

THE CHALLENGE OF VIOLENCE

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Violence, in its various forms, has been an essential variable in the constitution of Brazilian society. The European occupation of what is now Brazilian territory was achieved with the destruction of hundreds of indigenous cultures and the death of millions of Native Americans. Whether by direct confrontation in combat or by diseases, slavery and the disorganization of their social life, the Amerindians were largely decimated. Researches by anthropologists and archeologists have now shown the vastly diverse sociocultural wealth of these numerous Indian groups, victimized during the process of colonization and territorial expansion perpetrated by the Portuguese-Brazilian State and by private individuals.

Likewise, the institution of slavery, implying physical and symbolical violent domination, was first inflicted upon the Native Americans and, later, mostly upon African laborers – who, for almost four centuries, were to be the victims of the slave trade. Millions of individuals, from various African regions and cultures, were thus brought to Brazilian territory in accordance with an international system of division of labor in which the large “plantations” – producing sugar and coffee, among others – and the forcible extraction of precious metals were to be the contribution from this side of the Southern Atlantic (Alencastro, 1979).

Inexorably, a complex and heterogeneous society was formed that, over and above the dimension of social exploitation and iniquity, also proffered extraordinarily rich sociocultural interactions and exchanges. The various Native American and African cultures, albeit defiled and fragmented, participated intensely in the

formation of the Brazilian society – as Gilberto Freyre (1933) and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1958), among others, have shown. The basic European contribution came from the Portuguese, whose political/administrative actions expanded and occupied the land, bringing with them their language and their Catholic/Iberian cultural repertoire. Other Europeans were soon incorporated as well, each in a different manner, including Spaniards, Italians, Germans and many other ethnic groups. Somewhat later, in the early 20th century, the Japanese arrived, settling mainly in São Paulo. The assimilation of these minorities abounded in episodes of arbitrariness and violence, with many instances of exploitation and discrimination (Seyferth, 1998). Mercantile colonization, imperialism, chieftainship and the oligarchic regime prior to and after the independence were all ingredients that would come together in a State marked by bureaucratic authoritarianism, contributing decisively for the constant outpours of violence that have traversed the country's history. As Simmel (1964) has shown, conflict is inherent to social life.

In Brazil, besides the routine domination through the generalized use of well-known mechanisms of physical force such as torture, there was a profusion of episodes or situations of armed conflict, producing their usual number of dead, wounded and victims. Limiting ourselves to Brazil after independence and only to internal conflagrations, we might mention, for instance, the Farrapos War¹, the Balaiada², the Cabanagem³, the Federalist Revolution⁴, Canudos⁵, Contestado⁶, the movements of 1924⁷ and 1932⁸, and many others.

1. *Farrapos*: revolutionary movement in the state of Santa Catarina that proclaimed the short-lived (4 months) independent Juliana Republic in 1839.
2. *Balaidada*: revolutionary movement in the state of Maranhão from 1838 to 1841.
3. *Cabanagem*: revolutionary movement in the state of Pará from 1835 to 1840.
4. *Federalist Revolution*: revolutionary movement in the state of Rio Grande that began in 1835 and proclaimed the independent Republic of Piratini, crushed in 1844.
5. *Canudos*: 30,000 strong religious messianic community founded in 1893 that threatened the stability of the recently proclaimed republican government. Was destroyed in 1897.
6. *Contestado*: disputed region between the states of Paraná and Santa Catarina that was home to a messianic community from 1911 until its annihilation in 1916.
7. *Revolution of 1924*: middle-class and military insurrection in the state of São Paulo.
8. *Revolution of 1932*: full-blown rebellion of the state of São Paulo against the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas. Was defeated by federal forces after a 3-month civil war.

The Vargas dictatorship from 1937 to 1945, known as *Estado Novo*, and the military regime of 1964-1984 greatly expanded the exercise of power by authoritarian and antidemocratic central governments. Even in democratic periods, various facts frequently attested to this. The cordiality of Brazilians must be meted out and contextualized taking this scenario into account: if understood as a manifestation of feelings and emotions in social life, without the requisite connotation of courtesy and civility, it might perhaps fare better as a factor in the study of our national *ethos* and culture. Likewise, the famous *jeitinho* [that wangling knack Brazilians seem to take pride in] may be analyzed as part of a repertoire in which manipulation of power and relationships, corruption and the use of force perform a crucial role.

Therefore, having stemmed from a complex balance of hierarchy and individualism, traditional Brazilian society developed a kind of barter system that institutionalized, for well-defined social players, reciprocity in inequality and patronage, and a more or less legitimate resort to violence.

However, our current situation has certain peculiarities that have altered and enhanced the traditional picture. Now that we have celebrated the 500th anniversary of our discovery, it is no longer possible to dissimulate or attempt to minimize the seriousness of the phenomenon of violence in contemporary Brazilian society. To be sure, violence exists in many societies. There have always been wars, ethnic/religious conflicts, and rampant outlawry. Sometimes the boundaries between these outbursts are not clear, as in Colombia, where all kinds of conflicts have intermingled, just to mention a case nearby. In Brazil, however, even with no explicit civil war going on, the situation has reached, especially in the large cities (but with repercussions throughout practically the entire national territory), such proportions that crime seems to have gained the upper hand, with its sinister retinue of murderers, kidnappers, thieves, larceners, and drug & weapons traffickers.

