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## Visibility and invisibility of violence in education

**Abstract:** The article describes the connections between theoretical assumptions concerning teaching freedom and the role of authority in education. It also presents Rene Girard's idea of sacrificial crisis and uses it as an interpretative technique to understand conceptual, bureaucratic, and neoliberal forms of hiding violence. Finally, the author formulates remarks concerning the importance of making violence visible and distinguishing between its manifold forms and cases.

**Keywords:** authority, education, freedom, Girard, sacrificial crisis, violence.

### Introduction

Education is a part of the culture. The relationship between culture and education is reciprocal. At the same time, education is causally linked to cultural factors in the society in which it is realised. Education has also influenced the future conditions of development of the society in which it is performed. Even if cultures tend to naturalise themselves in order to understand relationships between them, it is needed to uncover the cultural character of social institutions, among them education, to show that even the most apparent categories and practices were one day culturally created (Girard, 1979, pp. 227, 228). Educational practices and ideals cultivated in schools and universities hugely impact culture and society. The paper argues that some tensions visible in the attitude towards freedom and authority are essential for understanding contemporary education.

Ethics and norms are a part of the culture and are also influenced by educational practices. One of the crucial aspects of ethical reflection concerns definitions, evaluations, and reactions to and against violence. According to Rene Girard, violence is an unavoidable condition of human life. We shall ask ourselves how to distinguish between good and bad violence, the one culturally tamed and the one unleashed and spiralling out of control (Girard, 1979, pp. 37, 38). The hope for a world without violence influences educational systems and plays a role in understanding authority and power in education. This hope also makes invisible some aspects of violence that are harder to fit into the conception of a nonviolent world. This invisibility is many faced: it applies to the role of authority in education, the sacrificial crisis, as well as to the role of the state and the market. The last two topics are mainly scrutinised from the perspective of their role in education and in connection with the issue of violence. Final remarks concern the issue of the visibility of violence in educational contexts, as well as the role language and concepts play in making different aspects of violence more visible.

### **Teaching freedom**

The value of freedom and its social role influences not only the organisation of society and the relationship between its members, it also plays a role in education. In this context it is worth asking what are the prerequisites for teaching freedom, when it shall be done, to what extent freedom and its understanding relies on social contexts restricting its absolute character (Kotarbiński, 1986, pp. 330, 331). This shall be accompanied by the consciousness of perils connected with expanding the sphere of freedom, which raises the stakes of our choices. In Rene Girard's words:

More and more freedom is given to individuals and communities. Therefore there is more and more that is good and at the same time more and more that is bad in culture and social life. Indeed, our situation is increasingly apocalyptic as freedom increases. The Gospels have brought about this freedom, (...). The Gospels cannot guarantee that people will act the right way; they are not some kind of recipe for the good society. What the Gospels do is to offer more freedom and to set the example, above all through witness to the message, death, and resurrection of Christ, about how to use this freedom wisely (Girard, 2000, p. 274).

The magnitude of our decisions increases in proportion to the level of freedom we enjoy, demanding greater responsibility. Also with the increase of power the vulnerability of human species existence on Earth increases (Jonas 1984). Ethical importance and meaning of our choices influences our self-understanding. It also connects questions of freedom and autonomy, with those concerning violence, since the possibilities of harming others are vast.

The burden of responsibility is accompanied by a desire for autonomy, which has been analysed by Girard. He stated that the final reconciliation between the autonomous self and the other is impossible. This does not mean that the need for such a reconciliation does not arise. In Girard's words:

Solipsistic idealism and positivism wish to recognize only the solitary individual and the collectivity; these two abstractions are no doubt flattering to the Self which wishes to view everything from on high, but one is just as hollow as the other (Girard, 1965, p. 111).

The impossibility of finding ideal agreement between conflicting desires of solitary individuals and the ideal norms guaranteeing a peaceful organisation of the whole society is important for answering questions concerning the methods of teaching autonomy and freedom. If the final reconciliation of individuals and societies in which they live remains impossible, the tension between the two transposes itself on desires of individuals and the social methods of solving conflictual desires of its members.

