

Violence in the Classroom
Childhood, violence and burgeoning subjectivity
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We understand violence to be an abuse of power by an individual or group in relation to another individual or group; thus, we believe that violence is as old as humankind itself. The novelty we find in violent acts today has to do with the symbolic effects that such acts have on symbolic institutions. Thinking about violence, questioning it, and looking for its origins and subjective consequences all began to take place in the 20th century. This process evidenced the downfall of a single, universal and indispensable sense of social mores and gave way to subjective evaluation and all of the values that lie therein as strategies of socio-historical organization.

The antonyms objective-subjective, internal-external, individual-group, public-private, deterministic-random, have given way to new epistemological criteria which center on ideas such as the flow of interaction, inter-connected pluralities, and hierarchy in flux. The epistemology of highly complex systems (Bertalanffy, Bateson, Morin) tries to overcome the philosophical, psychological and sociological reductionism of a universal concept of subject and replace it with historical ways to produce subjectivity (subjectivation).

The future of childhood, supposing that childhood does indeed have a future, depends on social imagination and society's ability to make sense of things given that the internal-external borders of the singular and the collective, the national and the global, the natural and the cultural, the symbolic order and the practical use of power, are in an intense process of redefinition.

From a societal perspective, childhood has been represented over the centuries in a number of different ways and has defined existence, including the concepts of life and death. The view of childhood has gone from the child as a sinner (Saint Augustine, 354-430), to the child as a mistake (Descartes 1556-1658) to the child who is nurtured until is able to manage the freedom that is his birthright (Rousseau, 1712-1778), to the sexual and narcissistic child defined by Freud in the 20th century. Evolutionary psychology developed at the same time as psychoanalysis and tied cognition to affect, producing a century-long repositioning of the social concept of childhood. As a final paradox, in the 20th century, the child is seen as both the center of attention/guarantor of the future and an object, as desubjectivization emerges as a new cultural evil in a world in which consumption defines belonging and exclusion and technology produces more anguish than hope.

We were exposed to the concept of instant nuclear annihilation and planned extermination for the first time in World War II, and the peace that followed gave rise to a general declaration of human rights which has governed the planet as a formal pronouncement since 1948. The concept of universal human rights has been accepted and binds ethics to the law symbolically and to some extent, legally. However, this same

universality implies that the concept of human rights will be defined and develop in different ways in different places. More than a decade was needed to establish children legal beings and to produce a new and specific document: the United Nations Universal Declaration of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (1959).

When is a human being a human? What sexual, racial, or ethereal qualities must one have to be human? Is it possible to stop being human? What social practices make a human being a man, a child, a woman? Women and children are gaining ground in the Western world in terms of being seen as legal subjects, and new educational, health and legal practices are moving us towards the declared goal of the universality of human rights. Women and children are signatories to these declarations.

Nowadays, public and private abuse of women and children is penalized in Western society. It is considered a specific violation of the law, yet we witness with astonishment the persistence of secular violence and of the emergence of new expressions of violence in which children sometimes actively participate. Children make fun of other children, hit their classmates, lack respect for their teachers. They do not want to learn and are indifferent and addictive. Concern for them brings together psychotherapists, educators, and sociologists in wealthy Europe and in both the rich and poor parts of the Americas. If the children in all of these places share common traits, both in spite of and because of their many differences, their commonality should push us to look for a macro approach that encompasses the processes of subjectivation and social ties in today's world.

“How does a child become a child?” and more specifically “what causes children to be violent?” are questions that we are addressing here in Alicante in these meetings that have brought together so many languages and continents. It is a question related to the way subjectivity is conceived at this specific moment in history. Attempts to explain or acts to prevent and treat from an intra- or intersubjective, individual, family or institutional perspective transcend space when we come together, from both the North and the South, to reflect on these issues.

North and South ... we have lived together and separately, each in our own way. There has been a shift from a citizen-based society to a consumer society, from job security to job insecurity, from declarations of “equal under the law” to the most pronounced inequality in history between the haves and the have-nots. We have gone from a society based on productive work to one based on consumerism, from the law as mechanism for regulation to the law of profit.

Every practice produces a product and those in which desire plays a role have the potential to create identities. Early identities emerge in family intersubjectivity, which is always influenced by trans-subjectivity and the form it takes. The mass media, with television as the kingpin, present an image of reality through programming and advertising, and define this reality by proclaiming some things and silencing others. Certain lifestyles and models for living are presented as acceptable and worthy of pursuit and others as frightening and deserving of rejection. These models create desires and

propose the means to obtain them, and these will play an important role in the development of a child's identity.

Presenting a view of reality in which prosperity and violence are seen as part of the coextensive truth of existence is quite common. This image is repeated over and over again and presented as true life. Appealing sounds and images, along with what is silenced, have a massive impact on our subjectivities. Advertising has a specific goal as regards children, and that is to induce them to turn others, specifically their parents, into consumers and to train them, during their childhood, to become the consumers of the future. Action games synergize this view of life and portray automated killing as children's games. Violence is natural and is an essential part of life.