Accelerated urbanization, the unchecked growth of cities, powerful consumerist aspirations (most of leading to frustration), difficulties in the labor market, and conflicting values are some of the variables that have contributed to our predicament. No one feels safe anymore: neither corporations, nor individuals. Senators, former governors, members of the Brazilian Academy of Literature, diplomats, entrepreneurs and their families have all thickened the list of victims of robbery, assault, kidnapping and, oftentimes, murder. If the houses of the elites and

middles classes are constantly broken into, what to say of the poor, who have been victimized for centuries? In the infamous *favelas* [shantytowns], in housing developments, in the poverty-stricken outskirts of our cities, criminals can do practically whatever they want – abuse, rape, kill. There is no protection anywhere. Schools, churches, temples, army barracks and police stations have all been invaded. People are humiliated and disrespected in every imaginable way.

At best, governments have shown themselves incapable of dealing with this catastrophe. Much worse, however, is to ascertain that all this violence could only have emerged with the connivance, complicity and active participation of groups within the police, of members of Parliament at all levels, of sectors from the civil bureaucratic apparatus and even of authorities from the Judiciary. Corruption is indissolubly associated with violence, one feeding upon the other, both being sides of the same coin, as has been said. This did not begin today, to be sure, but the process has accelerated over the last decades, reaching frightening proportions and threatening the national State itself, inasmuch as the public powers not only can no longer control criminality but seem seriously contaminated by it. Indeed, poverty, misery and social iniquity have historically been a very fertile ground for the dissemination of violence, but I believe not enough attention has been given to the moral, ethical and value dimensions in attempting to explain the phenomenon.

The loss of credibility and of meaningful symbolic references destroys any expectation of elementary social coexistence. Philosophers, thinkers and social scientists of various orientations have shown that society is only feasible with a minimum of shared values and standards. Take, for instance, the physical assault of elderly people that has become routine in the day-to-day life of large Brazilian cities. In other countries with high poverty rates, such as India, such occurrences are unimaginable. Until very recently, this kind of occurrence was also extremely rare in Brazil, a cause of scandal and indignation. But today it has become banalized – the same happening with accounts of cruelty to women, children, sick people etc. We are clearly living an ethical/moral crisis.

In turn, neither the family, nor the school, nor religion, has been capable of resisting the deterioration of values. Traditional society, with its ingrained violence, had its mechanisms of social control to establish a certain basic shared morality. Undoubtedly, social areas and groups still exist that preserve and are concerned about these matters. Surely most people are not violent or corrupt. However, the

prevailing climate of impunity encourages resort to criminal procedures and strategies. The media, essential in a democratic society, exposes and divulges this state of affairs, making public at least part of ongoing criminal activities. Yet, it seems that in some instances the consequence of the media's denunciation was to increase the very same sense of injustice and impunity that is perhaps the main cause of violence. Hospitals function precariously, public transportation is deficient, wages are low and, on top of everything, new scandals continue to surface on a daily basis.

It must be stressed that censorship is not the solution, as some would like. On television, a stupefied nation watches the spectacle of powerful senators demoralizing themselves and the Legislature. City and state government officials are accused of corruption and connivance with organized crime. Although a president of the Republic was impeached for corruption, investigations were not carried through and the true extent and depth of his and his allies' plundering of the nation will likely never be known. And so an entire momentous social movement was frustrated.

Funds are constantly misappropriated and public works are constantly overcharged, in a rapid and uninterrupted succession of facts that only aggravate the overall feelings of disappointment, sometimes indifference, and often revolt. What can one expect in face of such examples of improbity? In the very least, confidence in our rulers will dip even further. Many will come to consider various types of transgression and even crime as normal and acceptable, in view of what is shown in the media and lived in the day-to-day. Others might bolster their attitude of withdrawal from, and contempt for the public sphere. Whatever happens, a free-for-all atmosphere begins to take shape in which each one must fend for him or herself and in which fewer and fewer individuals and groups manage to retain stable identities grounded on attitudes and behaviors guided by religious or laical ethics.

Inevitably, solutions that take the law into their own hands are developed, further fueling violence and insecurity. Police, outlaws, vigilantes and private security guards confront each other on daily battles, killing, maiming and jeopardizing the safety of the entire population. The phenomenon of "stray bullets", an expression derived from this type of conflict, is difficult to explain to someone who doesn't live in Brazilian cities. That fact that any person, in any neighborhood, is exposed to such dangers illustrates, in a dramatic fashion, the intensity of the crisis.

How to put together and sustain a national project under such circumstances? Civil society, by itself, is insufficiently organized to face these challenges and provide legitimate alternatives to combat violence. Only the State (and this includes the Legislature and the Judiciary), duly reformed and renovated, and in a joint effort with public opinion, has the means and resources to reverse imminent collapse. It must be understood that I'm referring to a democratic regime, not to some salvationist dictatorship. Without continuous and watchful support from civil society, the State runs the risk of hypertrophying itself into sterilizing authoritarianism, as has happened repeatedly before in our past.

Recently, the storm troop practices of the military regime, which included home invasion, torture and murder, played a significant role in promoting the culture of violence, exacerbating the violent trends of physical abuse and general truculence present throughout our country's history. Only democratic governments, legitimized by civil society and concerned with human rights, stand a chance of successfully exerting power and strength against crime. This action must be sanctioned through proper legal instruments to assure continuity and effectiveness, with no detours or accommodations. Whatever one's position may be in the ideological spectrum, every individual and social category faces the threat of violence in Brazil. Today, any project capable of mobilizing the nation must inevitably entail effective public security policies within the democratic order. Only then may we implement and consolidate our precarious citizenship, this prerequisite for the future of Brazil as a nation.

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