According to Girard, the role of violence in providing autonomy is changing between the society of masters and slaves and the society of internal mediation. The first relied upon the brute force and courage in order to solve the tensions between individuals, whereas in the upper regions of the internal mediation society "(t)he elementary rights of individuals are respected but if one is not strong enough to live in freedom one succumbs to the evil spell of vain rivalry" (Girard, 1965, p. 112). In the first violence was visible and obvious. The change towards the second does not mean that violence vanished, but rather that it is harder to grasp, its mechanisms are more complicated, which makes it less visible. It is also important to note that the not so upper regions of the second society are still experiencing violence in its direct and physical forms.

Interpreting the tensions between individuals, society and its members, and desires and norms, in the context of teaching freedom, we can recognize a tension between freedom as a result of inner desire and freedom as one of the societal norms imposed on us by others. This tension translates into a tension between the reliance on external authority to help us be free

and the external bonds that entangle us and diminish our ability to be free. In Michel Foucault's words describing this tension in Immanuel Kant's text:

First, Kant establishes that individuals are unable to get out of their condition of tutelage by themselves. Why are they unable to get out of their condition of tutelage? It is precisely for the same reasons given for them being in the condition of tutelage and for their responsibility for their own condition of tutelage. It is because they are cowards, because they are lazy, because of their fear. Once again, even if they were released from their bonds, from what holds them back, and from that authority, they would not take the decision to walk on their own two feet and would fall, not because of obstacles impeding them, but because they are afraid. We are in the condition of tutelage because we are cowards and lazy, and we cannot get out of this condition precisely because we are cowards and lazy (Foucault, 2010, p. 33).

In other words we need someone from outside who would help us to teach ourselves autonomy and who would let us be free. At the same time any external authority might be suspicious since it will again mean a form of guidance over our decisions. Questions concerning teaching freedom lead us to the questions regarding authority of teachers and educators to which I now pass.

### **Authority in education**

The very same questions about authority, freedom, and autonomy are often directly stated in the context of education. Many contemporary educational theories are afraid of authority figures and concentrate on making the teacher a partner in the education process so that the power over pupils and students will not lead to oppression and imposition of teacher's values. For example, Tomasz Szkudlarek, while describing critical pedagogy, states: "education suppresses freedom, but liberation requires education" (Szkudlarek, 2004, p. 366).

One of the proposed solutions for the political and ideological engagement of teachers is to remain neutral towards social and cultural conflicts to avoid the possibility of ideological bias, the teacher, according to this view, shall remain distanced towards the main issues of the contemporary world (cf. Filippakou, 2022, pp. 4-8). Henry Giroux proposes another conception of the role of the teacher in the classroom, namely the role of someone who helps students to understand the connection between power and knowledge, the obligations which

arise from social responsibility, as well as to foster their engagement in social affairs (Giroux, 2014, pp. 59-63).

In order to further understand the problem of the role of authority in education, it would be useful to refer to Girard's distinction between beneficial and harmful violence. He stressed that the two types of violence are very similar, and yet it is crucial to distinguish between them (Girard, 1979, pp. 37, 38). This distinction between different types of violence might be helpful in recognizing the perils of a neutral standpoint, which concerns us here in the context of its application in education. The adherent of a neutral standpoint refrains from taking sides, and in consequence, abstains from discriminating between types of violence.

The impartial party is not eager to resolve the issue, does not want to know if there is a resolution; nor does he maintain that resolution is impossible. His impartiality-at-any-price is not unfrequently simply an unsubstantiated assertion of superiority. One of the adversaries is right, the other wrong, and the onlooker is obliged to take sides; either that, or the rights and wrongs are so evenly distributed between the two factions that taking sides is impossible. The self-proclaimed advocate of impartiality does not want to commit himself to either course of action. If pushed toward one camp, he seeks refuge in the other (Girard, 1979, p. 46).

Relating this reflection to the role of authority in education, we can grasp that by abstaining from evaluation, the teachers present themselves as an authority being above the explicit conflicts of contemporary society. By not imposing any values and declaring neutrality, teachers refrain from condemning evil and risk being on the side of the rule of nobody (see below). This may also lead to another factor in making violence socially invisible - the teacher who avoids taking sides and abstains from expressing any value-laden judgments will most probably lack the motivation and means to expose violence and its negative consequences.

