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Event and Structure: A Phenomenological Approach of Irreducible Violence

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Abstract

Violence is signaled by a mark of discontinuity, interruption, rupture. The tripartite temporality of violence, with its strong focus on the present, points to the originary violence. Moreover, the violent event is structuring the order of the action sequences in an actual violent (embodied) interaction. The interactional dynamics in violent encounters between co-present actors shapes the specific forms of the experiencing in (and of) the violent interaction. Based on how violence is experienced in an interactive situation, the phenomenon of violence articulates itself according to three coordinates: directedness, co-performativity and de-capabilisation. The outlining of the structure of the lived experience of violence is revealing something irreducible in it. To understand the experience of violence as such, I propose that we accept the idea of violence per se and depart from the idea that the acts of violence are essentially moral actions. The core of the ethical-moral discussion concerning violence should be grounded instead on the moment of conversion identifiable when we take into account the reaction to violence.

Keywords Violence · Temporality · Event · Structure · Experience · The worst violence · Moral acts

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Introduction

While there is a growing body of literature on violence and its various forms, the definition and conceptualization of violence are still insufficient. What is problematic in today's research on violence, across many areas of investigation, is a series of methodological and ideological gaps. One of them is that between the narrow (minimalist) and the broader (comprehensive)¹ approach. Separating issues of (physical) force from issues of violations of rights, Bufacchi (2005: 194f.) identified two competing perspectives on violence: one in which the concept of violence is defined narrowly and one in which it is defined broadly.

Can we overcome this gap? Can we identify some traits of violence that could help us define it clearly and eventually better understand its nature?

We could of course proceed by including all acts that belong to the category of violence and excluding similar acts that do not belong to it (Hamby 2017). However, this way of approaching the concept of violence operation will offer us nothing but the purely semantic extension of a concept. The definition that comes out of this procedure will be rather a verbal convention than a concept able to point at some essential dimensions of the phenomenon. Therefore the starting point should certainly be to consider the *effective* character of violence (see Endress and Rampp 2013: 3), of the unfolding of violent interactions in which the agents are considered in their entirety. There is an identifiable need for "innovative approaches focusing on violent interactions and their particular dynamics" (Hartmann 2017: 1).

The phenomenological research on violence, which flourished in recent years,² brings a valuable contribution to the understanding of violence both in its plurality of forms and in its specificity. The phenomenological analyses of violence underlined the interplay of bodily aspects with those pertaining to the symbolic order, including the level of expression. Besides the task of describing a large variety of forms of violence, the phenomenological investigations of violence point to an ordinary level, to which they aim to open an access. While recognizing that violence is a difficult object for phenomenology and the researchers that assume the phenomenological style of thinking might feel paralyzed, the phenomenological analysis, being essentially descriptive, will explore "the various *modifications* of <the> experiential dimensions involved in the phenomenon of violence" (Ciocan 2019). A particular direction of research is to explore the way in which the *experience* of the individuals involved, taken both individually and collectively, is *modified* in situations of violence (an application of this method to the domain of affectivity can be found in Ciocan 2019).

¹ Other divides refer to normative vs. non-normative, micro vs. macro approaches on violence (see Hartmann 2017: 5f.).

² Two thematic dossiers, edited by Endress and Rampp in *Human Studies* (Springer) in 2013 and respectively Ciocan and Marinescu in *Studia Phaenomenologica* in 2019, deserve special mention here, as well as the contributions of Staudigl (2013a), Waldenfels (2003), Dodd (2017), Mensch (2008, 2017) and Lawlor (2016). A remarkable collection of phenomenological studies can be found in Staudigl (2014).

While putting to work the conceptual tools offered by the classical phenomenology and its contemporary re-interpretations, the phenomenological research on violence has also to keep contact with and to rely on the advancement in the research field of violence in various disciplinary fields. More particularly, recent research, both empirical and theoretical, in the sociology of violence delineated a highly dynamic field (Hartmann 2017: 2), which struggles to integrate potentially divergent approaches, from those that focus on the direct damage to the body to those that take into account the socio-structural aspects of the phenomenon (Endress and Rampf 2013: 3).

