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Performative Violence: Conceptual and Strategic Implications

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The concept of performative violence is more nuanced than it initially appears. I therefore structure my argument in a distinct manner. First, I discuss notions of violence, performance and ritual, and what the combination of all three means for a general definition of performative violence. Second, I analyse the conceptual implications of this notion, which I deconstruct to *types of* performative violence. Third, I explore strategic implications of this concept, both in terms of *defining* violence as performative and of *using* performative violence. I draw a number of conclusions from this discussion. First, it is important for academics to define this subject as clearly as possible to avoid manipulation by political entities. Second, the causes and effects of performative violence are tied together because effects feed into causes. Third, there are two general effects which occur outside of the direct intentions of those who adopt the use of performative violence. These are a change in the role of witnesses, and the creation of a new self-perpetuating structure of violence. Ultimately, I ask what the use of this approach really is. Does this perspective allow us to actually *change* anything in the world? The answer is open for discussion.

Performative Violence

As definitions of violence are so numerous, for the purpose of my discussion I will limit myself to explaining which conceptions of violence I do include in this essay. The outright, basic concept that comes to mind is that of physical harm inflicted upon someone. But I add notions of psychological violence, the threat of violence, violence through impoverishment, and symbols of violence.

Under psychological violence I include verbal abuse and other non-physical forms of violence that still cause intimidation, as well as not allowing an individual or group to move on from past traumas. In his study of humanitarian testimony in Palestine, Fassin discusses "trauma as the psychological trace of violence, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as the classificatory transition of violence" (2008, 533). Another notion that falls under psychological violence is the threat of violence. This can include examples such as dressing up in military attire, verbally threatening an individual or group with direct violence, or as Richards (2005b) recounts from his ethnographic research in Sierra Leone, enacting loud displays of military strength with no target. In line with Latif's (2012) study of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, I argue that impoverishment and imposed underdevelopment should also fall within the concept of violence because they are a form of intentional dehumanisation. Latif writes that acknowledging direct violence as remarkable and impoverishment as routine "obscures not only the ways in which the routine and the remarkable intersect but also the ways in which both are experienced as violence" (*ibid*, 25). Lastly, I want to clarify that by 'symbols of violence' I mean to include any forms of attire or behaviour which evoke violence without necessarily threatening or resulting in direct violence. Examples of these can include instances such as the dress choice of Black Bloc protesters in Genoa discussed by Juris (2005) or the 1960s graffiti and vandalism in America analysed by Rhodes (2001).

Before moving on to a discussion of performative violence, we must first understand the concept of performance in itself. What are the characteristics of a performance and what is its purpose? Is there a difference between performance and ritual? What can this distinction offer in terms of an analysis of performative violence?

The basic characteristic of a performance is the existence of an audience. The typical image associated with a performance is that of a theatre: on stage, with actors and an audience that observes and absorbs. What the audience absorbs is the message of the performance – this is its purpose. Whether to tell a story, bring attention to an issue, or express a feeling, a performance is done in order to convey a message. Conceptually, ritual is not the same as performance. Rituals do not necessarily have audiences, but they can. What I am interested in is the point where performance and ritual do intersect, when ritual becomes a *form of* performance. This occurs when there is an audience present that absorbs the ritual's message, except that part of, or the entire audience, also participates in the ritual. The receivers of the message are participators as well as witnesses. An example of this is *jiao* in rural Hong Kong whereby individuals join in the parades in order to define their territorial claims in opposition to other parades – the participants send a message to each other *and* the observers, not just the latter (Watson 1996).

It follows that when I write of 'performative violence' I mean to discuss acts of violence as defined above, which occur around an audience or witness, for the purpose of conveying a message. Juris writes that "performative violence can be seen as a mode of communication through which activists seek to effect social transformation by staging symbolic confrontation" (2005, 415). But combined with the notion of ritual, this concept becomes much more nuanced. Ritual action, in Richards' words "creates its own logic and meaning" and as a result "enduring symbols and shared values… are forged in the heat of ritual excitement" (2005b, 378). Richards takes this idea from Durkheim's theory that "ritual intensifies emotions generated by group activity" (*ibid*). Therefore, performative violence is more than just a tactic to convey a message – it generates new symbols and social dynamics (thereby perpetuating itself), and increases social cohesion.