In the Western world, we are shifting from "better to watch than to punish" a child, a basic principle of the disciplinary societies that interested M. Foucault, to the "better to explain and understand any childhood behavior." Instead of punishment, we have psychopedagogy, and the autonomy of and respect for one's desires has become an accepted principle.

How much is too much for children in rich countries who are overwhelmed by the amount of goods available to them and to the children in poor countries who do not have enough?

What pushes a child's subjectivity into a whirlwind of violence?

What material or semantic desires lead to excess?

Using a model of complex systems organized according to interaction, we will try to examine the concept of limits. We will view the world as a great system in which nations, families and individuals are organized into subsystems based on a hierarchy of heterogeneous, open and mutually dependent totalities. The idea of limits brings to mind the idea of rules and regulations, of laws which prescribe and prohibit, and of some kind of force or power, subject to those laws, that guarantees that they will be respected.

There are three types of limits that can be briefly defined as follows:

1) Outside of the family

In today's super-technical and interconnected world, it is paradoxical that the increased capacity for global communication has brought about a progressive weakening of social ties in the sense that institutions are gradually losing their control of legality. Where is the law today? The United Nations and nation-states give in to market pressure which randomly dictates the fate of individuals and entire populations based on whether or not they are consumers. And the market that legislates against this message of equality under the law has its primary and secondary proprietors.

The bigger the market, the greater the power. Thus, the United States is the virtual master of the universe, not because of its political supremacy, but because it is the large market, and the market rules politics. This master has virtually absolute power and strips international regulating bodies of theirs, subjecting other countries to its control as soon as they become valuable markets.

The market – state relationship is random, and it has become impossible to predict how the law will regulate social issues. Force and chance have replaced legality. Limits are arbitrary, and the unpredictable and invisible powers which set them are based on uncertain rules of the market.

The meaning of social practices becomes uncertain when the law loses its ability to set limits as to what is allowed and what is prohibited.

What kind of social ties are possible if anything goes as long as it makes a profit?

What is the sense of learning?

We are walking on shaky ground here. Hunger and war have caused massive migrations. People have been forced to move due to changes in the workforce. Cities have been destroyed by bombs, and buildings, town squares and streets have been razed to build giant shopping centers. Instant travel is now possible on television and through the internet.

Zygmunt Bauman points out that time and space changed the North and the South almost as if space didn't exist in the first world because everything seemed achievable, while in the third world countries of the South, time is of no import. Limits are based on notions of time and space, and if we most value what is instantaneous, what purpose do they serve? Consumerism emphasizes the ephemeral as a condition for yet one more immediate purchase. It promotes the immediate, the instantaneous, and generates an illusion of infinite satisfaction of one's wants and desires which promotes stimulation and invention. It is a cruel paradox because if all desires can be immediately satisfied, then satisfaction is minimal because it is fleeting. Embracing something and waiting for it, loses its importance if immediacy reigns. Forgetting must be promoted so that the empty space that is produced can be filled. If forgetting is promoted, learning does not take place, and if the immediate becomes the ideal, the commitment that is needed for permanence and persistence goes against the ideal.

How can the lawless anything-goes and instant paradises that the adult world of consumerism proffers as the best possibility stimulate a child who believes in something that is impossible? Why should a child have to be patient and create projects that imply delays, effort, commitment and rejection?

An individual who is defined according to what he possesses displaces modernity's subject in "I think, therefore I am" and replaces it with something that is increasingly more object than subject based: "I have, therefore I am."

Thinking requires language which affects culture, law and symbols. Take away the law as a creator of social ties and the dynamic of the self-other as discrete entities will tend to unfold in a field of mutually exclusive mirror-like reflections because only one or the other will be seen. If the self and the other are similar, or if the other seems to have what the self should have in order to exist, what else can that other be except a rival? And if insulting, harassing, calling names and hostility are introduced as signs of war, what else is there to do but go to battle?

If power and winning are derived from a specific semiotic, how can I be part of that world if I am not part of its meaning? If force seems to govern the world, why shouldn't a child stab someone with his scissors, hit someone with his compass, or harass someone? What other sense can quench the thirst for immediate satisfaction of the desires which the market must continually create so as not to break the cycle of do-have which a life of satisfaction tends to generate?

A world in which limits are always being pushed, even to the point of disappearance causes perplexity because a lack of parameters creates a sense of desolation based on feelings of defenselessness. Nation-states are increasingly defenseless against the market. Citizens cannot be protected by the fragile states in which they live, the disenfranchised are growing in number day by day, and this great technological world of ours looks more and more like a jungle in which only the "strongest" survive. And children grow up in this new form of subjectivity, in a world in which the law is fading away and limits are evaporating.

