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To not nurture a war – education against violence (Girard - Patočka)

Abstract: The author is primarily interested in violence in the form of joining Girard's persecution crowd. Thus, the text concerns violence not in the general sense as the use of force to break resistance, nor symbolic violence in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu, but in the sense of human disposition to retaliate and persecution - in other words, violence is analyzed here in terms similar to what Erich Fromm called malignant aggression - the tendency to destroy and gain unlimited control over other people and the world.

In the text, the author radicalizes the question about the pedagogical context of violence, treating the tendency to hasty curricular and organizational changes (which often occur after events of escalating violence in schools), as well as the utilitarian search for effective preventive evidence-based measures, as illusions and part of the problem we face with violence. He recognizes that pedagogical reflection must go much deeper. He seeks knowledge about the sources of violence and the cultural formations that foster it in the works of the French anthropologist René Girard and the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. The ideas of mimetic rivalry and the 20th century as war can give us insight into the phenomenon of violence and suggest the direction of educational transformation.

The author conducts the analysis in several steps. After a critical introduction to the contemporary reaction of education to violence, he first outlines Girard's concept of the mimetic mechanism, then emphasizes three ideas present in it (with references to the nowadays): violence as an anthropological feature embedded in the human condition, unawareness of one's own violence and unanimity of the persecuting crowd. In the end, these three

accents become the basis for the postulate of existential reorientation of education, based on Patočka's concept of forces of the day and the night.

Keywords: violence, education, mimetic rivalry, the solidarity of the shaken, war, achievement society, forces of the day.

Introduction

Occasional excesses of extreme violence¹ at school are followed by debates about the weakness of teachers' preparation to deal with conflicts and difficult situations (e.g. Witkowski, 2009). In the face of such a diagnosis, teachers, students, and the public often expect quick and simple solutions. What conclusions have we drawn? What can we do to prevent this from happening again? What "works" in the face of violence?

One of the theses of this text is the claim that such posing of the matter and such questions – or rather the way of thinking from which they arise – are part of the problem and not only do not help but even distance us from constructive solutions. What if we don't understand the sources of violence deeply enough? What if the aggressive *Zeitgeist* structure eludes us? So maybe our prescriptions for violence are just an escape from thinking? Maybe we are frantically looking for no real solutions, but a convenient alibi so as not to touch anything in our ideas and habits regarding education? Maybe we are trying to maintain a sense of reacting to the scandal of violence, but in such a way that nothing changes at school and in the world around it?

In this context, I am asking French anthropologist René Girard and Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka about violence. The concept of mimetic rivalry and the idea of the twentieth century as war can give us insights into the phenomenon of violence and suggest a direction of educational transformation that we usually do not think about when aggression at school appears in our field of vision. Someone may think that deep changes in thinking about education and far-reaching social transformations are unrealistic, so it's a waste of time for anthropological and philosophical intellectual expeditions. The scale and difficulty of transformations, which emerge from Girard and Patočka's reflections, may indeed be discouraging, but are they unrealistic?

¹ Violence is a very broad concept. In this text, I will not talk about violence in the general sense as the use of force to break resistance, nor about symbolic violence in the sense given to this term by Pierre Bourdieu, but about the human disposition to retaliate and persecution, i.e. violence in a similar sense to what Erich Fromm called malignant aggression – the tendency to destroy and gain unlimited control (Fromm, 1973: xvi).

Certainly, such a reflection is closer to reality than being stuck in the illusion that something simple will “work” here, omitting the deep – existential and structural – sources of violence and the long-term effort to disarm the war mode of thinking. Nothing is simple in education, you have to talk about it with the most excellent minds. And the “what works” discourse – as Gert Biesta (2013: 119-120) has already shown – by focusing on facts rather than values, has difficulty grasping that education is always defined by goals and ideas about what is good education and good human life. One can try to frame education in terms of *strong* causal links between input and output, but this is a misguided strategy – it means forgetting that in education the links are *weak* – they are established by interpretations, not causation.

What is at stake in these considerations is precisely the interpretation of the problematic question: how could we not keep and cherish violence, not nurture a war?

