

Is Learning Violent?

Written by Lucile Cremier

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LUCILE CREMIER, MAR 25 2014

Introduction

The title of Slavoj Žižek's recent work addressing the concept of violence, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2009), indicates the difficulty of identifying it. If one can indeed only approach violence obliquely or indirectly, it seems unhelpful to attempt an unequivocal definition. This essay recognizes violence as any act or phenomenon conducive to one's or something's physical, structural or semiotic deprivation of meaning, contingency or freedom *for an external aim*. Violence is, therefore, not an entity or object, despite its grammatical nature, but rather a quality or property of an event, act, or phenomenon that can be identified by its "instrumental character" (Arendt 1970:46). Therefore, the identification of dichotomies such as "negative" and "positive" potentials of violence (UNESCO 2003:79) will not be considered here, and the ways in which violence operates will be the object of discussion. Also, the question of human nature exceeds the scope of this essay, so that the possible interpretations of the emergence and roles of violence in human history will not be examined, as John F. Schostack (1986) did, for instance.

Within this framework, this essay contends that language, and especially the structure of the sign as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure (1991:10-11), entails semiotic violence, i.e. violence that is specific to signification. Therefore, the nature of learning should be problematized, because learning is a semiotic and linguistic process. 'Learning' means to acquire knowledge in the world and of the world or of oneself, but above all, to develop a relation with the world on one's own terms, by one's own means (Rancière 1991:139). Learning is, therefore, a paradigmatic instance of a fundamental human freedom and contingency (Arendt 1967:478), and is not limited to institutionalized pedagogy (whose object is the child, ὁ παῖς, or *peda-* in 'pedagogy'). However, the philosophical grounds of human freedom will not be addressed here for lack of space. After explaining the meaning and political consequences of semiotic violence, this essay focuses on the violence of "schooling itself" (Harber 2002:15) in that institutionalized mode of learning, that is in the classroom as a particular space in which younger individuals (students) listen to, follow, and retain one individual's (teacher) instructions. This essay argues that it is improbable for a form of modern schooling to engender active and emancipating education, as it reproduces violent uses of the sign and creates new ones. Finally, this essay contends that resistance to that disciplinary framework reveals the possibility for another conception of education and another *praxis*.

In this essay, 'politics' is defined as *praxis*, that is, the collective practice of power, or "act[ing] in concert" (Arendt 1970:44). As Hannah Arendt argues, the condition for such *praxis* is "plurality" (1958:87), which is the opposite of a univocal, totalizing government. It presupposes an "ideal" of intentional "action" and speech as political performances and ends in themselves (1958:89). This involves interactions within and beyond 'state politics'. It can be said that the school is now a globally relevant space at the economic but also political levels in an era of development and transnational governance in education policy. For instance, in the past two decades, international actors and organizations have created programs that help establish and run education systems (for instance, UNESCO 2003; Phillips et al. 1998). Schools are also highly political – in the sense specified above – spaces where (young) people, whatever the regime governing education policy, learn the essential tools for collective life, from language to social norms.

The Sign and Semiotic Violence

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Signification is the movement that defines an abstract reference for an object, that is, a “psychological” concept, being referred to (de Saussure 1991:11). As such, it creates the space for the subject-object relation, which implies the possibility of manipulation and control of that defined object by the subject (Žižek 2009:52). In that sense, the sign, that is constitutive of all languages and societies, diverts, uproots and transforms the reality of the object that is signified in order to create and communicate meaning between subjects. This Hegelian “violence of the sign” (Zizek 2009:52) shapes interactions and subjectivity, insofar as “practices of signification” (Butler 2006:197) produces “assemblages” (Deleuze and Guattari 2013:2) that can be political, social or military for instance. Indeed, signs are created that constitute “lines”, i.e. descriptors or parameters, that “cut us up” to characterize and describe elements of the embodied world (Deleuze and Parnet 2007:124), that is, that define us and form assemblages, ensembles with contingent functions. This terminology is useful because it breaks from the rigidity of structuralist accounts of social and linguistic formations in political contexts, while the specific “machine” changes over time as the lines that constitute it evolve (Deleuze and Guattari 2013:2). For example, as Judith Butler argues, the model of original and copy is not appropriate for grasping the relation of sex and gender, because the self emerges “as an effect” of performing and practicing representations and expressions of sexuality or gender, or other identities (1991:22). Thus there is no original but only assemblages of performances that picture contingent and temporary signs, and thus identities, that can be studied (1991:19). Indeed, essentialist accounts of identity seem mistaken as their natural, or necessary criteria depend on observations of the very “practices of signification” that are excluded from what is essential (2006:197).

