

Contemporary Culture, Citizenship of Fear ¹

The violence in Brazil between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st

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Let us begin with a brief definition of violence, just repeating what has long been known: that it constitutes a form of human bond in which the initial intention or purpose sought involves the use of force - physical, psychic or institutional - which results in damage, loss, suffering, humiliation or death of another person, then converted into a victim. Of course, its social extension varies enormously and is manifested both with absolute evidence, in the case of mass hostilities (war), and in an intimate or reserved way, between only two people.

For some authors, like Hobbes, violence - in the case of a war, for example - can even exclude real force, as long as there remains a manifest conflictual disposition, generating fear or anguish (more recently, the cold war may have been a good illustration of this concept).

Nowadays, especially in Latin America and Africa, urban violence no longer distinguishes “classic” forms of externalization, as we could theoretically observe between war - violence between states or armed political-institutional factions, with purposes political, territorial, ideological or financial, often simultaneous; organized crime -

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violence perpetrated by private armed groups, with immediate financial purposes; and torture or violation of human rights - violence by states against individuals for often ideological-political reasons. This is so true that, since the second half of the twentieth century, the predominance of violence and the deaths caused by it no longer occurs between military bodies, but in the confrontation between citizens or between them and the police bodies in charge of security.

In Brazil, absolute champion in these statistics, as well as in Mexico, Russia and the United States, violent deaths are the first causes in the age group between 5 and 39 years (World Health Statistics Annual, several years of the last decade of the 20th century). According to the Maps of Violence published by IPEA (Institute of Applied Economic Research), we have the following numbers in Brazil: murders committed in 1980 = 13,910, with a percentage of 11.7 people per 100 thousand inhabitants; in 2010 = 49,932 homicides, with 26.2 people per 100 thousand inhabitants; in 2017 = 65,602 violent deaths, with 31.6 people per 100 thousand inhabitants. 5,200 homicides were all committed on the European continent in 2007, that is, less than 10% of those that occurred in Brazil.

Among so many causes that seek to explain the growth and consolidation of criminal forms of violence and corruption, we find, immediately, the usual economic rosary: unemployment and lack of prospects for material survival, precarious work and brutal concentration of income, precariousness or even a progressive exclusion of public services (health, social security, housing, public security) - which also means a severe limitation or even the suppression of substantive citizenship - in addition to the expanded economy of drug trafficking, given the increases in production and

consumption of drugs. A recent survey by the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2003) concluded, for example, that half the world's population lives on up to two dollars a day. As if those who survived with three or four were in a dignified situation. And if it continues at such a pace of impoverishment, the abolition of socioeconomic perspectives and the simultaneous appeal to consumption, it is very likely that the regime will move, in an insane way, towards its self-destruction. This perspective is not the result of a traditionally Marxist or anti-capitalist view, but suggested by a defender of the liberal economy, who, when confronting Nazism in the 1930s, warned his peers with the following recommendations: "Whatever the political trends or currents chosen as examples, we will find that they always sow their destruction when they lose the notion of measure and exceed their limits. A free economic system is no exception: it will only flourish and be defended as part of a much broader order, involving ethics, the law, the natural conditions of life and happiness, politics, the state and divided power".²

Recently, André Gorz, in one of his last books (*Misères du Présent, Richesse du Possible*, Galilée, 1997), and despite an optimistic final proposition, he does mention the possibility of reaching the stage of a "non-society", in which all the traditional bonds of social interaction would dissolve, starting with work, defined, until recently, as the central axis of the material and spiritual organizations of life. Among the negative and most evident aspects of contemporary political economy is the generation of "useless masses", with no other means of livelihood than recourse to begging or persistent crimes.

² Wilhelm Röpke, *The Economics of the Free Society*, Chicago, Henry Regnery, 1963.

With regard to organized crime (mainly in Brazil), everything indicates that it is configured as a permanent action of hierarchical groups, which have the capacity to accumulate instruments of strength and to demonstrate it both from a territorial or sociogeographic point of view (imposition on other groups and sectors in close or even remote areas), as well as political and institutional (confrontation, intimidation or enticement of public agents of any nature and institutional power). Through it, all objectives were merged: economic, financial, political, social and axiological. And, simultaneously, its forms of organization and action: drug trafficking, guerrillas, terrorism, money laundering, financial scams, theft, assault, kidnapping, robbery and lobbies of various kinds and infiltration capabilities. Legal and illegal coexist promiscuously or become partners between the legal lines, while organized and diffuse crimes (this one committed by people or groups that are not well equipped and that act intermittently) start to differ only in extent, that is, in their degrees of reach.

