

Violence: proposal for a new paradigm

Abstract :

The expectations arisen from the fall of the Berlin Wall for a continuous and durable economical and social development are deceived. Instead, violence is reappearing even at the heart of western democracies, in old or new forms.

Simultaneously, though their first responsibility is to grant citizens security, Governments are less and less empowered to do so, as the market economy is getting freer and freer and globalized, and that economic warfare leads to the acceptance, when not the promotion, of various forms of violence as a necessity to face fierce competition.

This contradiction is ultimately jeopardizing both democracies and freedom. A detailed and comprehensive understanding of mechanisms of violence and of its effects is crucial to resolve it.

The notions of “narcissism of small differences”, as introduced by Sigmund Freud, and “mimetic desire”, as developed by René Girard, are still relevant and useful, but there are not sufficient : further insight into the psychological motivations and drivers of such fundamental behaviors is necessary. Developments in neuroscience, and especially what this discipline can tell us about the respective roles of the consciousness and the unconscious, give strong clues which allow to understand the emotional processes which are roots of the need for recognition, mimetism, rejection of the other, and, finally, violence.

Such a new perspective shed light on the systemic nature of violence, and on how its various forms interact together. It also proves to be a very valuable reading grid to understand ills western democracies are actually facing, such as terrorism, sexual harassment, communalism, racism, etc, and helps to discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate responses to those.

At last, but not at all the least, it provides solid foundations for ethics : one should not promote nor accept violence, except when an actual and verified threat exists. Whenever it occurs, one’s answer should be proportional and strictly defensive.

Key words : violence; ethic; mimetic desire; René Girard; democracy; freedom; economic warfare; communalism.

Violence: proposal for a new paradigm

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."¹

I - Exhaustion of liberal democracies?

Though I am a former Major General, my interest for understanding violence did not raise from the battle field but from the very common "City" life, that is from my experience in management, negotiations, and more specifically from what I observe since 15 or 20 years is happening around me every day, not only in France, but more generally in Western Democracies.

Those observations are the followings:

- First, related to the professional environment: increase of work-related stress and suffering meanwhile forms of violence are not only accepted but also promoted as normal management practices within companies or organizations. The 2009 France Telecom Company² scandal, which led to a trial that should end by a judgment mid-July 2019, has shown how easily leaders have adopted violence as a normal and explicit mean to achieve their goals, notwithstanding about moral values, which, one would have expected, they would have acted in accordance with, and therefore would have taken care of consequences of their decisions or behavior among employees.
- Second, resurgence of violence in the public area since the late 90s: increase of antisemitic-acts, outbursts of collective violence (before the "Yellow Jackets", the most impressive one occurred in Paris suburbs in fall 2005 and lasted 3 weeks. 10 000 cars were burnt on that occasion), aggression against law enforcement officials, incivilities... All these have been documented: facts and figures are undoubtedly indicating a deterioration.
- Third, moral and sexual harassment: though one cannot assert there is an increase, as most of the facts were not reported before, the "Weinstein Affair" and its replica all over the world have shown how deep roots of violence still are in the private area.

¹ Genesis.

² Since renamed Orange.

- Fourth, terrorist attacks perpetrated in America or in Europe, that should not be considered apart from previous considerations, as most of them involved European or American natives.
- Fifth, growing instabilities, crisis and wars in the immediate surroundings of Western Countries as well as in the world, which are worth to be mentioned here as they are part of the global picture and cannot be disconnected from previous points: Western Countries involvement in the most significant of them means also violence from their side.
- Sixth: lies, which are, is it worthy to recall? the first pillar of war, as stated by the famous Chinese general Sun Tzu (*The Art of War*). Always considered a necessity for *The Prince*³ under very specific considerations, and normal practice in advertising since many years, lying is no more prohibited, when not considered by leaders as a standard way to act⁴.

My statement is quite simple: violence is jeopardizing freedom and democracy, and therefore wealth. Furthermore, it prevents any action urgently needed to stop the degradation of our environment and keep it liveable. The paradox is that democracies and freedom, which aim at more justice and wealth, have by the meantime encouraged violence, within them. The fact is that there is a logic at work: the freer people is getting, the more globalized economy is growing, the less governments are empowered to grant security, though the “raison d’être” of modern states is to do so – at least this is the ground of the Social Contract first theorized by Thomas Hobbes, and latterly by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, they are supposed to implement.