After surveying the effervescent research on violence, inspired or not by the phenomenological tradition, there is one question which arises: is it fruitful to conceive violence as always being on the “dark side” of our life and to construe it as a residual category? This kind of approach, as well intentioned as it might be, will lead to the marginalization of the research on violence and finally to obscure the domain of study instead of bringing much needed clarifications. Therefore, defining and conceptualizing violence still remain open issues (see Bufacchi 2011; Schinkel 2010). The theoretical construction and the philosophical commentaries that I propose in this paper are entirely built on the insight that the experience of violence, necessarily placed in an embodied and interactive situation, is specific. That does not mean that it is easily distinguishable among a series of experiences of the social world; it belongs to a very peculiar regime of action, to an order of things whose description requires novel conceptual tools.

The starting point will be the observation that violence exhibits a very specific temporality (see Thornton 1995; Endress 2004), underlining the idea of *event* as a critical moment of temporality. Based on the description of violence as event, violence is conceptualized as an irreducible phenomenon, which structures itself dynamically on a set of coordinates of the experience. The last section will offer a discussion of some philosophical implications of the thesis of irreducibility of violence, noticeably concerning the possibility of a conversion inside the experience of violence.

The Violent Event

Both subjectively and objectively, violence is signaled by a mark of discontinuity, interruption, rupture. Its “irruptive character” (Morin 2013: 61; see also Ciocan and Marinescu 2019: 12) leaves an indelible mark on the subjects who are involved and raises many questions on the continuity of our experience. The violent event shows a particular temporality: before the violence, the present itself of the violence and after the violence. According to Thornton (1995) and with special reference to violence, an event is <what> “takes place in time, and is assigned significance or meaning by observers, but <that does not mean> to imply that its eventuality is a consequence of other events or causes.

In its paradigmatic form, violence is outburst. The outburst is connected to an agitation and frustration in connection with the uncertainty of the time of resolving a problem (see Kelly 2020: 86). Eventually, the future of action will suddenly

collapse in the now, while the subject will become a self who is a prisoner of that now. Obviously, violence may be exerted continuously and may be incorporated in some institutions of the social life. However, these forms of violence cannot be understood without the outburst as the original starting point of an entirely new regime of action; they are its reverberations throughout the entire field of experience of the ones who are involved in the interaction and who become thus recipients of violence from afar.

The tripartite temporality of violence, with its strong focus on the present, structures then the range of *responses* of the individuals: the positive retrieving of the before, the rejection of the present and the struggle to integrate the after in the encompassing stream of temporality. As Dastur noted, the event is what “constitutes the *critical* moment of temporality—a critical moment which nevertheless allows the continuity of time” (Dastur 2000: 182). After a violent event, nothing is like before. We may therefore say that we are finding ourselves always *after violence*, actors of an attempt to reconstruct a (common) temporality. A large amount of studies on violence focuses rightly on the reparatory side of (individual or collective) actions. However, that should not encourage us to describe violence as being only situated in the realm of the (re-)constructive dimensions of sociality, in which the ordinary violence remains, in the majority of situations, hidden or forgotten. Ordinary violence is simply where violence begins, except that, when we see it, we realize that it was already there. Violence that we conceptualize *after violence* tends to lose its character of bodily (inter-)action and appears as deploying itself purely at the level of the symbolic ordering that governs the interaction of the individuals in a particular society. It is tamed, governed, even monopolized; it inserts itself in a chain of signifiers.

Moreover, the violent event is structuring the order of the action sequences. Since violence usually calls (more) violence, it certainly can be considered a characteristic of interaction. Moving from the level of physical-bodily interaction to that of symbolic ordering, we could regard violence as “a form of *interaction ritual* in its own right – a dance-like sequence – initially inhibited by the human tendency to fall into each other’s rhythms, but once initiated promoted by exactly that tendency” (Bramsen 2017: 1).

The answers to a violent event are structured not only longitudinally, but also vertically. The violence has a significant tendency to produce answers which are reverberating from one level of the subject’s experience to the other. In an individual, actual physical violence, for example, has a significant impact on the level of ideation and verbal expression. Many of the severe cases of speech and pronunciation disorders in children are related to the phenomenon of violence, particularly to the physical violence (Carpenter and Drabick 2011; Abu-Zeid and Al-zu’be 2012).