In order to better understand performative violence, I have divided the concept into structured subsections.[1] The two main aspects in need of 'deconstruction' are the types of performative violence, and the strategic implications of it. I discuss four such types – actual violence, psychological violence, symbols of violence, and performances with violence. When I discuss strategic implications, I essentially look at the motivators/causes and effects, with the role of witness as key point. I examine the implications of defining violence as 'performative', but what I find even more

interesting are the implications of actually *using* performative violence. Each of the five motivators I discuss results in one or more of the three effects of using performative violence.

Conceptual Implications

Dividing performative violence into different types is useful because it gives us a better understanding of its general causes and effects. The best way to undertake this analysis is through case studies and examples which I have obtained from articles of mostly ethnographic research.

The most straightforward type is direct violence – inflicting physical harm, whether it be torture, rape, or murder. Osterholtz (2013) discusses the results of excavations in Colorado which showed bone remains with evidence of torture practices in AD700-900. She explains how this practice was more about enforcing social control than harming single individuals. It is easier to establish dominance over a wider population if the actors in control "convince all those watching that they will benefit from obeying" and if they do so in the most efficient manner, by "hobbling and/or torturing only a few individuals" (*ibid*, 139). Ellis offers an interesting point to the discussion of direct violence when he states that "it seems quite likely that many major acts of violence are committed in imitation of earlier such acts" (2003, 465). He uses the example of lynching and how its popularity grew in 1960s America, but the underlying idea to be understood here is that performative violence perpetuates itself.

The same stands for psychological violence. Richards (2005b) writes of rebel army tactics in Sierra Leone where insurgents would manipulate the media to announce false news about their advancement, which would result in entire towns being left empty (and thus easy to capture). The performative aspect of this example is what allowed it to perpetuate itself for a long time and what made it effective – Western media[2] were searching for shocking news that would captivate the public[3], and the RUF wanted the threat of violence to be displayed to its target audience in the most efficient way so that their actual military strategy would be less arduous. Other performative tactics included abductions of children by the RUF and the army displaying force loudly and visually without a real target.[4] These were all forms of attempting social control and, in Ellis' words, "armies always act in a way they hope will intimidate others" (2003, 469). Another form of psychological violence is intentional impoverishment as discussed by Latif (2012). Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are kept in poverty to remind them, the international community, and the Lebanese public, of their role as 'outsiders' and 'refugees' and to avoid integration. If we consider impoverishment a form of violence, then the analysis of the role of witnesses brings forth its performative aspect.

The implication of defining symbols of violence as 'performative' is that their communicative purpose becomes evident. Symbols of violence such as military attire, vandalism and arson all serve to convey a message or to open communication lines between groups. Rhodes (2001) discusses forms of vandalism in 1960s America – he calls these acts "symbolic writings" which are not "idle or mindless destruction, but direct action taken to another level, a coherent attempt to open lines of communication with white society" (*ibid*, 187). Similarly, Juris (2005) analyses Black Bloc behaviour during the G8 protests in Genoa by discussing "styles of violent performance through distinct bodily techniques, styles of dress, ritual symbols, and communicative practices" (*ibid*, 421). Both make the strong point that these symbols of violence, because they are aimed at an audience, are inherently performative and bring about avenues for communication.

The last type of performative violence is not violence in itself, but performances which include violent aspects. Watson (1996) carries out a thorough ethnographic study of *jiao* rites in rural Hong Kong. He states that this "is best understood as a re-enactment and celebration of violence" (*ibid*, 145). Performative violence can therefore also be seen from this perspective – the *jiao* ritual is distinctly political and sends out a message to an audience just like the aforementioned examples. In this particular case, Watson writes that "the obvious goal was to maintain control over territory" (*ibid,* 157). The implication is that historical conflicts over territory are kept alive through these performances while territorial boundaries are controlled without the outbreak of war.

From these examples what we can understand of performative violence is that it serves to convey a message to an audience, but also serves as a form of social control and as a tool to increase social cohesion within groups through ritual action. In a way, therefore, performative violence constructs and perpetuates its own reality. Ferguson writes

that “acts of war are expressive as well as instrumental” and these “systems of thought have their own logic and power, not reducible to practicalities” (2008, 38).

Strategic Implications

What I intend to analyse as ‘strategic implications’ are the *motivators behind* and *effects of* performative violence. I discuss the implication of defining violence as performative, but I focus especially on a more compelling subject – the implication of *using* performative violence.

Why would someone want to define violence as performative?[5] Ellis answers this question when he writes that “any Western politician who wishes to avoid pressure to become involved in a war that is not regarded as of vital strategic importance for his or her own country is likely to represent it as representing a fixed cultural pattern” (2003, 471). Similarly, an unclear understanding of the nuances of the meaning of ‘performative’ can be manipulated to portray violence as senseless, fickle and not rooted in the deeper aspirations and need for communication of these ‘performers’. It is therefore important for the academic to appropriately define this term so that it illuminates rather than obscures the underlying reasons for which individuals or groups employ performative violence.