Does it mean democracies are regressing to *the natural condition of mankind* as described by Thomas Hobbes? *Natural condition* does not mean here natural life, but “*war of every man against every man*”, which Thomas Hobbes describes as such: “*For war consisteth not in battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known: and therefore the notion of time is to be considered in the nature of war, as it is in the nature of weather. For as the nature of foul weather lieth not in a shower or two of rain, but in an inclination thereto of many days together: so the nature of war consisteth not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary./.../ In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain*”⁵. Whatever the answer, this 370 years old statement should actually challenge both our consciences and our minds today.

My statement meets French sociologist Alain Touraine’s view, when he considers that “*we are currently living the exhaustion of all rules of living together at world level*”⁶ and concludes that the socio-economic model which is underlying our societies must give place to an ethic, and to the development of self-consciousness and consciousness of others.

³ *The Prince*. Machiavel.

⁴ This assertion refers to D. Trump, but also to president Macron’s young former counsellor Ismael Emilien, who recently declared that using social networks to propagate fake news under false identity, as he did in the Benalla’s affair, is normal practice, to Tony Blair’s decision to fight against Irak in 2003, or to Boris Johnson’ campaign for the Brexit, and to many others...

⁵ *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes, chapter XIII.

⁶ *Nous, Sujets humains*. Alain Touraine (French sociologist, born in 1925), 2015.

II - Till unanswered question: where does violence arise from ?

But how to proceed? Since beginning of 19th century, and probably as a consequence of the French Revolution, it seems violence have been looked upon as a necessary driver to change, rather than a subject of study as such. This is quite a simplistic assertion that would need to be further elaborated, which is not the purpose of this paper⁷, but the fact is that violence seems not to have been thought for years and years, as in the meantime it has generated, and is still generating, many justifications⁸. Among other things, ideologies that have underpinned social claims and political life since 200 years, such as Marxism (class struggle and proletariat dictatorship) or liberalism (promotion of competition, capturing of market shares, and economic warfare since the 1970s), are mainly based on the idea that violence is a necessary condition of any change or progress: violence is in the genes of western societies, however social or liberal they are.

The way Western Democracies are thinking violence roots in two mainstreams. The first is illustrated by Thomas Hobbes, the second by Friedrich Hegel. Their political and philosophical thinking, which has been developed upon considerations about inter-personal violence, is still underpinning our awareness of it within society. Both are associating violence with desire and will of one to dominate the other, but there are also very significant differences between them : according to Hobbes, will to dominate stems from “*competition for riches, honor, and command*”⁹, as when two men are desiring the same thing there is no issue but to fight to obtain it, but according to Hegel, it stems from desire of recognition from one by the other.

But though psychoanalysis, psychiatry, neurosciences and many other disciplinaries have since shed light on different aspects of how psychism and brain are developing, there is still few significant contributions to the understanding of violence mechanism, that can be useful to go beyond what has already been discussed by Hobbes, Hegel or followers.

Among the most significant 20th century ones, one must of course mention Sigmund Freud, who introduced the “Death Drive” notion, and also attempted to account for conflicts between individuals and between neighbor States by introducing the concept of “narcissism of minor differences”. But Sigmund Freud failed to explain it.

One must also mention René Girard¹⁰, whose huge work highlighted the role of mimicry as motivation of desire and origin of violence. Referring to both of them, the American Historian Russell Jacoby provides in “*Blood lust. On the roots of Violence from Cain and Abel to the Present*”, a thorough analysis of conflicts since centuries, at the end of which he concludes that cultural and geographical proximity is a key factor in violence, and that Girard’s concept

⁷ One can refer to Hegel (“Master-Slave Dialectic”), Marx, and criticism by Hanna Arendt (*The Human Condition* - 1958)

⁸ Statement made by French philosopher Marc Crépon (*L'épreuve de la haine* – 2016), as well as by historian of ideas François Cusset (*Le Déchaînement du Monde* – 2018), confirmed by facts, such as those reported in the previous pages about France Telecom or Ismaël Emilien), or as decisions for military interventions in Irak (2003) or Libya (2011).

