as an organic disease or failure of character? In a bit different sense, would it be convenient to tell some young black guy living in a favela in Rio de Janeiro that the access to any sign of recognition is irremediably closed to him but that, even so, he should walk in the line? I don't consider this possible or desirable. How to deal with such impossibilities then?

The incapacity to answer the mentioned questions reveals our present helplessness. The today available answers show our undisguisable incapacity of accepting and understanding characters that up to now were insulated inside sanitary cordons. They are expressed in descriptivist, phobic proposals that deny to others the right of being in this world the way they are. Even propositions marked by pretendedly humanitarian principles sound many times cynic or, in the best of hypotheses, ingenuous and simplistic. Sometimes, they underestimate valuable advances. For example: the process leading to an increase of potential victims occurs concomitantly with another, in which former objects of control pass to be recognized as victims of the old control agencies that are not working anymore. This is for example the case of the Afro-American populations living in the

south of the United States, whose rights were violated with the consent of the law. The same applies to masculine homosexuals, in times when sodomy was a crime punished by law and subject to public disdain. Such changes show that we are not only ignorants.

We are living difficult times but we witness advances and, from the starting point of the current disorder, we can profit by widening the access to rights and by adopting the basic principles of equity in the relations between men and people. For this, it would be desirable to engage in the search for a new language, like Wieviorka suggests, and not to be ashamed to admit that the creation of mechanisms for social control is imperative. Without this, we are taking the risk of continuing to witness generalized fear convert into hate, which in turn, provides the fuel for perpetuation, even if degraded, of intolerable mechanisms of social control and arrangement.

About "Violence today" Sobre "Violência hoje"

*Luiz Antonio Machado da Silva*³

The theory

Right in the opening of his article, Wieviorka demarcates the terrain for developing his argument by affirming that "the phenomenon violence changes and with it its representations". Although the term used is "representation", I suppose the author means that an adequate understanding of violence in its objectivity cannot transform it into a mere act of force, it must also consider the *sense* given by the actors to their conducts (I use the expression – act of force – in a loose way, only to indicate the individual or collective conduct interrupting the relation of alterity, or arising from its lack. In other words, it indicates the exterior, objective dimension of violence, to which the sense given to it by the actors must be aggregated). It is in this sense I understand the link between the theory presented after the brief indication of

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