COUNTERING WITH NONVIOLENCE THE PERVASIVE STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE OF EVERYDAY LIFE — THE CASE OF THREE SMALL ITALIAN TOWNSHIPS

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Summary

This chapter deals with structural violence in everyday life on the assumption that structural violence is the source of all forms of violence (direct violence, cultural violence and wars). In order to prevent violence, we need to understand its origins — from the perspectives of cultural evolution, social mechanisms and personal ontogeny — rather than accepting its consequences as inevitable traits of human beings. An alternative hypothesis to such inevitability is presented.

On the practical side, a specific project has being initiated by the author in the form of three small Italian townships. The aim is to identify structural violence in everyday life and devise nonviolent ways of reducing and eventually eliminating it, in order to obtain, one or two generations later, new citizens who are happier, healthier and even richer than those living in neighboring townships that have not attempted this human experiment. Theory, practice and expected outcome are considered for several aspects of this project. Such nonviolent projects can probably be attempted only with a specific township in mind, as social realities vary in different communities.

1. Introduction

The literature of peace studies is dominated by discussions about direct violence and war, while specific analyses of structural violence and its possible nonviolent alternatives are poorly represented. Such a difference in representation is particularly evident where ordinary everyday life is considered. In fact, direct violence under the form of anti-social and criminal behavior is the subject of numerous academic studies, while the extensive web of structural violence affecting everyday life is largely ignored. Conflict management and justice studies mostly deal with structural violence in developing countries, while in the suburbs of the so-called First World structural violence remains invisible, effectively shrouded by accepted social structures.

Moreover, comparative analysis of the consequence of structural violence mostly refer to the coarse parameter of death, ignoring that the essence of human life is not mere living, but rather being healthy and happy, whatever that means in any given culture. The importance of studying structural violence in developed countries lies in the fact that structural violence is the source of all other forms of violence, and developed countries are directly or indirectly responsible for most world conflicts. As the long-term project to establish a nonviolent society involves analyzing the root causes of violence, everyday life in developed countries is, in my view, an important but neglected field of research.

This chapter analyzes accepted violent assumptions in three neighboring townships in Italy and begins to explore possible nonviolent alternatives. As it turned out, no substantial differences exist between any two of these three towns and their being considered together is a matter of convenience, as explained below.

2. Background of the Project

Three neighboring small towns in the Italian province of Bologna — San Giovanni in Persiceto, Crevalcore and Sant'Agata Bolognese — have jointly established a lively Peace Committee, which is involved in a number of projects. In 2004, Dr Wolfgango Horn, alderman of San Giovanni's City Council, invited the writer to hold a series of seminars on peace studies. Members of the town's Peace Committee attended and subsequently agreed to become involved in a study aiming at analyzing aspects of structural violence in their towns, and to formulate alternative nonviolent proposals. This study is described and discussed in this essay, for which this author is exclusively responsible. The theoretical aspects presented here represent ideas and opinions of this author, while some practical proposals were discussed or just briefly mentioned during the tutorials held with members of the Peace Committee. Other practical proposals are put forward by this author. All practical proposals are only primers for future discussion and are obviously not set in stone. It should be noted that not all members of the Committee supported this project, as some considered it a utopian idea and preferred concentrating their efforts on opposing current wars (see 'negative peace' below). The author is acting as external consultant in this long-term study and project of the Peace Committee. For the moment local authorities are not responsible for the project and provide only limited operational resources.

San Giovanni in Persiceto (population of about 25,000), Crevalcore (12,000) and Sant'Agata Bolognese (6,000) are located northeast of Bologna in the river Po's delta, a relatively rich region of Northern Italy. A balanced mix of small-size, specialized industry and modern agriculture sustains the local economy.

3. General Rationale of this Chapter

Works on peace studies often aim at raising awareness about the ills of violence, mostly killing and war, as if this analysis was enough to initiate miraculous changes in interpersonal behavior and political context. It seems necessary, instead, to identify the structural mechanisms leading to violence. Just as in the metaphor of medicine, one moves from the description of symptoms to the understanding of the root cause(s) of diseases, in order to propose appropriate preventive solutions.

For the long-term approach of preventing violence, small towns should offer, in the first instance, a better chance of success than large urban areas. In fact, small towns have a higher degree of social cohesiveness and their citizens demonstrate more interest in local political issues, which facilitates participatory democracy. Whether one can scale up this pilot project to the size of larger polities will be explored later. Individual urban suburbs could eventually be equated to small towns. Analyzing the origins of violence and proposing nonviolent alternatives must necessarily be done with reference to a specific context. The present essay refers to the political context of Italy and the social context of Northern Italian small townships.

4. Methodology

Structural violence operating in the towns in question is being analyzed along main axes

of interactions: family / school, administration / administration, consumer / production, citizen / administration, etc. This approach recognizes that social problems emerge within a web of complex interactions and the analysis of their root causes should be as least reductionist as possible.

The project in question has a local character, but it also is mindful of wider, general socio-political issues.

The analysis of structural violence refers to the following parameters: social justice, personal well-being, and quality of the environment. The proposals for nonviolent solutions are based on the assumption that building citizenship and establishing participatory democracy are necessary preliminary conditions.