⁹ *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes, chapter XI.

¹⁰ René Girard (1923-2015) : French historian, literary critic, and philosopher of social science whose work belongs to the tradition of anthropological philosophy. He was a professor at Johns Hopkins University and at Stanford University.

of mimetic desire is relevant. But he also concludes that psychoanalysis, while focusing too much on sexuality, is still failing to account for this phenomenon¹¹. On his side, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, one of the best known Girard's followers, acknowledged that exchanges between psychoanalysis and Girard's theory were poor and have not been fruitful¹². The reason is probably that, meanwhile psychiatry and psychoanalysis is focusing on pathologies, and though there could be pathological violence, violence can not be considered only as a pathology.

Though we have strong reasons to believe that mimicry is key to understand violence mechanism, along with domination, desire and recognition of each by others, as illustrated by the hereafter pictures recently published in French newspaper *Le Monde*, we do not know yet how all those different notions may be articulated together into a comprehensive and consistent scheme to account for the emergence of violence. However, such a scheme happens now to be necessary to overcome current challenges Western Democracies are facing, by improving our own self-consciousness, and therefore the consciousness of each community about other communities and about itself.



Feb 2019 : clash between KLM and mother company KLM-Air France.

KLM CEO Piter Elbers (Netherlands) and recently appointed Air France-KLM CEO Benjamin Smith (Canada)

May 2019 : US- China commercial war.

Chinese Vice Prime-Minister Liu He, and US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, and US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer.



Le vice-premier ministre chinois, Liu He, le secrétaire américain au Trésor, Steven Mnuchin, et le représentant au commerce, Robert Lighthizer, à Washington, le 10 mai. .../2019/05/10/19051019

¹¹ *Blood lust. On the roots of Violence from Cain and Abel to the Present.* Russell Jacoby, Free Press, 2014.

¹² *La Jalousie – une géométrie du désir.* Jean-Pierre Dupuy, éditions du Seuil, 2016. Jean-Pierre Dupuy is a philosopher, and a professor of French and a researcher at the Center for the Study of Language and Information (CSLI) of Stanford University, California.

III - Back to the beginning.

Recalling that violence has also something to do with feelings and emotions, which in many circumstances it appears to be the result of, is very useful, as it leads us to look at the recent findings by neuroscientists about the development of the brain and the role of emotions, unconsciousness and consciousness. There is actually a consensus to consider that human beings are much more driven by the first two, emotions and unconsciousness, than by the last, consciousness, though we have been thinking the opposite for centuries. Emotions are a much more important driver in our behavior than the reason¹³.

Edgar Morin, one of the most famous worldwide known French intellectual during the past decades, actually reported his own experience in *Autocritique*¹⁴ : though one feels reasonable and rationale, one is not. He described how his own reason secreted rationale to support the communist doctrine, meanwhile he was quite uncomfortable with many communist party decisions. Then he realized that though he was thinking he thought rationally, he was actually moved by something else than rationality, and was under the influence of “*Magic Thoughts*”. It was unclear to him why, when he wrote *Autocritique* in the 1950s: that is the starting point of his major work, *La Méthode*, in which he develops the idea of *Complex Thought*.

But reading what he wrote when he was expelled from the French Communist Party in 1951, there is no doubt that what he referred to as “*Magic Thoughts*” are actually the influence that very deep emotions and feelings were exercising on him : Edgar Morin reported he actually felt at the very moment he was expelled “*the unbearable suffering of the fetus getting out from placental material. It was misfortune of birth, to be expelled, against one’s will, to be excluded*”.

Is the suffering of the newborn baby pure metaphor?

Since Edgar Morin wrote *Autocritique*, scientists have explained how brain is developing, from the fetal stage to the adult stage. They have shown that, among the different areas of the brain, one, the amygdala, has a special role in the feeling of fear: this brain area is already mature when we are born, which is not the case of others. The amygdala is keeping memories of the experience of life by the fetus or newborn baby, that will never be forgotten, though consciousness will not be able to access to them later. Furthermore, amygdala is triggering secretion of molecules generating stress and fear.