While I agree that “we lack a paradigm that would allow us to understand the different forms of violence” (Mensch 2008), the phenomenon of violence does not have to be regarded necessarily as a homogenous one. Its tripartite temporality is an indication of the fact that the experience of violence consists in a plurality of modes of experiencing and in the *shifting* from one to another. Therefore, a better way to conceptualize violence is to see it as the outcome of a dynamic embodied interaction. Rather than disentangling its structural dimensions, it is more valuable

to take seriously the “changeable modes of experiencing violence” (Koloma Beck 2011: 345) and the way they are structuring themselves according to their specific (immanent) temporality. Also, the understanding of the specific temporality of violence enables the unfolding of the “micro-interactional dynamics of violence” (Collins 2008). It is less important that violence is determined (or not) by some causal or background factors which are identifiable at the macro level.

The Structure of the Experience of Violence

The “interactional dynamics in antagonistic encounters between *copresent* actors” (Hartmann 2017: 5; my underlining) shapes the specific forms of the experiencing in (and of) the violent interaction.³

Directedness

The first characteristic that emerges in a phenomenological analysis refers to *what is given* in the experience, to that particular something that is brought to light (in our case, in the event of violence). Violence appears first of all as a force which is directed against someone or something (Dennen 2005).⁴ As such, it is a form of objectivation and an eminent form of the instrumental action; it is meant to produce an effect and it effectively does that. Since violence manifests itself primarily as violent *action*, I will call this characteristic *directedness* (towards or against someone—usually identified as victim—or towards or against something).

This characteristic is not only a starting point, a basic primary form of manifestation, but it is also one that defines violence all along. If the action is not addressed to someone else (or something outside), then it is directed towards or against the own body, which is taken in this situation both as person and object.

The presence of this trait suggests that in the description of violence the physical harm cannot be avoided; it is not secondary or derivative. In more elaborated forms of violence, in which the physical harm is not apparent, there is always an action directed against someone. We cannot speak of violence in general without some particular – we might say: individual⁵—acts that embody it.

³ This is an attempt to provide some conceptual tools that might capture *the act itself of violence*, the unbearable moment of present violence and its unfolding, which will make it, in certain aspects, more bearable. This dynamics should not be seen as normative, although it might be seen as a proto-normativity.

⁴ Dennen (2005) shows that in the poetic tradition of ancient Greeks we can find a distinction between force and violence, personified as Kratos (Might) and Bia (Violence), servants of divine power. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Kratos and Bia dwell only in the house of Zeus and go only where he directs them. In *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, they are the first to appear on stage. While Kratos is the first to speak in the play, Bia remains silent throughout the entire play.

⁵ Salice (2020) speaks of “a commitment for the subject to stick to the hostile attitude”. In describing hate, he insists that it consists primarily in aversively targeting (the other qua this individual person), “where the adverb ‘aversively’ expresses the subject's desire for the target to be annihilated”.

As receiver or patient, we see violence as strange and unexpected, as interrupting the taken for grantedness of our life. Being characterized by remoteness from everyday life and suddenness, could this moment of directness be framed as a kind of “presence,” as an “epiphany”? In fact, it is not at all the case, since, in its primal moment, it has nothing edifying, “no message, nothing that we could really learn from” (Gumbrecht 2003: 98). Epiphany implies a “staging,” through which a “complex and embodied form” is presented (Gumbrecht 2003: 113). We find nothing like that in the outburst of violence; even if we realize afterwards that it was somehow already prepared. It also implies a *loss of control*, which is experienced, again, only *après coup*. To the moment itself of violence a meaning is eventually assigned, but this operation always and automatically participates rather in appropriating the violence than in the process of addressing it; we could therefore say that it enlivens it, making it permanent, inerasable. Therefore, this trait cannot be the only one which characterizes violence. It has to be supplemented with other ones, which capture the moment of *response*.