The element of violence

Girard (1979: 14-27) argues that modern human does not understand violence, that is, he is not aware of the fragility of the social order, of the danger of the spread of revenge, and of the respect that archaic societies have for violence. Violence is something unpredictable, like an uncontrollable element: fire, storm, earthquake, flood, or plague. Any reaction scheme becomes impossible:

The slightest outbreak of violence can bring about a catastrophic escalation. Though we may tend to lose sight of this fact in our own daily lives, we are intellectually aware of its validity, and are often reminded that there is something infectious about the spectacle of violence. Indeed, at times it is impossible to stay immune from the infection. Where violence is concerned, intolerance can prove as fatal an attitude as tolerance, for when it breaks out it can happen that those who oppose its progress do more to assure its triumph than those who endorse it. There is no universal rule for quelling violence, no principle of guaranteed effectiveness. At times all the remedies, harsh as well as gentle, seem efficacious; at other times, every measure seems to heighten the fever it is striving to abate (Girard, 1979: 30-31).

The sources of human violence lie in the mimetic mechanism. What is the basis of cultural transmission – *mimesis* – is also the fuel of conflicts and the spiral of retaliation. Desire – a similar motif is also known from Lacanian psychoanalysis (cf. Stępniewska-Gębik, 2004: 116) – is always the desire of the

Other. That is, desire arises from the imitation of a pattern - a person desires what the other desires or what someone else possesses. If the subject and the model are not separated by an appropriate social distance (difference), imitation easily and often imperceptibly turns into rivalry (the so-called relationship between the doubles). In the spiral of retaliation, explains Girard (2006: 61-63), the combatants become similar to each other, the object of desire disappears, becoming only a pretext in the fight for dominating the opponent, and the crisis often spreads unpredictably upon the environment. In this situation - in the shadow of the threat of community destruction - people tend to unite against the chosen (often accidental) victim. Directing violence at someone relatively indifferent and weak, who can be "sacrificed" without the risk of retaliation (thereby without the risk of rekindling the conflict or exacerbating it) relieves tension and restores harmony for a while:

No one in the community has an enemy other than the victim, so once this person is hunter, expelled, and destroyed, the crowd finds itself emptied of hostility and without an enemy. Only one enemy was left, one who has been eliminated. Provisionally, at least, this community no longer experiences either hatred or resentment toward anyone or anything; it feels *purified* of all its tensions, of all its divisions, of everything fragmenting it. (Girard, 2001: 36).

I do not sympathize with the scientific claims of Girard, who presented his concept of the mimetic mechanism and the scapegoat as an irresistible, final, only possible explanation, what some commentators even interpreted as spiritual robbery, an unjustified despotic generalization (cf. Domenach, 1983: 316-317). One does not have to agree with Girard on everything or accept his frame of interpretation of his theory, to recognize that he does have something important and inspiring to say. Well, I think he says three things that are crucial to our attempts to understand malignant aggression: first, violence is within us; secondly, we have a strong tendency not to see it; thirdly, for this reason, we join the persecuting crowd every step of the way, increasing the sum of the sufferings in the world.

The war within us

Girard convincingly showed that violence is not so much a biological instinct or a contingent attribute of unfortunate social circumstances as an archaic power related to the ambivalence of human desires. In this sense, it is part of the human condition, it is, so to speak, an anthropological constant that must be constantly kept in mind, which cannot be underestimated

(also in education). We must not think that we can get rid of it definitively by reorganizing social relations, but neither should we treat it as an innate individual property outside the environmental context.

Violence is inherent in our condition, but it is also strengthened today by the overgrowth of the calculating reason. Patočka's thought will be helpful here. According to the Czech philosopher (Patočka, 1996: 123-132), the wars of the 20th century and the military thinking related to them are the fruit of a new working society – that is: discipline, production, and planned organization – aimed at releasing more and more energy resources. Our concentration on the tasks of everyday life and the related mobilization – which the Czech phenomenologist calls *forces of the day* – can send millions of people to the front, turn peace into a dormant state of war, and approach death only statistically. The will for technical control over everyday life is the point of view of a constantly renewed conflict. One might say that war incurably haunts the calculating intellect. Tadeusz Ślawek (2018: 174) writes: “War is the thinking that haunts within the mind ruined by the creations and discipline of a calculating, technological reason”. In this perspective, violence is not what appears as an irrational primordial force disrupting our well-ordered world, but rather it is a perverse spectral effect of the hegemony of one-dimensional desire and the unjust social order built upon it. Thus, violence cannot be weakened without first weakening the technocratic *status quo*. Lubica Učník (2011: 190) sums up the intuition of the Czech philosopher: „For Patočka, the existential crisis of today's society and the perpetual wars disguised as peace are two sides of the same problem. They are the outcome of the transformation of nature into a standing-reserve of energy for humans to use as they see fit”.