When growing, other areas of the brain are developing during the first five years, then maturing for around the next twenty years. With them are appearing the capabilities to understand, monitor and overcome emotions, but the capacities to do so depend on the experiences the child actually lives, and also on how he perceives his environment. The ability to learn and to keep conscious memory of experiences appears later when growing, when the child is 3-5 years old. At last Scientists have established the importance of imitation in the child development process.

¹³ *The Strange Order of Things. Life, Feelings and the Making of Culture*. Antonio Damasio, Pantheon Books, 2018.

¹⁴ *Autocritique*. Edgar Morin, Le Seuil, 1959.

Therefore, one may assume that brain is actually keeping memory of three essential experiences: the womb's comfort, the absolutely awful pain of birth, and the satisfaction of biological desires (the only ones just after birth) when being fed. Those three experiences are very closely associated with the mother. Of course, this association is not immediate, as the just newborn baby is not differentiating himself from his mother: but he will progressively experiment his mother is different from him, and, doing so, he will learn, first unconsciously but a few time later consciously, that his mother is not part of him. Consciousness of himself will arise during this process, during which the baby will try to get his mother as if she is still part of him, so that he can keep her satisfying his desires with no fear of separation - since the first one was so painful! In other words, he will try, by the means of his age – mainly crying, first – to dominate his mother and entirely submit her to his desires. In the meantime, or shortly after, the baby will discover other people, around him and his mother, whom he has to share with the later, since she is sometimes diverting from him to be available for them. But while the baby is making his own experiences, feels his environment by his own and gets conscious of himself and of the others, he is still influenced by his first emotions: strong desire for, and dreadful fear of separation from, his mother.

Whereas Hegel considers the “pure abstraction” of consciousness is the starting point of the fight for death and life between the Master and the Slave, one must instead consider consciousness is strongly rooted in the variety of the emotions the baby feels through his physical experience of the sensory world. That means also that the consciousness first asserts itself against the mother's resistance to the child's desires and the mother's ability to deal with the fear of separation, before moving progressively to the others.

When growing, the human being's conscious relation to the world, to the others, and to himself, will develop through a set of symbols, including language. Those symbols enable people to communicate together within a community, but also carry a shared comprehensive narrative of the world. Language enables human beings to think about themselves, about the others, about their environment, and about their role and place in the world; which, in return, allows the community to constantly revisit its narrative of the world, to adapt it accordingly with the never ending experiences of the sensory world by individuals. Through this recursive process, the community provides to its younger members information, that is not limited to language, as it includes as well knowledge, beliefs, and a variety of rules for common life. This information will help them to achieve their own understanding and monitoring of their emotions, while they are growing and their brains are developing, so that they can surpass them, at least to a certain extent, and consequently feel safer and confident in their environment. Through this process, fear of separation and desire will progressively change into need for recognition and move from the mother to others, accordingly with the rules set by the society in order to reduce internal conflicts, mitigate violence between its members and increase security.

But the complexity of symbolic representations must not conceal that, from the beginning, everyone's relationship to the world, or every “being-in-the-world”, is built upon the emotions felt during the three fundamental moments, mentioned hereabove and associated with the mother: womb, birth, and breast feeding. Their unconscious evocation, through the different symbols the figure of the Mother will be transferred to, or through similar situations that may occur (e.g abandonment), will stimulate the original emotions and provoke a brain

activity that will drive a reaction, such as fear for and/or hate of the one who has reactivated the emotions.

IV - Mimetic desire.

All of us are seeking recognition from other(s), because recognition is a condition for satisfaction of our desires, and all of us are also fearing other(s), because our first experience of them is that they have distracted our mother's attention from ourselves.

The more the Other is resembling me, the less I feel distinctive, the higher I fear not to be recognized anymore. Though the Other is different, this difference may divert the recognition I am seeking, from me to him. The difference between us confirms that we are two distinctive people, but it may also make the Other be preferred. For that reason, I desire what makes him different, and I may even dispute or even fight for it. This accounts for mimetic desire, and explains why, in a globalized world, dark blue suits, white skirts and light blue ties were worn during the last past months without distinction by KLM CEO Pieter Elbers, Air France-KLM CEO Benjamin Smith (Canada), Chinese Vice Prime-Minister Liu He, and US Treasury Secretary Steven Munchin.

