

INTRODUCTION

If we define and desire modernity as a progressive stage in humanity's history or as an advance on the part of reason and a retreat on the part of traditions and obscurantism, two main conceptions of violence fall almost naturally into place. The first grants it great legitimacy and expects it to play, if need be, a revolutionary role. As Frederick Engels puts it (1976 [1878]: 235–6), 'In the words of Marx, it is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one ... the instrument by means of which every social movement forces its way through and shatters the dead, fossilized political forms'. According to the second, violence will inevitably decline as reason comes to the fore. This latter conception has inspired broad socio-historical approaches, as in the major (1994 [1939]) study in which Norbert Elias reconstructed the civilizational process that allowed Europeans to internalize, control and therefore reduce their violence from the Renaissance onwards. It has also provided the theme for more empirical and less ambitious studies, such as Jean-Claude Chesnais's long-term statistically-based (1981) study, which demonstrated that the number of acts of violence has quite simply fallen.

But both the history of the twentieth century – the history of wars, genocides and other mass murders – and the social changes which have for example, seen an almost systematic rise in the statistics for delinquency in Western societies since the end of the Second World War, suggest that we must be wary of images of a general decline in violence in the contemporary world. That suggestion is consistent with the broader picture. The exhaustion of the workers' movement and its 'grand narrative', and the return of God and the rise of ethnicity, urge us by the day to abandon evolutionist modes of thought. We can no longer see contemporary modernity as the ever-more triumphant march of peoples and nations as they automatically advance towards further economic and political progress. Some thinkers even take the view that we are no longer modern but post-modern, whilst others (Eisenstadt and Schluchter, 1998; Göle, 2000) prefer

to defend the idea of 'multiple modernities' and reject both the idea that all societies are moving in the same direction and the view that there is 'one best way' to go forward. The vast majority of those who try to reflect upon modernity or contemporary post-modernity have one thing in common, namely an idea that Alain Touraine (1995 [1992]) has definitely formulated more clearly than anyone else. In his view, the characteristic feature of modern times is certainly not the progress of reason but, rather, the dissociation that divorces reason from cultural identities and passions, including religious identities and passions.

From that perspective, there is no particular reason why there should be a decline in violence. On the contrary, violence can appear and spread in countless spaces. It can be encouraged both by reason, which turns it into an instrument to be used by actors for whom it is a resource or a means to an end, and by identities and religion, because it is part and parcel of their demands and aspirations which can sometimes be unlimited. With every passing day it is becoming difficult to articulate the dichotomous registers that constitute modernity, no matter whether we describe them as body and soul, reason and the passions, action and being, instrumentality and identities, or the universal and the particular. The gap between these registers can also lead to increased violence.

The more we look at contemporary modernity, or post-modernity if we prefer to put it that way, in terms of a splitting or dissociation, the greater the danger that we ourselves will be divided in our approach to violence. We must therefore consider, on the one hand, its objectivity, including its empirical objectivity, its factuality (possibly in quantitative terms – the number of people killed in wars or terrorist attacks, the statistics for delinquency, crime, and so on), and we must on the other hand recognize the way subjectivity influences how it is experienced, lived, observed, represented, desired or undergone by individuals, groups and societies. There is no avoiding the need to adopt this double perspective, which makes it remarkably difficult to define violence. An objective definition will, for example, speak of a violent assault on the physical, intellectual or moral integrity of an individual or group of individuals.¹ It will, however, quickly be objected that this definition forgets the subjectivity – individual or collective – of the author, victim or observer. We simply cannot ignore the fact that what we describe as violence is subject to considerable variation in both space and time, depending on which individuals and groups are concerned. The objective, or objectifying, point of view implies a strictly universal perspective, as it claims to be applicable to everyone and at all times. The subjective viewpoint, in contrast, is relativistic as it changes, depending on the position of the individual who is speaking. There is therefore a danger that we will find

ourselves in a difficult intellectual dilemma. The specific feature of the contemporary era is that it confronts us with this type of divorce, which constantly threatens to paralyse or subvert the analysis, and to make any action designed to respond to the challenge of violence delicate, or even counter-productive. We will return to this point in our discussion of the media in Chapter 4.

Before we even begin to explore the huge topic of violence, we have to recognize its diversity. The word 'violence' is in fact applied to countless phenomena, and used to describe all sorts of events and behaviours, both individual and collective: delinquency, crime, revolution, mass murder, riots, war, terrorism, harassment, and so on. Its spectrum of application can be extended almost to infinity, depending on whether or not we include its moral, and not simply physical, dimensions, and depending on whether or not we follow Pierre Bourdieu by introducing the notion of symbolic violence – the violence used, in this perspective, by a dominant system such as a state or actors that are so powerful as to prevent the dominated from producing for themselves the categories that would allow them to understand their own subordination.² This book is not devoted to one or more given forms of violence, and is primarily interested in its physical modalities, and especially those that prove to be most murderous. Although the author has devoted several empirical studies to the phenomenon, the ambitions of the present study are much more theoretical. It seeks to provide a coherent and sophisticated set of analytic tools that will allow us to approach the question of violence, to understand the logics of its appearance and spread – and, perhaps, to resist it.

These analytical instruments are not just described one after the other, as though laying them out side by side was enough to provide us with a toolbox. This book is based upon something that became obvious to its author in the course of his research: in either the 1960s or the 1970s, we entered a new era which both demanded and authorized the use of not only the classic modes of approach, but also of new ways of thinking about and approaching violence, if we wish to understand it. There is something mysterious about violence, which is never reducible to the explanations that the market for ideas offered us in the 1970s and the 1980s. That strangeness, which is what gives literary and sometimes journalistic accounts of violence their power, is the very thing that makes the phenomenon still more intolerable. And ultimately, that is what defines it best. That, at least, is what we have to deal with here, as we first (in Part I) demonstrate the need for a new paradigm and then outline an original approach that gives a central role to the subjectivity of the actors and to the processes of the loss of meaning or the over-production of meaning that give rise to violence.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Yves Michaud (1978: 20): 'We can speak of violence when, in an interactive situation, one or more actors act, either directly or indirectly, either once or on more than one occasion, in such a way as to attack, to some degree, either the physical or moral integrity of an individual or group, their property, or their involvement in symbolic and cultural activities'.
- 2 For a critical discussion of this notion, which runs through all Pierre Bourdieu's work, see Addi (2002), and especially Chapter 7, which deals with symbolic violence and the political field.