The violence of technocracy is not only manifested in the negativity of war. The positivity of modern terror is aptly – although in my view a slightly too dualistic – described by Byung-Chul Han (cf. 2018: vii-ix). Violence has not disappeared from modern Western society, which can be called the achievement society. It only shifts from visible and negative forms to hidden and positive ones. More than lynched victims, manifestations of revenge, torture, terrorism, armed confrontations, or hate speech – although Han should have made it clearer that these are still with us – we are dealing with an overabundance of positivity – overproduction, overcommunication, hyperactivity, a flood of data. The violence of positivity does not take away anything directly, but it saturates and exhausts - in effect, so to speak, it takes away everything. The modern subject with the injunction of success lives in

the perspective of depression and infarction. He fights not so much with an external enemy as with himself. There is no place for weakness in his world.

Fragility and uncertainty are obstacles to effective action, which is the only thing that matters to the calculating reason. From here, however, it is only a step toward negative violence. Who is a dictator for himself is easily a dictator for others. Tomasz Stawiszyński writes about it:

Disagreement with our own weakness and blindness by the ideals of efficiency, activity, and optimism lead not only to a lack of tolerance for our own helplessness – but also close us to the helplessness of others. They destroy empathy. They turn us into always smiling, always productive, and always ready to act, but at the same time fundamentally lonely cyborgs which react to every manifestation of imperfection, inertia, contingency, weakness, or danger – that is, lack of control by and large – with fear-lined rationalization (Stawiszyński, 2021: 154).

The persecutory unconscious

Girard emphasizes (2001: 126) that the sacrificial mechanism – defusing community tensions through violence centered on the scapegoat – is only truly effective when the attitude of *all-against-one* goes unnoticed by the participants. We wouldn't bear to know our own violence.

We have a permanent tendency to impose our existential limitations (of desire, thinking, feeling, imagination, lifestyle) on others, ignore the effects of competition, and locate ourselves on the side of those who are harmed, not those who harm. Persecutors are always others, our hostile words and actions are, after all, valid and justified – they are only reactions to someone else's misconduct. Human constantly externalizes evil – he projects violence onto deity, fate, and other people, or – reversing the vector – an instinct. This is how we run away from responsibility. The source of violence is always Something, some Other. We avoid mirrors unless they are enchanted mirrors that respond the way we want. Girard (1979: 253) writes: „To pontificate on the subject of monsters is in effect to take them seriously, to enter into their game; it is to be duped by their appearance instead of recognizing the human being who lurks behind the monstrous form”.

The phenomenon of not noticing violent situations, blindness on the one hand to one's own and others' fragility (finitude, vulnerability), and on the other hand to deceitful rationalizations of one's tendencies to malignant aggression (to destroying others by word and deed, taking control over others, forcing submission, imposing one's limitations, joining a symbolic or physical lynching) is a formidable challenge to education, the more so

that rightness, values, ideals, social expectations, success, order, efficient organization, progress, service, the necessity of adaptation, etc. may be the manifestations of rationalization concealing violence here. This challenge requires the initiation of advanced reflexivity and the tender nurturing of human sensitivity, not the search for simple prescriptions or transparent response algorithms. There is nothing simple under the pedagogical sun. Especially since the traps of persecutory unconsciousness lie in wait for the actors of the educational activity. Also, a critical disposition – when we are already aware of violence and decide to fight it – can lead us astray: „Instead of criticizing ourselves, we use our knowledge in bad faith, turning it against others. Indeed, we practice a hunt for scapegoats to the second degree, a hunt for hunters of scapegoats. Our society’s obligatory compassion authorizes new forms of cruelty” (Girard, 2001: 158).

Persecutory (digital) crowd

Group unanimity is important in persecution. Girard (e.g. 1979: 100) showed that breaking someone from the persecutory circle weakens or even destroys the sacrificial mechanism. If someone from within the community does not join the violence, the war machine jams - it becomes possible to slow down the momentum of aggression and to emerge of fractions. Thus, the discharge of internal tension at the victim’s expense is hindered or thwarted. Without a common front against the Other, the mimetic rivalry is not interrupted.