Co-performativity

The confrontational affects, like tension or fear (Collins 2009), find themselves at the core of the violent interaction and operate at a certain stage of the confrontation as an internal engine of the violent actions. But, in experiencing actual violence the actors (perpetrator, victim or witness) are taken *beyond* the common understanding of experience of the world and of themselves, which could be characterized as indifferent or neutral contemplation and as predictable action. They are pushed towards a region in which they are forced to effectively deal with something that surpasses them. For example, they have to circumvent the barrier of confrontational tension and fear (Collins 2008: 23) and enter, as mentioned *supra*, (see Section I of this paper) a phase in which “violence can be considered an interaction ritual *in its own right*.”

When dealing with violence, we are never “neutral”. From this point of view, violence could be seen as a means to extract us from neutrality and indifference. Although the “objective” descriptions of violence provide us a huge amount of information, they rarely instruct us about how to act in the moment. We may therefore say that another characteristic of violence is co-performativity, in the sense that there is always a concrete partner in the violent encounter and the manifest violence is a response, a particular kind of action-reaction situation (see Waldenfels 2003). As such, violence already imposes a particular structure to the field of experience as interactive environment. There is a perpetrator and there is a victim, an agent and a patient. Therefore, it appears to us that the violence takes place between them. In fact, it just *takes place*; it is there. It is the violent activity that makes them perpetrator and victim. From this point of view, both the perpetrator and the victim are “subjects” of violence.

De-capabilisation

The third aspect that should be taken into account when we describe the experience of violence is related to the fulfillment of the acts of violence. We cannot have experiencing (of violence) without fulfillment of acts (at least not in the phenomenological sense). Thus, violence can be associated, surprisingly, with aspects related to success and skill. Collins interprets this situation in psychological terms, in the sense that the perpetrator succeeds in surpassing some psychological barriers (Collins 2009: 9). In an interactive approach, it has to be noted, nevertheless, that while the perpetrator becomes more “competent,” the victim loses correspondently her/his capability to act. The analysis has therefore to move to a level that exhibits the limiting or hindering of the capacity of expression of the agents involved in the violent interaction.⁶ From this point of view, violence is not only a force and a reaction; it is also an interruption of the course of the action and virtually an annihilation of the potentialities of action.

The subject of violence is taken short; it finds no time or space “to elaborate a question, to work a distance, a span...” (Tengelyi 2005: 139). This particular form of discontinuance seems to produce meaning, but in fact it produces a “non-expression” (Tengelyi 2005: 139) because the meaning is not the outcome of a free play, but that of repression. The formations of sense do not belong to the subject anymore; they are haunting her or him. The elaborations of meaning remain “buried” and therefore inaccessible to the living subject. As Posada Varela puts it, these “truncated and unconscious ‘formations’ belong rather to a non-temporality, to the limbo where nothing is formed or elaborated or temporalized” (Posada Varela 2015: 128f.).

It is in these moments, when the “subject” is unable to deal with a violent event, i.e., with the sense in the making and with the meaning being made, that a new essential trait of violence is disclosed: we might call it *de-capabilisation*.

An important aspect in the understanding of a violent event is its *unpredictability*. This aspect impacts the subject’s capability to operate at the level of the meaning and meaningfulness. Beyond this terminology, reminiscent of the paradigm of the prevalence of meaning, we should rather see the capability of transitioning from a level of the action to another. In describing this transition, the narrative dimension plays a crucial role (see Posada Varela 2015: 123; see also Tengelyi 2005). In the experience of trauma, associated with violence, we are dealing with the relationship between meaning and expression, more precisely with cases of *interruption* of expression, situated at the threshold of meaning. Tengelyi speaks of “unforeseen alterations in life-history,” for which “the irruption of primal impressions into the temporality of experience may serve as a formally generalized model for the study of such sudden changes” (2005: X-XI).

⁶ This is obvious in the case of the victim, but, since violence consists in a loss of control (see *supra*), it is noticeable also in the case of the perpetrator. The witness, in her/his turn, usually finds herself/himself in the impossibility to act.