What institutional, family, and social practices will they use as the foundation for their values? Rules, language, commitment, ties, knowledge?

2) Families

The definition of a "family" is being broadened, parental duties are being redefined, what a family or a couple is is being questioned, the social roles of men and women are being transformed, the differences between the sexes is being challenged, and the sense of life and of the future are unclear. The line between belonging to a family or excluded from it is becoming both more rigid and stereotyped and more tenuous at the same time.

Every family, as an open system, needs a hierarchy with a certain distribution of power which, in order to be beneficial, depends upon flexible intra- and extra-systemic limits. This hierarchy serves as a protective filter for excess which brings to mind the Freudian idea of "contact-barriers" which support organizational ties.

From my point of view, the idea of flexibility as regards limits between subsystems within the family as well as those between the system itself and the outside, are dialectically related to their ability to prohibit, which is a natural human tendency.

Within a family, a limit is flexible (Vidal) when it prohibits two types of interaction

- a) the use of abusive or absolute power by one individual over another or others, thus guaranteeing that each individual is considered unique and that there is some opaqueness in each relationship. No one is completely transparent to anyone else and no one is an object.
- b) sexual incest.

The line between being included or excluded from a family is defined by both the family and the context, and the limit fluctuates at both extremes, being both rigid and blurred. Limits are rigid when they control subjectivities and the bonds that are based on exclusion, indifference, segregation, and vulnerability, as the effect of the current concept of throw-away people which unemployment and lack of minimal consumption brings about. Society as a whole sets up barriers to belonging that are impossible to overcome. Limits define interaction and the possibility of participating in the social contract. Limits are blurred when individual space and bonds are violated by advertising invasiveness, by forcing consumerism down our throats, by flooding us with images and meanings that overwhelm our thought processes and our ability to defend ourselves.

Who am I? What purpose do I serve? These questions are interrelated and echo the ties between subjectivity and social practices. Individuals want to be recognized and to so must emphasize their existence over that of others.

Force takes precedence over rules; overpowering someone is more important than creating alliances; self-conservation and individualism obliterate the ties that are necessary for existence. We need an other in order to exist and to survive. An I without an other is pure illusion, and if we forget this, so will our children.

3) Uniqueness

How is it that victims of violence become violent themselves? What makes a mother attack her child's teacher and then attempt to excuse that behavior by saying she was protecting her child from an unfair grade given by the teacher?

Children hit children, and now women hit women. We know of children who hit the mothers and teachers, of mothers who mistreat teachers, husbands, children and parents. We know of women who launch missiles over hospitals, bridges, schools, and civilians. How can female soldiers who knowingly kill children, as has happened this year in Iraq forget childbearing and childrearing? How can they, as givers of life, erase that aspect of themselves to the point that they are able to take life?

If the master-slave dynamic is a necessary binarism, being a slave saves one from enslaving someone else, but being the master prevents one from being a slave in a general sense that does not permit uniqueness or singularity and obliterates not only individual personal histories but also generational and transgenerational history.

African-Americans mistreat Latinos in the United States; Israelis oversee concentration camps; the poor fight among themselves for scraps of refuse. What is it that

has deprived the direct and indirect victims of these acts of their identity, sense of belonging and memories?

At the same time that violence destroys human ties, networks of solidarity driven by the need for survival, identity, belonging and sense are being developed. The need to survive revives in many people the feelings of childhood vulnerability, that need for others in order to survive and become a subject. Remembering the support of others counteracts the image of the other as an enemy and strengthens social ties. We are defenseless beings who are radically alone. We are no more than an overflow of nothingness unless others populate the desert of fatal individualism.

Ties, laws and the production of subjectivity are intertwined (se sirven en trenza???)

Producing meanings which strengthen the value of multiple social ties is a challenge that favors life and subjectivity. Only from an other can we become subjects. We are on ourselves when our existence is recognized by others, and it is the pleasant and creative meeting of bodies and souls that gives life meaning and transcendence.

In schools, singing, playing games, planting a garden, painting murals, dancing, and group activities are libidinal practices that downplay existence and define an individual from the perspective of the desire of the other, as a source of pleasure and protection.

Information and academic training taught by teachers who also play and participate creative activities with their students, keeps teachers from becoming speaking screens that can be turned off if they are boring, and facilitates intersubjective exchanges that have nothing in common with the object-object method that exists between a speaking device and a child, which is what happens when a child sits in front of the television several hours a day.

Creative and enjoyable activities carried out in educational settings transform the institutionalization of play as a solitary, toy-based act, contaminated by consumerism and the market which profit-making demands. Efforts to restore creativity and a sense of order and to defend the law wherever it is trampled will propitiate human contact and connections and promote culture and common sense. Restoring order is not simply feeling nostalgic about the way things were; it is inventing new legal methods for these new times based on the concept that the purpose of the law is to serve as a structure to which we all must submit, and from this position of equality, we can negotiate and grow in diversity.