This is one of Girard’s most important discoveries, striking at our myth of social harmony. Unanimity is dangerous. The French anthropologist invokes the Talmudic principle in this context: „If everyone is in agreement to condemn someone accused, release him for he must be innocent” (Girard, 2001: 118).

Unanimity is rarely the carrier of truth, most often it is a manifestation of hidden tyranny. As Ryszard Koziółek (2017: 519) writes: “The desire for one (i.e. my language) is always an invocation of violence, and it is not only a problem of academic humanities but a common, dark energy permeating social reality.” It has become a common modern practice – most often, of course, unaware of one’s own violence – to join the persecuting crowd on the Internet. As Han says (cf. 2015: 42-43), the digital world is poor in otherness and offers no resistance – in virtual spaces, the narcissistic subject meets primarily himself. Therefore, he can freely vent his anger at everything that exceeds his own limits. Girard (cf. 2006: 86) – not referring to the Internet – emphasized that disappointed desires derive comfort from experiencing the

scandal together, from the fact that many people share our agitation. Just post. Social media works like an echo chamber – it allows you to receive instant gratification. Digital reality has therefore become an ideal environment for the development of mimetic violence:

Because the disposition to violence, the shadow, the dark side, is one of the most insidious blind spots in our inner landscape. This is extremely important, especially in the era of social media, which closes us in information bubbles and trains us to permanently formulate binary judgments: like – don't like, yes – no, guilty – innocent. Waves of indignation sweeping through the digital world, permanent antagonisms, emotions cranked up to unbelievable registers, treating dissent as a crime, attacking anyone who breaks the chorus proclaiming a given orthodoxy in unison – these are all phenomena that we observe daily and that we are participants every day (Stawiszyński, 2021: 290-291).

Ending – education of the shaken

Violence now appears to us as a deep anthropological mechanism related to the mimetic and ambivalent nature of human desires, largely it is not accessed to consciousness and is projected by us outside, ubiquitous, everyday, reinforced by the technocratic culture of calculating reason (forces of the day, and thinking as war), by the compulsion success in an achievement society (desensitizing people to human fragility) and by the comforting support of the digital crowd (in a tense-relieving unanimous lynching).

In the face of such complex phenomena, no hastily drawn pedagogical conclusions, techniques of influence based on scientific evidence, or superficial organizational changes in education or teacher training will help, especially since they are part of the problem. It is, after all, a component of those rushed forces of the day that perpetuate and feed the state of war. If education is to attempt to realistically oppose violence, it cannot fuel it, it cannot act as a daytime force, and it must go into night mode.

Patočka sees a counterbalance to the culture of apparent peace, to warlike thinking and the evil infinity of everyday life in the solidarity of those who have doubted the day. We need the *solidarity of the shaken* – people who can understand what life and death are all about, and who can oppose the possessiveness of the technocratic society of power:

The solidarity of the shaken can say “no” to the measures of mobilization which make the state of war permanent. It will not offer positive programs but will speak, like Socrates’ *daimonion*, in warnings and prohibitions. It can and must create a spiritual authority, become a spiritual power that could drive the warring world to some restraint, rendering some acts and measures impossible. [...] Humankind will not attain peace by devoting and surrendering itself to the criteria of everydayness and of its promises. All who betray this solidarity must realize that they are sustaining war and are the parasites on the sidelines who live off the blood of others (Patočka, 1996: 135).

Commenting on the famous thought of the Czech philosopher, Sławek (2021: 113) says that the modern school, surrounded by techno-bureaucracy, has ceased to deal with what is serious and important: “It has become a puppet theater distracting the student’s attention from ‘what life and death are all about’”.

In other words, the only hope lies in an existential reorientation of education. What is used to mobilize to meet the challenges of the present day cannot simply be abandoned but must be seriously weakened and placed on the margins of educational activities. And what gives insight into the fragile human condition must be moved to the pedagogical center, not as a positive program of a brave new world (a humanistic plan for realizing genuine human nature), but as a subtle and sometimes difficult conversation about what is human and non-human or humane and non-humane in the world. In the terms of Michael Oakeshott (2001: 15-16), much more space needs to be devoted to *the adventures in human self-understandings*, with the proviso that the underlying culture cannot be understood as a coherent doctrine or a ready-made set of teachings about human life, but rather as an embroiled and confusing conversational encounter requiring initiation.