Political processes of identification, subjection, and subjectivation are produced by and through that signifying play (Derrida 1972). So, this semiotic *praxis* is political, in essence, as it makes such concepts as nation, individuality, or culture intelligible. Yet political objects of reflexion are also semiotic practices at the same time, because these objects depend on the regime of signs that govern their articulation (Deleuze and Guattari 2013:6). In that sense, the semiotic condition of politics involves a particular kind of violence at its root.

The passage from “*phonē* to *logos*”, that is to say, from voice to language (Agamben 1998:7-8), is a paradigmatic instance of the impact of signification. Giorgio Agamben argues that while leaving “bare life” (1998:6) or “*zoē*” (1998:1), which is life “as merely reproductive life” (1998:2), for political life, voice becomes *logos*, that is language or discourse. However, *phonē* is maintained within *logos* as proof of the latter, because as such, the *exceptio* is an “originary spacialization” (Agamben 1998:111). The conceptualization of political life is intrinsically dependent on the presence of its opposite within itself. That original localization of bare life *within and without* civilization characterizes the modern “*biopolitical body*” (Agamben 1998:6). This primary assemblage of modern politics is found in political and educational rhetoric, and determines the strategic use of semiotic practices for political, war or revolutionary aims (Agamben 2005:3-4; Puar 2007).

For instance, in a crucial passage of the preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of The Earth* (2004), Jean-Paul Sartre’s articulation of the colonized subject depends on the concept of the colonizer, inasmuch as to reject the colonizer includes him within his own rejection, and empowers the colonized subject through the dehumanization of the colonizer and through the idea of a victory over him, involving a necessary comparison to him (Fanon 2004:lii). In that sense, while Sartre and Fanon attempt to show, or teach, Algerian people how and why revolution could be carried out, they follow the same structure of the ban that the colonizer had used as a means to set himself as the superior being, because the affirmation of the Algerian people’s subjectivity depends on its inclusion of “the colonizer” as referent.

Schooling, Discourse, and Totalitarianism

Within that framework, schools teach these mechanisms of signification because of the prevalence of the nation-state structure in political organizations across the world, and so, learning is circumscribed and regulated within that exceptional structure. Following Walter Benjamin, one may argue that if the violence of schooling seems at first sight to be “law-preserving” because it is “at the disposal” of the ruling apparatus, it is at the same time, not unlike the police, potentially “lawmaking” because schooling has the capacity to “promulgate” and sow (new) laws and norms in students or pupils’ minds (1986:286-7). While Michel Foucault identified the “immense verbosity” (1990:33) surrounding sexuality and sexual practices in the nineteenth century as a way regulate and discipline subjects, it

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seems that in the same way as signs, producing and produced by discourse, form basic dichotomies of good and evil, sane and insane (1990:67), schooling is one key institution in the development of such “general economy” of speech and concepts (1990:11).

In other words, schooling participates in the elaboration of a specific moral, sexual, or political “machine” (Deleuze and Guattari 2013:2), while enforcing and producing signs. On the one hand, in situations of post-conflict reconstruction, for instance, the school system is a priority in order to create a democratic commitment, that is to say in order to achieve ideological “reconstruction” (Phillips et al. 1998:17). Schooling is, therefore, not the liberatory “gymnastics” of the mind (Rancière 1991:122), but rather acts as the provider of level ground given to all by competent “instruction” (Rancière 1991:125). On the one hand, what is learnt is subordinate to the aims of the apparatus, as the current “militarization” of the American higher education system shows (Giroux 2007:73). As the “military-industrial-academic complex” (Giroux 2007:18) shapes *how* one studies and learns (for instance, regulating internship requirements or work experience), that complex circumscribes the meaning of studying. Indeed, one may observe the “political homogeneity” (Giroux 2007:73) of the university today. Also, the belief in the “inequality” of human intelligences that is postulated by the instructing institution is largely taken for granted. That sanctioned and unchallenged belief does not only flourish on the anxiety or alienation of ‘ignorant’ individuals (Rancière 1991:133; Illich and Verne 1976:10). It also maintains a rigid vertical structure of “explication” (Rancière 1991:117), which moves unilaterally from a ‘teacher-explicator’ to a ‘student-receptor’.

