

A Close-up on Violence

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Text for Lecture @ Live In Your Head / HEAD Geneva, 2012

I will start from the bottom. I think of how violence is intrinsic in each person, time, place and situation. I think of how it is impossible, either for the writer or for the reader of this text, to avoid the very notion of violence. What I consider here as 'implicit' forms of violence are those that are more difficult to recognize as violent actions.

I pay attention to what I do and think, and I acknowledge that I am not immune to it. It is part of my behaviour, my writing or talking, of how I relate to others.

There is a part of violence that has a positive meaning: the violence I address towards myself when I make efforts to go ahead to obtain something, whether intellectually or physically, trying to overcome the inertia one is seized with sometimes. That is a small violence.

There is the rather disguised violence we inflict upon others, perhaps with beneficial purposes (in my opinion), or the violence I am willing to accept. For example, the prohibitions we impose on our children, adjusting to a work environment (or imposing it to others), or induce our family, colleagues and friends to do or plan something. These are strange forms of violence, mostly partial and well accepted, that I have to negotiate constantly.

Then there are the other forms of violence in front of which I am almost transparent as they cross me completely and I don't even discuss them. I mean the physical, psychological, subtle or plain, violence I am not aware of; the violence I do not share but which characterizes my life style. Being born in a country rather than another, living a certain political situation rather than another, growing up in a given social class rather than another: all factors that cause violence starting from elements that are external to the self, elements which I do not know, I do not want to know, I am not in the condition to know or change. These types of implicit violence are those that I live everyday when I read the newspaper, open the internet or switch on the TV, or which I indirectly exert when I buy clothes, go to the office or travel with a vehicle. Specific but remote, and consequently almost non-perceivable, forms of violence.

II

But let's go ahead. There are effective keys we can use to interpret the ways this unrecognized violence is accomplished, from the personal microcosm to global flows. In this regard, I will borrow a literary work

among the most popular in Italy and abroad: *Lezioni Americane* [American Lectures] by Italo Calvino. I need it to give substance to this possibility of interpretation, I will explain why later on. Starting from literature, in 1985 Calvino identified six parameters which, according to his view, would characterize the culture of the Twenty First century.

He prepared some essays for a series of conferences to be held in the United States, but he died before he could present them. The notes he wrote for those readings are the *American Lectures*, a book that was published posthumously in 1988, whose significance is determined by the connection between (written) language and (lived) experience. These six 'memos' – lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency (the latter was in Calvino's plans but was never written) – go well beyond the characterization of the cultural forms of the present time and play a paramount role in the current 'globalized' lifestyles of human beings.

These six "memos for the next millennium" (this was the subtitle of the book) make up the very skeleton of the present era of information. Since violence is one of the constant and implicit constituents of our lives, I wondered whether Calvino's memos might work as instruments to be used to read how violent actions and thoughts do crystallize in our existence.

III

I borrow. I will start with the first of the aforesaid six terms: *lightness*. That is my present nature: I am light to be better and more conveniently (tele)ported. The more violence I absorb, the less I acquire, and the further I divert my attention from what happens to me. I see, feel, acknowledge but do not 'process' information. I just scan things. I travel light.

I feed myself with *quickness*. Passing from fashion to war in a click, a turning of a page. But this does not upset me because I consume information I can give a title to, but much less can I contextualize, considering its uninterrupted rhythm. The rapid succession becomes part of my everyday life, and this is the anaesthetic that allows me to go ahead.

Exactitude is my objective, the goal I never achieve. As I do not make real efforts – lacking energy, time and need - to properly assess my position and the effect of my actions or non-actions, I refuse taking responsibilities upon myself and I entrust others – other 'systems' (i.e. the media) and procedures (i.e. work) - with the precision of an assessment. Every day I dispatch violence from nearby, through missed accurate connections.

Being *visible* allows me to 'make' history. And I comply with and grow in it, unless I forget that the visible part is only a portion of what happens, perhaps not even the most significant or true; it is just the part that

someone decided to bring up to the surface, and which I will bring with myself from now on. I should re-understand what I am seeing.

Multiplicity is the capacity to think and implement many things all together; which also applies reciprocally concerning the multiple consequences of an activity. Each act of violence, either suffered or perpetrated, is never closed in itself, but spreads with thousand repercussions all around. And I ignore the multiple implications of the violence I commit.

The feature of *consistency* is the last parameter. It is Calvino's mute testimony, which was never written and therefore is more open to interpretations. Each one of us can read it as he or she likes. But it is particularly interesting to see it in a relationship with violence: violence is *consistent* because it is systematically applied to repeated actions and approaches, which, however, produce different results from time to time. Sometimes they should be punished, sometimes not. The spiral of violence extends because it has become a 'sustainable' practice, which brings about expected but also unexpected effects and leaves no other space than that of continuing.