Discussion: from Violence Per Se to “moral acts”

The outlining of the structure of the lived experience of violence is revealing something *irreducible* in it. This particular mode of experience is not deriving from other experiences, cannot be seen as a sum or convergence of previous experiences. While violent behaviors are learned or copied from others, as any other behavior, the key point in the violent encounter is that the agents are entering a new realm of action, with consequences that usually go far beyond the normal regime of action. The dynamics of the encounter lacks any prior experience; the dynamics itself is formed *in* the encounter, in the (violent) present. From this point of view, the violence that we are speaking about *cannot* be derived or secondary.

As I showed above ("The Violent Event" section), violence is directedness and force; it is *not* re-enactment. If we reiterate a moment of violence, that particular moment will be just another episode of violence before it will be considered a sequence in a practice of violence or in a chain of meanings. Any episode of violence, even reiterated, appears as senseless, as originally non-motivated, even when the perpetrator and the victim have a “common frame” (Mensch 2017). Actually, imposing meaning onto it might, in fact, create more problems than it solves, because originary violence, in its horrific entirety, risks to remain hidden and to re-emerge at a certain moment in the future.

It is therefore probably better for our purpose to accept the idea of violence per se, as preceding any of our “meanings” (categorizations). The constructivist view of violence, apparently endorsed by classical phenomenology, fully acknowledges a variety of orders of violence, which are, in fact, cultural variations of our understanding of violence, but it fails to understand the experience of violence as such, which is relegated to the marginalized status of “brute fact of ‘physical violence’” (Staudigl 2013b: 2).⁷

Staudigl is undoubtedly right when he questions the capacity of the perspectival approach to bring the phenomenon of violence to the fore (Staudigl 2013b). But, if violence is a *break* in our inter-subjective tissue, what can we find *in* the break? If the moment of present violence compels us to anything, it is to face it and to take it as what it is. Acknowledging directedness as an essential characteristic of violence helps us to see through the immensely vast area of meaning productions and to liberate the territory of what cannot be reduced in spite of all efforts. The irreducible, in this case, is the originary violence.

I would further add that, in the meaning constructions of violence, the living body certainly plays a central role. From this point of view, embraced by Mensch (2017), Staudigl (2014), and Waldenfels (2003) in line with the classical phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, violence is seen only as destructive. However, the living body cannot be restricted to the aspects pertaining to the sense making of the world. Before anything, the living body brings forward the idea of presence, of being here and now. Although this is not the place to decide on an ancient philosophical dispute

⁷ Staudigl takes the expression from Lorenz (2004).

concerning the destructive vs. creative character of violence, I will just point to the fact that, once we adopt the idea of originary violence, the violence appears as neutral, as being there, before any normative consideration. As originary, violence cannot be either rejected or accepted; it is simply there. Violence is then rooted in this neutral ground; it is its reactive unfolding that creates the conditions for evaluative judgments, which are starting usually with its rejection and continue with various forms of negotiation, adaptation and acceptance.

It would be difficult, from this particular standpoint, to accept the idea that the “acts of violence are essentially moral actions,” which could be explained within the general framework of a theory of moral action (Wikström and Treiber 2009: 75) I do not imply that moral considerations are superfluous. On the contrary, they are rooted in the very structure of the experience of violence; the initial disruption produced by the primary act of violence is the starting point of an affective and evaluative process, which finally leads to making the acts of violence an unavoidable topic for the subjects involved.

Violence is not only an action directed against someone or something, but also a *reaction*. The core of the ethical-moral discussion concerning violence is therefore the moment of conversion which we point out when taking into account the reaction to violence (see Subsection II.2). When we pertain to a region beyond the construction of meaning, to “a ‘field of experience’ that is neither strictly subjective nor strictly objective” we shall necessarily encounter there “the foundation of the problem of the worst violence” (Lawlor 2016: 5).⁸ According to this view, there is a fundamental violence located right in the foundation. As Derrida (1978/1992) showed, in order for me to experience a being, that being (including living beings) has to enter my sphere of experience and thus to be endowed with a meaning. Accordingly, when anything new enters into my sphere of experience, it has to be connected with past experiences in order to be understood. If a person enters my sphere of experience, she/he can be understood only through my prejudices and formed ideas. The use of language already consists in a form of violence. As Lawlor synthesizes this situation, “fundamental violence is fundamental because it appears in the fundamental structure of experience” and it “cannot be eliminated” (Lawlor 2016: 11).