For these organizations, of course, the idea of life, as a supreme good, has little meaning. The only one that may be preserved is that of exchange value, but close to that of redemption. And the idea of personal good, as property, becomes booty. In their places, the action of violence, gain and conquest at any cost, the brutal imposition of will and competition with other powers legally constituted or not, were valued.

In the broader context of culture and mentalities, we are faced with the abandonment or failure of the traditional education of the humanities and the failure of modern and utilitarian education for work, a phenomenon reflected in the mismatch between educational offers and those of employment, or between qualifications and real

occupation. But also with the premature addiction and the generalized consumption of drugs, with the resulting psychotic effects, with the loss or insignificance of ethical references (corruption, concussion, bribes), the indistinction between the public and the private, besides the legislative, judicial, police or prison indulgence or permissiveness for crimes and criminals. A certain pathology or decline in political participation, visible in situations of apathy and abstentionism, can also be seen in institutions representing civil society (trade unions, parties and associations) as well as in times of elections.

This creates daily and widespread situations of intimidation, insecurity and institutional incapacities that characterize our contemporary citizenship of fear. That in which social relations or mediations take place under strong tension and distrust, in which citizens sense the permanent possibility of their victimization - physical and socioeconomic - in which the public space, by definition open, tends to ruin and to fragment into private spaces and, therefore, confined and excluding. It also corresponds to a picture of the disintegration of bonds of solidarity, that is, the weakening of constitutional and labour guarantees, typical of Welfare States. Under other impulses and reasons we could subjectively repeat Rousseau's first daydream: "Here I am, therefore, alone on earth, having only myself as a brother, neighbor, friend, companion".³

But we can still remember, now from an objective point of view, Alessandro Manzoni. In *The Fiancés*, the author comments on a situation typical of the 17th century in Italy, which we can still experience with the same vigor today: "It was not that laws against private arbitrariness were lacking. On the contrary, there were

³ *The Lonely Walker's Daydreams*, portuguese version, Ed. UNB, Brasília, 1986.

exorbitant sanctions and penalties for all sorts of offences... But in spite of this, they only served to attest to the impotence of their authors, when they did not aggravate the vexations of the more peaceful citizens. Organised impunity had roots that the sanctions could not shake".⁴ In other words, the counterpart to organised crime among us is the irresponsible or even conniving tolerance of the authorities responsible for legislating and enforcing laws.

Parallel to this state of affairs, there is the symbolic diffusion of violence and its glamour, carried out by the ubiquitous means of mass communication and promotion of shows. As it is susceptible to multiple reproduction and playful, agonistic treatment, it becomes (alongside pornography) an easy and exciting commodity to consume. This fact amplifies the social resonance of behaviors and both phenomena then become educational, in the neutral sense of a transmission of life forms, attitudes and values. That is, they reaffirm a culture that is, at the same time, one of hostility or aggressiveness trivialized and of fun morality (that of narcissism and that of immediate pleasure), easily perceptible in the streets or in primary or formal relationships of all classes. First of all, in harsh, poor, ironic, pimping and sexualized language (the series of obscene words in a conversation is almost innumerable) even when it is intended to be friendly or cordial.

If we use Wittgenstein's argument (that of *Philosophical Investigations*), we must agree that this "language game" (Sprachspiel) - type of speech, vocabulary and meaning - which is simplistic and brutalized, corresponds to a "way of life" with identical characteristics. Thus one of his aphorisms ('23) proposes: "Speaking

⁴ Portuguese version, Abril Cultural, São Paulo, 1971.

language is part of an activity (Tätigkeit) or a way of life (Lebensform)". This decline, although only initiated, had already been noticed by Arnold Gehlen in the middle of the twentieth century, who analyzed it thus: "In the rubric of primitivism we must finally describe yet another strange phenomenon of modern cultural life, which is the decadence of the subtlety of thought in the linguistic domain. The figures of thought rich in allusions and connections are missing in vast circles, the expressive richness of the unspeakable, the stylistic refinements, the rigorous conceptions with their superior tones; everything has to be presented in a summary, accessible, mnemonic, taxative way".⁵

Through contemporary language, interpersonal treatment abolishes differences of sex, age or social role, and consequently denies the perception and meaning of those distinctions. Multiple individualities, for example, are all treated under one category.