In the following analysis I do not explicitly distinguish between *motivators* and *effects* because the motivators are also effects. For example, an effect of performative violence is the opening of new lines of communication[6], and the motivation behind the use of performative violence is wanting to achieve this result. What I do distinguish as just purely an effect is the unintentional result of using performative violence – namely the creation of a new self-perpetuating structure/logic.

An implication of using performative violence is the intimidation of individuals other than those receiving the violence. It can also be the intimidation of individuals who witness symbols of violence (in cases where there is no physical harm involved). I discussed examples earlier whereby armies would fire loud shots without target in Sierra Leone. For a considerable time this was an effective tactic that made it easy for the RUF rebels to take control of various towns. A second implication, following the first, is social control. Serious intimidation can facilitate social control of one group over another. In the discussion of hobbling and torture by Osterholtz (2013) it is evident that during the Pueblo I era, one group sought to exert control over a second group by applying painful and gruesome techniques to a portion of individuals within that second group. She argues that the witnesses of this performative violence would decide that obedience rather than resistance was in their uppermost interest.

Material control also follows from social control. Once a society is under control, material aspects can be more easily manipulated. In the case discussed by Watson (1996) the *jiao* rites in rural Hong Kong were used to delineate territorial boundaries and territorial supremacy. Here we can see how a performance with violent symbols can have same motivators and serve the same ends as direct violence with an audience. Watson writes that “the *jiao* procession was… a demonstration that the Teng were willing and able to potect their territory if required to do so” (*ibid*, 157). Both are instances of performative violence.

Another significant implication of performative violence, stemming directly from its ritual aspect, is social cohesion. The use of performative violence can increase social cohesion within groups. This is due to the fact that performative violence often includes strong ritual aspects, which Richards says intensify “emotions generated by group activity” (2005b, 378). In reference to Black Bloc protester behaviour in Genoa, Juris writes that “young militants enact performative violence in order to generate radical identities” (2005, 414). These identities are then reinforced every time they are expressed in acts of performative violence. Osterholtz also claims that for victims, aggressors and witnesses, social cohesion is built “through the development and destruction of the other” (2013, 124). In other words, ritual action intensifies emotion within groups, and performative violence creates distinct identities and serves to polarise them so that ultimately social cohesion within groups (and in contrast to others) increases.

Ultimately, the communicative aspect of performative violence is the largest implication, which significantly interplays with the role of audience/witness. Rhodes writes of 1960s America that

"in Kansas city… rioters used performative violence to force whites to finally see and hear their perspective on the city's relations and inner-city living conditions" (2001, 186).

Juris looks at the manipulation of media as one way to pinpoint the communicative nature of performative violence; he explains that "anti-corporate globalisation activists have hijacked the global media space… to communicate political messages" (2005, 414). Both argue that the direct goal of using performative violence is to open avenues for communication, and not just to express personal frustrations or harming individuals or property.

There is one further implication of performative violence that falls outside of the direct aims of those who enact it. Performative violence creates a new logic which perpetuates itself by keeping the past alive. It is evident that most of the discussed literature converges onto this point. Richards writes that "humans engage in collective practices centered on killing in order to reshape minds and re-organise society" (2005b, 389). Similarly, Ferguson writes that examples of performative violence become "critical social facts, defining relationships and playing a major role in shaping future actions" (2008, 38). Ellis (2003) claims that acts of violence imitate earlier acts, and the parades discussed by Watson "re-enact a history of territorial conflict, keeping the past alive in the present" (1996, 150). Lastly, Osterholtz makes the point "stories of violence serve as morality tales for future generations" (2013, 134). The underlying claim in these texts is the idea of temporality or historicity. Performative acts of violence create connections with both the past and future because they create new logics and social structures, and because they keep past logics and traditions alive in the present. This way, the entire dynamic ends up perpetuating itself.

Conclusion

I deconstructed the concept of performative violence by looking at theories of violence, performance and ritual, and what the combination of all three means for a general definition. Second, I analysed the conceptual implications of this notion, which I divided into *types* of performative violence. Third, I explored the strategic implications of this concept, both in the sense of *defining* violence as performative and of *using* performative violence. I drew a number of conclusions from this discussion. First, it is important for academics to define this subject as clearly as possible so as to avoid manipulation by political entities. Second, the causes and effects of performative violence are tied together in that the effects feed into the causes. These are intimidation, social and material control, social cohesion and communication. Third, there is one effect which seems to occur outside of the direct intentions of those who adopt the use of performative violence, namely the creation of a new self-perpetuating structure of violence.