### **Sacrificial crisis**

According to Girard, a lack of distinction between types of violence leads to a cultural process with far-reaching consequences. The process, which he calls "sacrificial crisis," endangers the very cultural foundations of societies because it affects the possibility of conceptualising. In his words:

The sacrificial distinction, the distinction between the pure and the impure, cannot be obliterated without obliterating all other differences as well. One and the same process of violent reciprocity engulfs the whole. The sacrificial crisis can be defined, therefore, as a crisis of distinctions—that is, a crisis affecting the cultural order. This cultural order is nothing more than a regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to establish their “identity” and their mutual relationships (Girard, 1979, p. 49).

Similar issues to the sacrificial crisis have been observed by other authors as well. For example, Lewis Mumford (1952, p. 144) wrote about “systemic confusion of names” as one of the vivid examples of ethical disheartenment. The obliteration of differences influences educational systems as well. In order to establish ethical values and categories also to introduce knowledge and differentiate it from ignorance, there is a need for distinctions.

For some young people facing conflicts between self-sufficiency and limitations of the outside world, between the need for autonomy and the anxiety about responsibility, and different visions of the world and self, the solution to those tensions is to commit suicide (Witulska, 2015, p. 426). The educational system shall help them to overcome those inner tensions. It is worth noting that this will not happen by pretending that education is not relying on narratives or by assuming that the future of society is impossible to predict. In such a context young people will miss reflection on values and goals that relate to the future (Gauchet, 1997, p. 180). These assumptions often lead to denying the role of meaning and sense-making in educational activities. In the words of Neil Postman:

The point is that, call them what you will, we are unceasing in creating histories and futures for ourselves through the medium of narrative. Without a narrative, life has no meaning. Without meaning, learning has no purpose. Without a purpose, schools are houses of detention, not attention (Postman, 1995, p. 7).

We need to overcome the sacrificial crisis in education in order to provide meaningful narrations about education and its role in our societies. Those narratives shall not close pupils’ eyes to the presence of violence, as well as search for providing them with the ability to evaluate different situations ethically.



### **Rule by Nobody: The Power of Bureaucracy and Markets**

Lack of distinctions and the impossibility of establishing the identity of people wielding power leads to a new type of rule - "rule by Nobody," which Hannah Arendt (1970, p. 38) defines: "bureaucracy or the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible." A bureaucratic decision-making system leads to a situation of diffusion of responsibility, often annihilation of it (Bogunia-Borowska, 2021, pp. 51-53). This form of government of nobody prompts a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, it makes violence less visible since it lacks active actors to impose it on others. On the other hand, it makes violence more attractive as a solution to social conflicts. Without the possibility of communicating grievances, since all the harm and mischief is without an author, it leads to frustration and regret. In the search for a solution, there seems to be only one answer - a violent one (Arendt, 1970, p. 81-87).

The rule of nobody in its bureaucratic context finds its corresponding version in the rule of nobody/the rule of the vicious state in the context of the market. Thus, another way of making violence invisible is referring to enlightened self-interest or market coordination. Again no actor would be responsible for violence and its results. In other cases, the whole responsibility for the evil actions is deflected towards the state, as if employers, consumers, corporations, and markets were always good and non-violent. Thus, the Weberian definition of the state as an entity holding the total monopoly over violent actions is applied without reflection on the much more complex social life practice. Money, market, and self-interest are treated as if their influence was neutral and without connection to power and violence (Arendt, 1970, pp. 77, 78; Foucault, 2013, pp. 140-142; Kucz, 2019, pp. 146-150).

The invisibility of the violent aspects of markets underestimates the dangers of corporate control over educational systems, which propels the charm of neoliberal reforms in education. From that follows the utilitarian understanding of education, as if achieving goals (mainly market-oriented ones), the best usage of resources, and the proper ratio of money spent to money gained, were the crucial factors in the social role of educational systems and their influence (Rosół, 2019, pp. 16-19).