It should be noted that the project in question does not appeal to any revolutionary ideology or unrealistic world view, as it refers to social rules and values that are already enshrined (but not applied) in the existing legal framework of most European countries.

5. Theoretical Assumptions

A few theoretical assumptions are at the basis of this project of social renewal. The originality of the project is based on refuting current pessimistic or fatalistic views about human nature, the origins of human behavior, and the perfectibility of democracy. Interestingly, these views, widely accepted in social sciences, are not supported by modern scientific information in anthropology and neuroscience.

5.1. Human Nature

So far the definition of human nature has been a topic of philosophical discussions. But recent data in anthropology and neuroscience provide enough information to revise some outdated assumptions in social sciences that hinder the advancement of peace studies. In fact, one cannot embark on a project involving the introduction of nonviolent alternatives without first refuting the widely accepted idea that human beings are congenitally violent (see below). This old assumption has for a long time justified punitive and repressive solutions against antisocial behavior as the only way of dealing with allegedly unavoidable violence and greed.

The current literature of political science, psychiatry, human ethology and sociobiology is strongly influenced by the biologically deterministic stand taken by these disciplines' founders: Thomas Hobbes (1651), Sigmund Freud (1929), Konrad Lorenz (1966), and Edward Wilson (1975), respectively. In these disciplines the discussion on human nature is polarized, affected by the sterile dualism "nature or nurture", and at best settled on the basis of the unscientific 50:50 hypothesis that human behavior is jointly determined by genetic information and postnatal experience (see next section).

Modern anthropology provides evidence that the behavior of *Homo sapiens* is more likely the result of a biocultural selection for cooperation and nonviolence, which very probably characterized our species since its emergence about 100,000 years ago. Much direct and indirect evidence refutes the credibility of human congenital violence. The

first author who systematically investigated human cooperation was the Russian anthropologist Peter Kropotkin who published *Mutual Aid* in 1902. He found that instances of solidarity and cooperation in both social animals and humans were far more common than instances of greed, competition and direct violence. The anthropologist Ashley Montague also came to the conclusion that structural violence and war were social constructs and nonviolence was a more obvious characteristic of human beings. The psychologist Eric Fromm effectively contested Freud's contention of congenital human violence. The anthropologist Richard Lee, among others, lived for several years with the Kalahari Bushmen, who were essentially hunter-gatherers (i.e. not food producers), and described the sophisticated nonviolent strategies they had developed (but now have lost) to solve conflicts of interest. Unlike hard sociobiologists, the ethologist Robert Hinde made a clear distinction between the origins of animal and human behavior, and between aggression toward members of other species for nutrition and defense, and oppressing and killing members of one's own species, a peculiarity of human beings.

The recent analysis of hundreds of thousands of items of prehistoric rock art also shows that essentially no evidence of direct violence and war transpires from about 40,000 years of engraving and rock painting (only a few ones are of doubtful interpretation), while anti-human weapons and warriors appear very clearly after the domestication of plants and animals. In fact, violence against other human beings is a recent (7-8,000 years) invention of food-producing cultures. We are still passing it on culturally from one generation to the next, a fact that provides the false impression of being genetically determined. The poor understanding of these mechanisms of inheritance has caused much confusion in the so-called nature/nurture debate, which is more a political than a scientific debate.

5.2. The Origins of Human Behavior

Modern textbooks of developmental psychology indicate very clearly that human beings have practically no instincts, especially with regard to social behavior. This casts much doubt about the outdated Freudian concepts of compulsive drives and aggressive and sexual instincts. Cutting edge neuroscience research indicates that specific social behavior is mediated by specific neural connections (not brain regions), and most associative neural connections in the cerebral cortex (cognitive behavior) are formed well after birth. The logical associations (neuronal connections) mediating appropriate social behavior (aggressive and cooperative behavior being part of them) become specified between 6-7 and 11-12 years of age, on the basis of precise information provided by each given culture. These modern neurological data confirm a concept already put forward by Jean Piaget half a century ago. It becomes, therefore, very difficult to support the idea of a congenital human violence (antisocial behavior), but this idea is still widely accepted in social sciences.

The species *Homo sapiens* has indeed functional potentialities for aggression and killing, but they were selected by biocultural evolution for the purpose of hunting, not oppressing and killing people. This odd redirection of aggression emerged only 7-8,000 years ago after the invention of food production, as discussed above. Individuals have indeed different levels of predisposition to aggression, but this congenital characteristic

does not define specific behavior, it only sets the level (quantity) of social channeling (the true source of behavioral information) necessary to adopt a specific behavior. This explains why adding genetic information (unspecific predisposition) and postnatal experience (specific information) to explain specific human behavior, as the 50:50 hypothesis mentioned above would have it, is not scientifically correct. One cannot add together elements of such a different nature to formulate qualitative causal explanations. This scientifically modern position necessitates, however, the correct understanding of what congenital (or genetic) predisposition means.