What is the use of this approach to the study of violence? I find it to be valuable to understanding a variety of nuances that would otherwise be lost, but I maintain that it is only useful if combined with other perspectives (psychological, economic). If we assume that the purpose of our analysis is not just that of academic inquiry, but to provide theories that will allow us to limit the use of violence in the world, then it is important to not ignore any of the other aspects.

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[1] See appendix for a visual representation of this structure

[2] Richards cites the BBC

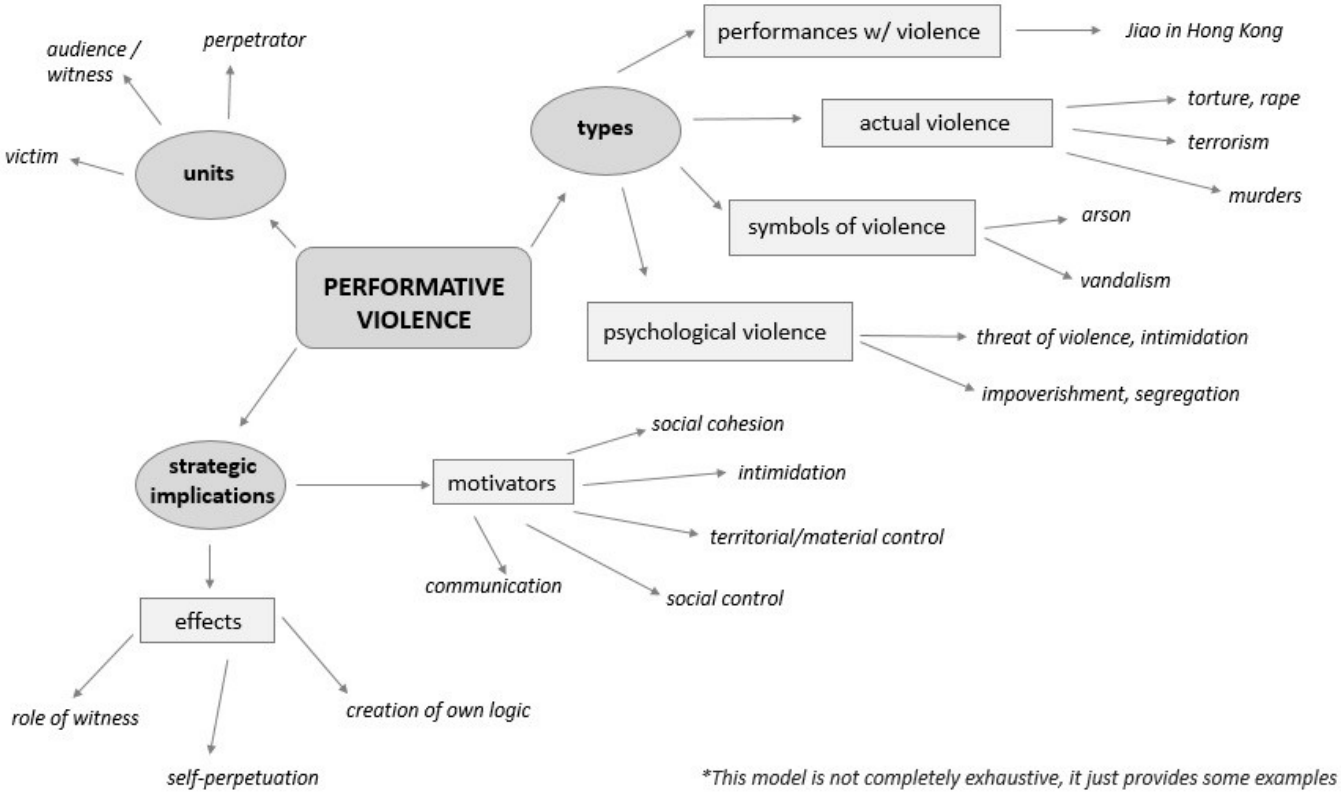
[3] Which is why the brutality of the civil war in Sierra Leone was so appealing

[4] For example by driving around with the loudest truck and firing cannons

[5] Other than for pure academic purposes

[6] Quoted earlier in Rhodes 2001

Appendix



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