But the process does not stop so easily. The Other is now resembling me even more, as well as he is inspiring more fear to me: this is obviously not what I was expecting at first, but now a new issue is raising. As there is less and less difference between us, how can I expect to be recognized when I can no longer distinguish the Other from myself? Once I have lost my identity and my self-consciousness, having mixed it up with the Other's, there is no way to recover them but to get rid of Him.

This is what happened between Abel and Cain. They were brothers. Cain is the elder; he suffered when his brother is born as Eve had to take care of Abel. Years later, both Cain and Abel are expecting recognition by God. They compete in offering, and God prefers Abel's present. Cain kills Abel soon after. This mechanism, which associates the figure of the mother, seek for recognition and utmost violence, is also the baseline of the narratives of a number of most famous films or novels, such as *L'Étranger* (Albert Camus), *Jazz* (Tony Morrison), *Point Omega* (Don De Lillo), *My Life as a Man* (Philip Roth), etc.

V - From interpersonal violence to collective violence.

René Girard has proposed a scheme similar to the previous one at the community level, which gives clues to understand collective violence against a third party – either individuals (scapegoat) or other community.

Difference is still playing the key role, but not all differences, as there are obviously differences within every community, as each individual is unique. What René Girard suggested is that the difference must be out of the community: it must be different than the community's own, that one may encounter between its members. That implies that all those differences can be compared together. Yet such a comparison can be achieved only if there is a common baseline to be compared to: difference would have no importance, if there is not similarity first.

That means that the Other is in the meantime belonging to the community, and differing from the community. His difference acts toward collective identity as the exception that proves the rule: it confirms the identity of the community's members and threatens it simultaneously. For those reasons he must be expelled or killed.

What has just been exposed about individual violence, hereabove, helps to explain this phenomenon.

When the Other comes, and with him what slightly differs from anyone else in the community, the members of that last one will fear discomfort, for the difference may jeopardize recognition, as explained previously. Thus, first move of each member of the community will be to reassert recognition from the inside. As the Other is considered only through his difference, and the community is mostly moved internally by desire of recognition of its own members, who are playing the game accordingly with the internal rules of it, the community, of course, cannot favorably appreciate the Other; on the contrary, the more one demeans the difference, the more one gets recognition from the other community members – and the more the community is doubting about itself, the higher the need of recognition, the fiercest the demeaning. If it happens that the difference may jeopardize the integrity and the identity of the community, and that for a reason or another the community is filled with doubts about itself (during a crisis, for instance), facts and arguments against the Other are to become partial, then distorted – slightly first, but more seriously if inglorious collective histories that has been forgotten or reviewed (as denial and oblivion help sometimes to erase any negative role of the community in the past years, decades or centuries...) are too hard to be reminded. When the confrontation reaches a certain point, the Other, who was not actually a foe at the beginning, becomes the symbol of the community's contradictions, errors and lies. The difference blurs, and the more it does, the more unbearable it is for the community, as the Other must stay different, otherwise recognition is no more possible: therefore the Other is looked upon as an aggressor who is jeopardizing the community, and thus must be expelled or killed.

« *Errare humanum est, sed perserverare diabolicum est* »: failing to recognize our errors and limitations of our mind, we accuse the Other of our very own diabolic and monstrous nature; we impute our own evil intention on him, whereas we fear him, only because we do not pay true attention to his difference.

One may find this is a too simplistic scheme to account for what has been, and still is, one of the most, or is the most complex and difficult problem Humanity is facing since women and men exist: violence. Indeed, it is not so simple. First, one must imagine multiple mimetic behaviors and many sets of mirrors in which each individual will seek recognition of others. Second, one must also consider what is presented hereabove is just the skeleton. Around it, organic material has grown for centuries, which has been shaped in a blurry way by Human History: whether explicitly or implicitly, myths, beliefs, religions, various codes of conduct, social structure, laws, science and knowledge, and so on, are the unformed frame each individual in the community have inherited from the past, and feels safe in. Is not this frame worth being secured? To some extent or another, everyone is unconsciously contributing to secure it, whatever happens out of it.