More serious, however, is to suggest the existence of another relationship in the order of culture, or of an already advanced stage of decline (of a late civilization). What is meant is that the current situation leads us to the following conception, made by cross-cultural psychiatry (Arthur Kleinman, Byron Good, for example): that a sick society demands from its individuals, or at least a large part of its constituents, attitudes appropriate to the mental and behavioral abnormality that also characterizes it. That is, the standard of normality is given by the illness from which one suffers. An understanding that makes us go back to Cícero (here quoted by Montaigne in his *Essays*): "familiar with the things we see daily, we no longer admire them and do not try to understand the causes of

⁵ *Man in the Age of Technology*, portuguese version, LBL Enciclopédia, 1959.

this". Violence and fear are so ingrained in our daily lives that we no longer see them - individuals and authorities - as anomalies.

For this reason, we must not forget also the crazy and irresponsible brazilian daily traffic (43,870 deaths in 2014 and, despite the reduction, 37,345 deaths in 2016, across the country, according to data from the Ministry of Health); the voluntarily provocative appearances of dressing and walking; the repeated attitudes of vandalism, depredation and graffiti on public or private goods and the accumulation of garbage voluntarily thrown on urban roads, roads, water courses and beaches.

The culture of violence means that the real and virtual manifestations (these are increasing, as their authors believe they are unscathed to justice) of strength, damage, challenge, disrespect and irresponsibility towards the other, who in extreme cases reach summary justice, constitute behaviors usual forms of an undeclared war that takes place both within civil society and between civil society and the state.

The aspects of reality that are reflected in our imaginary can be perfectly distinguished then when we compare two fictional situations of juvenile marginality, separated by about seventy years. We refer, on the one hand, to trickery, to the life of thefts, to the social revolt present in *Capitães de Areia* (by Jorge Amado), the consequences of which do not actually remove the vocations announced from the horizon of perspectives; on the other, to the astonishing gravity, cynicism and absolute impasse of the characters of *Cidade de Deus* (by Paulo Lins, later adapted for film by Fernando Meirelles). Between one and another work, one travels from the harshness of life to complete barbarism. Today, and annually, only in the State of São Paulo (between 1999 and 2002), the facts notified to the Secretariat

of Public Security, which show only the shark's back, amount to more than 1,300,000 (one million and three hundred thousand), between homicides and attempted deaths, bodily injuries, rapes, robberies, drug trafficking, robberies and thefts.

Intoxicated by the generalized lethargy of contemporary thought, we admit poverty as a standard of socioeconomic normality, ignorance as a manifestation of truth and spontaneism as purity of spirit (there are grammarians and teachers of Portuguese for whom there are no more mistakes, because all elocutions are equally correct. Therefore, we no longer need professionals in this area of education). We also admit voluntary action as a substitute for formal and protected labor relations and absolute ethical-moral relativism as an indispensable attribute of personal freedom, since we owe no one else satisfaction for our acts and purposes.

Everything finally leads us to a contradiction in terms. In other words, we naturalize, in the cultural universe, the innate conflicts that the idea of civilization has always believed reduce. Tired of psychic sublimations, we regressed to primary situations of the primitive horde and opened the doors to the free course of all impulses. If in 1929 Freud even attributed the sensation of *Malaise in Culture* - or in Civilization (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*) - to repressions and necessary libidinal reconversions, today he would probably be surprised, and perhaps shocked, by the results of all the mental, economic, moral and sensitive liberations that we now practice and idolize. In a previous work, he had already written about it: "But how ungrateful and, above all, how imprudent is the effort for the abolition of civilization! What remains, without it, is the state of nature, much more difficult to bear. It is true that nature does not demand from us any restriction of impulses, but it does have its effective way of

restricting us and killing us, cold, cruel, ruthless, exactly for the reasons of our satisfaction".⁶

Today, in the south of Ecuador, we live not only the 17th century in Europe, but we still apply two other theses to ourselves. The first is that of Samuel Huntington: "The West has conquered the world not because of the superiority of its ideas, values or religion (to which few members of other civilizations have converted), but, mainly, by the superiority in the application of organized violence".⁷

The other is expressed in Spinoza's Ethics: "XLVII - The affections of hope and fear cannot be good in themselves (*Spei et metus affectus non possunt esse per se boni*).

Demonstration - There are no affections of hope and fear without sadness. For fear (by definition 13 of the conditions) is a sadness and there is no hope without fear (see explanations 12 and 13 of the conditions); hence, these conditions cannot be good in themselves, but only when they can embarrass an excess of joy (by proposition 43).

School - To this it is added that these affections indicate defect of knowledge and impotence of the mind".⁸

That is why Brazil has been, even more effectively in recent decades, the "country of hope".

⁶ *The Future of an Illusion*, Complete Works, portuguese version, vol. X, Delta Edition, 1954.

⁷ *El Choque de Civilizaciones*, Barcelona, Paidós, 1997.

⁸ *Complete Works*, portuguese version, Ed. Perspectiva, São Paulo, 2014.