Mark Herman’s *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008) illustrates these mechanisms of discourse production and knowledge hierarchization. The film shows the children of a Nazi officer during the Second World War, young Bruno and his sister Gretel, attend Herr Liszt’s tutoring classes. While only the latter may define what counts as “facts” to learn, Liszt’s role is that of a “master explicator” (Rancière 1991:12). The material studied by the children is thus chosen so as to ‘plug’ their minds to the Nazi “war machine” (Deleuze and Guattari 2013:2). Gretel’s assiduity in learning the description of “the Jew” and pinning portraits of Nazi leaders on her bedroom wall illustrates the efficiency of the reproduction and proliferation of discourses of the Nazi semiotic regime, as well as a certain pleasure that she takes while confirming her knowledge (Foucault 1990) in reproducing those violent signs. This highlights the relations between not only learning (as schooling) and violence, or violence and language, but also between learning and language. For instance, Gretel and Bruno’s lessons are mainly oral, and linguistic signs prevail in the process of their indoctrination, even though other types of – sometimes double – signs, such as the “pyjamas” or uniforms that prisoners wear, are performative and visual.

In that sense, the conditions of educational processes, as processes involving a dense and influent semiotic matrix, must be interrogated. For instance, graduate students’ research field trips to violent scenes undertaken *for* work experience does not question the constraints and ethical resonance of producing speech about the objects of study (Mitchell 2013). Indeed, it could be argued that “study” itself is an othering project that is exceptionalizing, and thus violent. Yet, if “othering” takes place in research processes in higher education and academia (MacLure 2003:3), creating an always-already narrowed and instrumentalized object can be identified in more informal sites of learning. Modern commercial media use images of suffering subjects for the production of “news”, and transform the full subjectivity of the person into an image, a commodity (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996:8). As Susan Sontag confirms, photographs “beautify[y]” subjects to model new *objects* and thus limits one’s knowledge of the *subject* of the picture within the borders of a certain perspective (2004:72).

De-Instrumentalizing Learning

What seems to be the centre of the problem is the instrumental nature of learning within that system. A parallel may be made with Hannah Arendt’s treatment of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism entails the expansion and hegemony (that is, *total* domination) of an ideology transforming the evolution of human *action* into naturalized *motion* (Arendt 1958:101), which implies that all human acts are or should be subordinate to that transcendent direction. As seen above, when politics as *praxis* ceases to be an end in itself, the potentiality and contingency of human actions disappear (Arendt 1958:86). Therefore, totalitarianism is essentially “anti-political” (Arendt 1958:95). While schooling, as characterized above, dispossesses the individual of his ability for autonomous action and speech (1954:106), it not only dehumanizes the individual, but also depoliticizes life. Similarly, modern schooling weakens

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power. Indeed, while totalitarianism hinders the autonomy and creativity of individuals, society becomes mass and in that sense, “loneliness” foreshadows totalitarian emergence when it becomes the rule (Arendt 1967:478). In the classroom, the student is in a sense isolated from his classmates inasmuch as he only learns from the teacher, who is the primary authority. Indeed, the “circle of powerlessness” (Rancière 1991:15) in the school is due to there being no concerted action. If learning is the conjunction of an “intelligence and will” and if the encounter between the will of different persons is what creates an equal relationship of mutual teaching, then schooling is its opposite, as it is the encounter and comparison of intelligences (Rancière 1991:13).