### **Visibility and invisibility of violence in education**

Taking into consideration the above reflection concerning the relationship between freedom, authority, violence and education, we might conclude that different questions concerning authority in education, and the issues arising from the sacrificial crisis all are a part of the process of making other faces of violence less visible. Philosophical reflection might be helpful to recover and create conceptual distinctions, making it possible to see the world in more shades and dimensions. Quoting Marta Bucholc:

The basic mechanism for dealing with violence in civilization is to suppress its presence in selected spheres of social life. Violence is pushed backstage - and the backstage of the global world is immense. What used to accumulate in the dark corners of our cities and beyond the tightly closed doors of Goffmanian asylums is now removed to other continents and burdens the lives of people who, for their equally anonymous oppressors, have neither names nor faces. Violence, which we have cast out from here, may easily found out there. (Bucholc, 2015, p. 27)

Suppressed violence is not resolved violence. Invisibility does not mean nonexistence. The Russian war against Ukraine reminds us that violence is still there on the European continent. It also shows that the connection between violence and education is much more complex than the reflection on educational systems that are already in place would suggest. Entering Ukrainian territories, Russian forces were engaged in destroying libraries and killing teachers. Russian rockets destroyed universities and schools. Those actions were deliberate against the Ukrainian culture and educational system (Said-Moorhouse, Ochman, 2022). An essential part of the war includes the questions concerning the legitimacy of state power, the language of institutions, and the values that will be promoted in the public sphere.

Education is one of the most critical tools for answering those questions. Even if we agree that the situation of war provides an extreme context, it still might help us understand that questions concerning teachers and the educational process are fundamental and include issues that might turn violent in unfavourable circumstances. The example mentioned earlier of war also illustrates vividly that the possibility of education, and the space and circumstances that allow for its existence, shall not be taken for granted. The statement that “neoliberalism” is “the most dangerous ideology of our time” (Giroux, 2014, p. 65), in the context of education, ignores these prerequisites. It narrows the perspective to particular states and their policies, whereas



wars and conflicts may destroy the very possibility of the existence of educational systems. The negative influence of physical violence on education is not limited to international conflicts and wars. Research also shows how the prevalence of physical violence in a society has a negative impact on the possibility of education and access to it (Haugen, Boutros, 2014, pp. 100-108).

By ignoring the need for a proper context, which is necessary for educational systems to function properly, we close our eyes to the existence of direct violence. This leads to an overestimation of the dangers connected with different types of symbolic violence, cutting funds and other changes in the way education is treated in a society, at the same time to underestimation of the dangers connected with direct violence, dysfunctional states, international wars, that all make it impossible for the educational system to function properly (cf. Giroux, 2014, pp. 86-93).

This does not mean that those other dangers shall be ignored or that they are not worth our attention. Certainly educational institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom face significant challenges, including issues of funding and corporate control. Nonetheless, if we claim a global scope of our reflection, we shall remember that in many parts of the world, the main problems are even more profound and more existential issues. Even in the context of the US, there exist some more existential questions concerning education and its role in politics and culture. For example, as we can read in "The Economist," there are plans to change the way children that are not legally allowed to stay in Texas will be treated - their access to free education might be denied ("Meanness to migrants," 2022, pp. 39, 40). In the same issue of "The Economist," there is another article concerning the role of physical violence in education: the fate of Indian children who were forced to attend boarding schools. The article states: "There was rampant physical, sexual and emotional abuse as well as malnourishment, disease, and overcrowding. Many children were sent out to farms and businesses for months of manual labor. The schools often pocketed their wages" ("Stolen children," 2022, p. 38). These are vivid examples of more violent issues that concern education, which we shall not forget while protesting lack of funds, bureaucratic burdens, etc. The development of more nuanced language and concepts are essential to make violence, in its many forms and shades, more visible and less easy to forget.

## On the Commitment to Evaluate Violence

The inflation of language and the war-like metaphors are unhelpful in understanding the scope of challenges and the difference between particular situations and in different parts of the world. Claiming that violence is violence and there is no difference between symbolic violence and physical violence makes it harder to understand how to change the world into a less violent place (cf., for example, Bourdieu, Passeron, 1990, pp. XX, XXI, 9, 10). Describing violence in the symbolic categories is an act in social life that focuses our attention on the violent character of educational systems, but at the same time lacks ideas about the way out of its violent character (Kłoskowska, 1990, pp. 39, 40). Applying its own interpretative tools might be seen as an act of symbolic violence, undermining the legitimacy of educational systems without providing a less violent alternative. As Arendt (1970, p. 80) wrote: “The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.” Without differentiation between physical violence and symbolic or maybe even better between physical, mental, and symbolic violence (cf. Sojak, Zybortowicz, 2008, pp. 17, 18) and without differentiation between good and bad violence, the very understanding of stakes and actions needed to solve international and social conflicts and diminish the role of violence in the world is going to be endangered.

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