Today, sciences and knowledge allow us to see through the flesh, provided human sciences and hard sciences are brought together. Neurosciences shed new light on how brain works, and what they are revealing is challenging the previous ideas we had on mind. Descartes was wrong¹⁵: consciousness and mind are driven by emotions. Those are considered by neuroscientists as physico-chemical signals of the body reacting to stimuli. When the brain receives and processes those signals, it reacts on his turn in order to improve the “living state” of the body, accordingly with homeostasis principle¹⁶, at work in every living being. High-order thoughts, such as decision making, are significantly, if not only, influenced by emotions.

Illustration is given, once again, by Edgar Morin. Trying to understand why he has rationally promoted Marxism and why he failed to find reasons to leave the Communist Party despite his discomfort with decisions the Party made, he wrote after his eviction: “*My reflexes were inhibited. I was passive, infantilized. The party was my fatherland, my family. I was afraid, afraid of loneliness, of complete lonesome restart*”¹⁷. He was deeply moved by his seeking of recognition by others.

VI - Perspective

I tried to show in the previous paragraphs where violence lies in human beings and societies. No need to say that there is a reciprocity in the process that makes it escalate once started, if not regulated from the outside – that was the role of Gods and Sovereigns, now probably devoted to nuclear deterrence, but for how long?

The other point worth to be mentioned is that violence is anthropologic. As already stated by Friedrich Hegel, violence between human beings has much more to do with the consciousness women and men have of themselves and with their ability to represent their environment by means of symbols, than it has with their biological needs or whatever lizard brain in which would remain unfortunate savageness from the old ages.

I mentioned Antonio Damasio work twice. I could have mentioned other neuroscientists or neurobiologists, besides or instead, as a consensus is emerging within those disciplines on how the brain works and interact with the other parts of the body. But Antonio Damasio also suggested, in his latest work, that homeostatic life-regulation mechanisms govern not only cells, but also whole societies. I confess I have some sympathy with this idea, which is quite new, though Antonio Damasio is not the first one to compare a whole society with a living being: Thomas Hobbes already did so with *The Leviathan*, shown as a king whose body is made of his subjects, and later Friedrich Hegel.



¹⁵ *Descartes Error : Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. Antonio Damasio, Putnam Publishing, 1994.

¹⁶ “Set of regulatory mechanisms by which cells keep their functions and metabolite concentrations within a certain range, to maintain an internal environment conducive for life to flourish”. Definition from the web.

¹⁷ *Autocritique*. Edgar Morin, Le Seuil, 1959 (already mentioned).

In such a perspective, violence might be looked upon as the mean by which a society, or a civilization, resist to changes in its environment and try to adapt with the slightest efforts – as do organisms in general. But organisms are also tending to die from their own internal laws. That would mean, in our case, that society's or civilization's ability to improve is limited, and would confirm Hegel's view that violence is a condition of any major social progress, as the social structures of the society must be destroyed prior new ones can emerge.

But in such a view, violence is not the starting point of any change or progress in the society, but the ending point of the exhausted previous one: we must certainly fear that resurgence of violence, renewal of nationalism and protectionism within western democracies, as well as the different crisis they are involved in all around the world, are warning signals.

However, there are good news. Among other living beings, human beings are certainly the less adapted to any environment... But they are adapted to inadaptation! Their brains allow them to be conscious of their environment and of themselves in their environment, thus they can interact between them and with the environment. Now that we know that the devil is virtually in the brain of any of us, and nowhere else in the body, we can change our regard on violence, and improve our understanding of conflicts; therefore it raises expectation that mankind will overcome the biggest challenges it has ever faced.

Being conscious that violence is ours before it is the others' provides also solid foundations for ethics: one should not promote nor accept violence, except when an actual and verified threat exists. Whenever it occurs, one must avoid any escalation, and therefore one's answer must be proportional and strictly defensive. One cannot expect any good from violence.

Jean-Luc Tinland