IV

I expand. Therefore, the modes of implicit violence escape self-reflection and analysis because they are disguised as common sense, social life, professional commitment, and crossed variants. There are parameters that I do not activate consciously but play a role in the game to constantly describe my individual and collective position through specific contexts.

For example, the (relatively) remote condition of the violence I witness, where the most appears as the less or minor, negligible, simply by way of the distance. If the same impact of a violent action committed somewhere in the world struck me here and now, its physical and psychological consequences would obviously differ a lot. There is a problem of translation of the context: while we do not miss the literal translation of violent actions (from a language into another, from an image into another, and the like), there is only a scarce attitude in contextualizing that violence that takes place in a given space and time and seeing it in a perspective with the facts that happen in the receiving environment. I absorb the description, which is often a graphical one, of the others' evil, but I do not develop the tools to manage it in connection with my life. By removing far away, by identifying an 'elsewhere', everything appears much less complicated.

Talking about complexity, the implicit modes of violence are also masked by the fact that a certain mental and social opening is presented as the bulwark erected to defend retrograde and repressive cultures, so this declared 'open space' facilitates and resolves two types of violence: the violence perpetrated somewhere else, as evidence of the result to be expected when you do not embrace the aforesaid open-mindedness, and the violence that is statutorily applied here and now, as a necessary and sufficient system to avoid the former. In both cases, rather than finding the time and means to verify, I stick to my prescriptions. Every few years there is someone who tries to demolish this strategic simplification, sometimes successfully, as in the case of WikiLeaks encrypted files that are scattered all over the world to periodically disclose data and

information for the work of analysts and commentators.

But there are more factors to consider, which push me, more or less consciously, to live in a state of perennial vicinity with violent policies, thoughts and actions. Power is one of these. I am not vested with any such power as to be capable of affecting the decision-making processes of others, and I subject myself to situations that more or less allow me to live according to my personal interests or priorities. I might work to obtain more power - a desire I probably nourish somewhere in me. But not being directly involved in any legislature, commerce or technology makes life more linear. I use what is available to me, rather than trying to change something by interacting with the systems described above. In practice, I underuse my potential, but I take much more advantage.

Finally, I will consider the technological nature of implicit violence. Like others who will read these lines, I have a profitable relationship with technology and I almost never ask myself how to grasp its hidden aspects. Technology allows people to do things that could only be imagined in the past; it allows for wanderings and explorations in time, in space and in one's mind, and an active social life, in spite of what the enemies of social networks maintain. And yet, there is something that escapes our minds. What we lack is a more extended notion of how technology is linked to violent military, political or economic policies. To make an example, everybody knows that the Internet was initially created as a military network called Arpanet, but only a few are trying to understand how it is developing – and I am not one of them. The fact that Facebook was fundamental in the practical organization of mass movements in Tahrir Square in Cairo still leaves me astonished and somewhat incredulous. I am amazed at the opportunities for appropriation for different purposes of a product of the *late American capitalism*, and it is perhaps precisely this exception that distracts me from critically appreciating these means. I 'process' a good part of my life technologically, and I would never go back, but I still have to learn how to systematically relate technology with my decisions. And if I don't do that, this implies violent modes that 'enable' my person as an agent.

V

I imagine. The contours of what I call violence are not defined, but fluid; they depend not only on specific circumstances, but also on the historical moment and on the spatial situation where it happens. Therefore, it makes sense to focus on how it manifests itself, rather than trying to explain what it is or why it happens. That 'how' includes all the things I am myself involved in. And what happens sometimes is that I project my thoughts beyond my actions with the specific purpose of avoiding that involvement, and this is good under some respects (so I will not be plainly anchored to the cause-effect relation), but it is a danger from another point of view (I do not control, neither try to control, the cause-effect relation). My involvement in a number of implicitly violent acts and thoughts, as is the case, probably, of anybody who reads these lines, is a fact more than a hypothesis; what changes is the level of that violence and the implications that, beyond a certain threshold, become explications.

Finally, I am not made up of what I eat, read or think, although this is what I learned. If I consider the issue

more deeply, I depend more on those who look at me from outside than on those who are near me. It is a matter of retaliation: the farther I position myself from what I feel I do not belong to, the more involved I am in it. Up to my neck.

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Note

This text was first presented by the Galleria Francesco Pantaleone for the project *Neither Here Nor There* by Loredana Longo in Palermo, TEMPORARY MUSEUM in the church of San Mattia ai Crociferi, April 30 – July 3, 2011. Some parts were originally developed for *Violencias Expandidas/Expanded Violences*, Brumaria, 2010.