A real response to violence requires a far-reaching transformation of the pedagogical imagination. The education of the day should be replaced by the education of the night, and the education of the mobilized should be substituted by the education of the shaken. As part of such a shaken education, at least four doubts are important (which we just can’t imagine so far). Firstly, if violence is born of the mimetic mechanism (imitation of the desires of the Other), we must start to doubt our desires and test them at the angle of – in our context – life (possibly) without violence. This means – according to the well-known formula of Biesta (2017: 16) – the question of whether what is *desired* is *desirable* as well. The discourse that defines education as a service activity to meet the needs of its clients is deeply misleading, as it obscures

the essential purpose of education, which is the Socratic problematization and transformation of needs and desires, and which is not to support but to interrupt human development in its conventional forms.

Secondly, if violence is born in the escalating relationship of the doubles (rivals who become similar to each other), one must doubt competition and the achievement-subject – one needs to weaken rivalry and weaken the focus on economic success in the field of education. Resigning from testing, parameterization, and ranking (which are convenient for bureaucracy but also lead students away from important existential questions) would be only the first step here. While it is inconceivable in the neoliberal order of late capitalism to renounce narcissistic self-imposition as a role model, we also have other stories in the cultural resources. Girard (2010: 117-118) refers to the paradigmatic role of the Gospel story about Jesus of Nazareth: „He does not present himself as a warrior. On the contrary, he claimed membership in the Jewish prophetic tradition, which aims to *demonetize* violence. It is thus *because Christ deprives them of scapegoats* that the Powers and Principalities will be destroyed”. Education that weakens competition would be based on cooperation and the positive dimension of *mimesis*, combining the arousing of desires with the withdrawal relationship: „Imitating Christ thus means thwarting all rivalry [...]” (Girard, 2010: 123).

Thirdly, if violence is an element that is generally unconscious and projected outside, one must doubt one’s identity narratives and subject them to examination. The vigilance of critical theory and the lesson of psychoanalysis, which yet grew out of the loss of confidence in self-commentaries, appear to be indispensable components of pedagogical thinking. Education must be interested in mute voices, afterimages, and underground life. In reflection and pedagogical practice, instead of individual or collective self-promotion, humility must be rehabilitated. Humility, on the other hand, as Paul Standish (cf. 1992: 21-22) explains, is far from protective timidity in the face of obstacles. It only means respecting the uncertainty of our situation and recognizing the provisional nature of our control over reality. In humility, we can read the call to leadership or take up difficult work (hubris, in turn, can be hiding in the shadows as a mask of self-centered safe play with the world). The point is that there are achievements that bring us suffering (violence) and we could do without them. The point is not that people (students) need to have lower aspirations, but that they have a realistic concept of their place in the world and proper respect for others. Humility means believing that life can be open to what is important, that – let us add after Biesta (cf. 2017:

16) – it can be conducted in an adult way (taking difference seriously) and not in an infantile way (closed in a narcissistic bubble).

Fourthly, if lynching – today extremely popular in the digital version (also not uncommon in school corridors) – requires tight ranks, then one must doubt unanimity, harmony, loyalty, and conformism in education. Education must be sensitive to these manifestations of closing ranks, building a front, and mobilizing. He can warn against them by practicing a conversation – not one that is about persuading the other party and getting his way, but one in which we can learn something from the interlocutors – even if they are completely different from us; and by generating and valuing creative resistance (instead of stigmatizing and overcoming it as insubordination). Resistance matters. Breaking the chorus of the unanimous crowd can weaken or even destroy the persecution, or at least preserve the memory of the violence and the victim. Girard gives a historical example:

But on the third day of the Passion the scattered disciples re-group again about Jesus, who they believe is risen from the dead. [...] A protesting minority appears and resolutely rises up against the unanimity of the persecuting crowd. The latter becomes no more than a majority, numerically overwhelming, of course, but incapable from now on of totally imposing its conception of what has happened, its mythical representation of the Crucifixion. (Girard, 2001: 188)

You can be – this is an important educational message today – the single who will say *no* to the forces of the day, who will take violence for real and start thinking seriously of what life and death are all about; more: you can be the one who will not join the persecutory crowd; the one who will save (the memory of) the fragile.

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