5.3. Problems with Democracy

 Representative democracy was implemented gradually in the last two centuries — from the initial representation of a minority of wealthy citizens, until the recent universal suffrage of both genders. Representative democracy was implemented under the false assumption that political education was generally available. The political ignorance of citizens has, instead, led to an exaggerated power of political parties and a few individuals, to which uninformed or oblivious citizens delegate representation and governance, with the consequent loss of democracy, because parties and their leaders are essentially obliged to seek or maintain power, while providing limited public service. The illusion that free elections is a sufficient condition of democracy is so widespread that regimes recently established in Russia and Iraq, for example, are wrongly considered democracies. As a matter of fact, the poor level of political understanding of citizens in all so-called 'free democratic' countries justifies questioning the validity of such a definition.

The rationale of the present project is therefore based on the idea that a slow, nonviolent transformation of small towns must necessarily pass through a realization of citizenship and participatory democracy. In the absence of participatory democracy, the particular aims of politically organized groups (seeking power) tend to prevail, a trend that leads to structural violence. This is not an anarchical position, just a determination of applying the intentions of the Italian Constitution, which, like those of most countries, implies the participation of competent citizens.

5.4. The Assessment of Structural Violence

One may wonder how structural violence can be identified and monitored. On the basis of Johan Galtung's definition of structural violence (as that which prevents individuals from expressing their own potentialities), it was decided to select social justice, personal well-being, and quality of the environment as basic indicators. This selection needs some explanation and discussion.

Galtung's definition of structural violence offers the possibility of considering social justice from a standpoint that is not purely legalistic. In the past the concern for the exploitation of weaker members of society led to violent struggles fought along class lines, but modern capitalism has adopted different strategies. In contemporary industrialized countries overt cases of social injustice are dealt within a new legal framework that protects the oppressed ones, but many subtle situations that prevent the full expression of personal potentialities remain unchecked and provoke considerable

malaise. The present project is specially designed to identify these latter situations.

Francis Hutcheson was among the first thinkers to describe in 1725 the aim of political action as the "greatest happiness of the greatest number", a slogan later adopted by utilitarian philosophers. But what does it mean to be happy? Early authors defined happiness in materialistic and quantitative terms, but Max Weber stressed more the definition of quality of life. The psychological literature concentrates more on depression and its consequences, while there are serious attempts of measuring happiness as the degree of life satisfaction. Theoretically, a community that embraces a nonviolent model should become, after about one generation, healthier, happier and richer. In fact, the close relationship between happiness and health is demonstrated by the many cases of psychosomatic diseases. Moreover, nonviolent social strategies also lead to saving much time, energy and money, which eventually leaves a nonviolent community with more resources than a violent one, other social parameters being the same.

The philosophical separation of humans (closer to the medieval circles of angels) from nature (closer to the devil), has gradually been abandoned since the 19th and 20th centuries to move toward the protection of the environment. This new approach was initially justified by ethical principles, but the concept of people-environment as a functional whole has improved this field of human concerns. The most recent developments have then moved this question from the realm of philosophy and politics to that of a greater awareness of health and even survival requirements.

To conclude, the level of structural violence/nonviolence measures the quality of political life, the level of people's satisfaction of life, and the quality of the environment as a holistic and complex approach to community life.

5.5. Implications for Peace Studies

As pedantic and complicated as these theoretical premises may appear, they are necessary for the practical work about to be discussed. The outmoded separation between humanities and science is preventing the development of academically sound concepts in many disciplines — peace studies included. On the one hand, the humanities are still relying on old ideas that are not evidence-based; on the other hand, scientists often fail to understand the social implications of their findings.

Information from modern anthropology and neuroscience (see Section 5.1 and Section 5.2) is particularly necessary to direct peace studies toward one or the other of its two main approaches: *negative peace*, short-term palliatives against violence, or *positive peace*, the long-term actions that prevent violence. As a matter of fact, both approaches should be adopted at the same time, while at the moment we are mainly dealing with only negative peace.

6. Specific Aspects of the Project

In this part twelve topics are discussed that need to be addressed for the project of a nonviolent small town. Theoretical aspects are discussed first, and then practical

suggestions and their possible outcomes follow. More topics will be considered later, or the present text may be modified at later stages of the project. The text reflects the discussions that took place during the seminars with members of the Peace Committee, or are ideas and opinions of the author, who in any case is solely responsible for this essay.

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Biographical Sketch

Piero P. Giorgi is an adjunct professor at the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Queensland, doing research on nonviolence and the origins of violence, and a honorary professor at the Centre for European Studies in Gargnano (Brescia, Italy), doing research on European social and political topics. He has a BSc in biology from the University of Bologna, a PhD in neurology from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne (UK), and is a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Biology. He has done research and taught in several universities in Europe and Australia (Bologna, Parma, Newcastle/Tyne, Geneva, Lausanne, Queensland, Trento) dealing with the development of brain and behavior, medical history, and peace studies. He has published many articles on academic journals, several chapter in books and five books, among which *The origins of violence by cultural evolution* (2001, second edition) that can be downloaded at <www.pierogiorgi.org>. His current research interests are structural violence in everyday life and nonviolence in prehistoric people.