However, this does not mean that we cannot (in fact) try to eliminate it. A complete (and reiterated) phenomenological epochè will suspend not only “the world” (for the subject), but also the mundane reaction (of the subject), particularly her/his attempt to reject violence. What motivates such a renewed suspension is the fact that it would be required from us to use “*more and more violence to repress and control what is fundamental in experience*” (Lawlor 2016: 11). This is what he calls “the worst violence”.

We receive this new insight on worst violence as a painful discovery. In fact, the phenomenological method, as it was here radicalized, helps us to uncover a level of

⁸ The term “worst violence,” as well as “transcendental violence” or “fundamental violence,” has been introduced by Derrida in his famous paper on Levinas see Derrida (1968), in Derrida (1978/1992).

affectivity in the description of violence.⁹ This new level will prompt us to operate a conversion and to open the path for a phenomenology of non-violence (Manning 2017). In Lawlor's terms, a new mode of existence, i.e. an ethics for humans, will consist in the reversal of the idea of the worst. This reversal comes about through the emergence of the idea of transcendental powerlessness (Lawlor 2008).

We are powerless in the face of violence, yet we maintain a special kind of power: the power of letting the other be free. The problem will then be that of minimizing the irreducible violence. For that, we have to produce a speech act that is concomitantly actuality and a potentiality (Lawlor 2016: 6).

The irreducible violence, which can be found in the fundamental structure of experience, motivates reactions. One of these reactions is that of using more and more violence to repress and control the fundamental in experience. The problem with this reaction is that it is more violent than the fundamental violence that it tries to eliminate. Once we recognize that the worst violence is a reaction, we are able to recognize its nihilistic character: "it wills the end *as such*" (Lawlor 2016: 11). However, the "phenomenological reasons imply that the end is always the end *as something other than the end*. The end is always related to something that remains. Even when we approach the end of something, there is always something heterogeneous to the end" (Lawlor 2016: 11).

Therefore, Lawlor proposes to think of a reaction of "the least violence" (Lawlor 2016: 3). In the footsteps of Derrida, he outlines a "new way of speaking," a friendlier way of speaking. Moving from the concepts of reversal and overcoming of violence to that of conversion of violence requires, on one hand, a deeper understanding of the idea of subject and, on the other hand, a critical re-examination of the order. A phenomenological inquiry will lead us to the order before the order, to the pre-constitutive (passive) "order" of the genesis of the politico-legal order, both in the historical constitutive, and the transcendental perspectives. At this point, we realize that violence is describable as a *socially* irreducible phenomenon, which transcends the layers of meaning. Its embeddedness in the fabric of sociality could hardly be denied.

Conclusion

While the understanding of violence requires the description of all the levels and forms of experience, the outlining of the structure of embodied interactive experience of violence is revealing something *irreducible* in it. The three coordinates that I sketched in the second Section of the paper (directedness, co-performativity and de-capabilisation) articulate a dynamic matrix which might describe in a phenomenological manner the immanent structure of the *actual* experience of violence. They are built one upon the other and they have to be taken together, as forming a triad.

⁹ For the relationship between violence and affectivity, see Ciocan (2019). Ciocan underlines that "the affectivity constitutes itself each time differently, depending on the various situations of the symmetrical and asymmetrical violence to which the third assists".

The phenomenological framework underlying the concept of violence compels us to operate a shift in our way of understanding and addressing violence, in order to leave place for a more “direct” approach of violent events. It is not a matter of totally abandoning the paradigm of meaning, but of engaging more courageously with the bodily dimension of violence, from which a physical dimension cannot be totally evacuated.

On this conceptual ground a general theory of violence is possible. It does not rely, however, on a meta-theoretical framework, but on an analysis conducted in a phenomenological style, which takes into account primarily the temporal experience of violence and the ways in which it is structured. The outcome of this kind of investigation may thus give an indication of a “set of general mechanisms that operate across various manifestations of violence” (Eisner 2009).¹⁰

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¹⁰ Additionally, the type of phenomenological approach that I drafted above will help us to move away from the idea that the subject and subjective experience have to be at the centre of a theory of violence (or, in general, at the centre of any theory).

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