This atomized and, in a sense, totalitarian structure of schooling only seems to engender more visible violence. For instance, in the United Kingdom, some students reveal to be unable to freely appear in the political space of the classroom as gendered subjects, because of the top-down and rigid characterization of sexuality that is produced and maintained by a curriculum that does not address plural subjectivities (Epstein, O’Flynn and Telford 2003:138, 146). Students’ status in such forms of modern schooling is determined by the limits of their knowledge, which deprives them of a sense of their own ability for self-determination and performance. Also, as Mary L. Rassmussen shows, discourses of contemporary sexual education, such as the closet narrative (being “out”, that is having officially declared one’s sexuality), are counterproductive because they create emancipation tropes that do not ‘match’ the lived experiences of young people (2006:86). In a sense, these works all converge towards a critique of schooling as “unworldly” education (Illich 1971:24), that is to say as a system that is incompatible with learning. It produces anxiety (Shaw 1995:143) – for instance in the lack of reference one may be faced with when the sign for one’s appearance is banished – but also diminishing will for or encouragement of autonomous study (Aronowitz 2008).

Therefore, one may argue that learning should be de-instrumentalized, that is, de-schooled, to go against that totalitarian movement. In other words, learning *cannot be* violent if the principles and practices that trigger its instrumentalization are sought out and abandoned. As Hannah Arendt argues, if violence cannot be or constitute anything, because it is intrinsically instrumental (1970:51) and if power is an end in itself, as seen above, and is thus the opposite of violence, then resisting violence is to strengthen power (1970:56). This implies that studying and confronting the violent assemblages of schooling, while empowering individual intelligences, could foster a “new politics” (Agamben 1998:11) of education. Propositions of new philosophical foundations for education, such as Jacques Rancière’s “equality of intelligence rather than [...] inequality of knowledge” (1991:xxii), or the general undoing of school structures worldwide defended by Ivan Illich (1971), work against institutionalization (Rancière 1991:106). Indeed, in the first instance, if “only a man can emancipate a man” (Rancière 1991:102) then that reciprocal and horizontal conception of learning enhances the emergence of power rather than the violence of the relation or comparison of an intelligence to another for the external aim of instruction. Within a narrow framework of politics, this project could be said to be apolitical, as it does not make any theoretical claim beyond the preliminary assumption that all humans have equal intelligence, and as it does not overtly adopt a partisan stance beyond the opinions of Joseph Jacotot, the founder of that idea.

However, one could rather argue that this proposition is highly political, in the sense that reciprocal learning invites to consider the potential of plurality as a form of *praxis*, against totalitarian univocity, and “beyond” the exceptional “limit relation” of politics (Agamben 1998:47). This requires an attitude of constant awareness and analytical attention to potentially harmful assemblages. However, it could be objected that such a perspective on learning is not applicable, that is to say that this proposition is utopian or unrealistic for modern politics. One may answer that if a proposition for alternative teaching and learning is first and foremost an “oas[is]” in the desert of modern life (Arendt 2005:202), it may be integral to its nature to escape institutionalization. Indeed, if Joseph Jacotot said that his theory of emancipation would “*not take*” but still “*not perish*” (Rancière 1991:105), the importance of that theory is the survival of a non-hegemonic, non-colonizing theory. To use Deleuzian (2013) terms, such emancipatory conceptions of education may form part of a political assemblage, but because constant movement is the condition for true political action and for the prevention of totalitarian crystallization, these conceptions seem to better serve their purpose by not being totalizing.

Conclusion

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Schooling, understood as the institutionalization of learning, is structurally violent because it is instrumental to external aims in the Arendtian (1970) sense. It is also intrinsically violent as it presupposes a hierarchy of intelligences founded on the inequality of knowledge and a separation between the actor and the receptor of learning (Rancière 1991). Learning, on the other hand, is violent inasmuch as language, which is the primary tool for learning, is semiotically violent. However, it has appeared that if learning and instrumentality are divorced, then learning is not an essentially oppressive process. "Plurality" (Arendt 1958:87) and "emancipation" (Rancière 1991:15) emerged as two possible criteria for an alternative conception of learning in a national, inter- or transnational society.

Re-thinking learning is crucial not only to conceptions of contemporary schooling, but also to the elaboration of democratic educative *praxis* against violence. The implications of this argument for international politics remain to be formally articulated. However, analyzing the philosophical and linguistic roots of political phenomena can be considered as a preliminary step towards further inquiry into the applications of emancipatory theories for new political relations in the school and the city.

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