

Violence and History Historic evolution of the representations of violence

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2008

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1064423ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064423ar>

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Résumé de l'article

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Éditeur(s)

Département des littératures de langue française

ISSN

2104-3272 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Wormser, G. (2008). Violence and History: Historic evolution of the representations of violence. *Sens public*. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064423ar>

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International Web Journal
www.sens-public.org

Violence and History

Historic evolution of the representations of violence

GÉRARD WORMSER

Abstract: Violence is a relationship, not a "thing"; nor does it submit to typologies. Nevertheless, that does not mean that violence cannot be studied and its present-day occurrences located, writes Gérard Wormser. The exercise of imagined history is probably one of the best antidotes to violence.

Résumé: La violence est une relation, pas "une chose" ; elle ne se soumet pas davantage aux typologies. Mais cela ne signifie pas que la violence ne peut pas être étudiée, ni être située dans son actualité, écrit Gérard Wormser. L'exercice d'histoire imaginaire est probablement un des meilleurs antidotes contre la violence.

Link: Original French version available on line

Violence and History

G rard Wormser

The term "violence" is by no means unequivocal: we should perhaps rather speak of it in the plural, of "violences". Our understanding of violence depends on whether we are thinking of warfare as organized technical activity, violence associated with psychological trauma, domestic violence, and so on. Sometimes violence may be intentional and blatant, in other cases it will be suffered by the same persons who commit it. Violence may be thought of as a paradox inherent in culture. If we are going to speak of violence as a form of expression (as in "an aggressive look"), we shall have to ask ourselves how we are to establish a relationship between the notion of violence and the notions of expressivity or expression. What is being expressed when we speak of violence?

Let us consider the paradox that arises when we ascribe violence, in part, to some natural or quasi-natural source. Of course, it is necessary that certain natural forces come to be mobilized when violence occurs: muscular force, "psychic force", instruments that make violent actions possible. However, we are then obliged to trace this back to symbolic relationships. In the case of vengeance, for example, two events, separated in time, are related by the intention to retaliate. Here, violence is first of all a symbolic act, linked to the temporal experience of a subject or of a group. The subject or group is capable of internalizing or externalizing impulses and affects, of recalling some memory and turning it into a vendetta, or reliving, perhaps in less violent but nonetheless traumatic form, violent situations. Their persistence in the memory turns them into motifs that demonstrate that it is impossible to really conceive of anything "new"; they express the idea that "there is no getting away from it", they express an inhibition. Collective inhibition is thus a phenomenon that is related to violence, even if that is not how it initially presents itself. The foundation of all that we do not allow ourselves to do, what we fail to manage to do to shed our habits, to break out of our behavioural patterns, is linked to inhibitions brought about by "violences" that we have not properly come to terms with, or recollections of violence that have transformed themselves into shame, into difficulty in living, into difficulty in being and, most of all, into difficulty in changing ourselves.

The question of singularity

Consequently, violence seems to us to be a relationship and not an object, not a "thing": violence has no essential characteristic; it is not "something". In calling it a relationship we are also saying that it involves a tension: it implies a relationship between self and other, between communities or nations in conflict. The question that we are entitled to ask as regards violence is therefore not what it is – because, strictly speaking, it is nothing – but what it involves. What is involved in violence? It is nothing *per se*, but it generates very powerful effects in those who are involved in a violent relationship. We find ourselves confronted, engaged, shaped by violence, even though it may never be possible to identify that violence with a being (which is what the concept of the scapegoat tries to do: exorcize the violence by externalizing it). Once the violent relationship is established, we are taken over by it. Reflection on violence is therefore to be seen as part of an outlook that Durkheim called "anomie". Violence is not a thing but it refers to tensions, expressed in a more or less regulated manner, within a community that does not accept the terms from which violence originates.

In discussing the subject of violence and history, we shall therefore refrain from asking the ontological question about the essential nature of violence. Indeed, it would not be the first time that a question, posed in metaphysical terms, requires one to essentialize a phenomenon that has no essence, thereby running the risk of reinforcing beliefs or illusions with effects that, in terms of violence, are often considerable. They can engender a degree of violence that would not have existed were it not for this metaphysical quest. Let us take one example. If one is led to speculate whether there is an ontological substratum to "race", by reference to differences that might exist between humans, then one is liable to create pseudo-essences, pseudo-groups, pseudo-entities, which will look like "justifications" for ways of acting, ways of behaving, for the kind of violence that we classify as racist. Let us therefore be wary of essentialization, of naturalization of what is not a thing but appears primarily as a relationship, as a tension – this point was, in fact, the interesting feature of the discussion between Jacques Sémelin¹ and Paul Zawadzki² on the difference between the explanatory approach and the cognitive approach. There is indeed a risk in applying general schemes to violent phenomena, which always present themselves as singularities. This is especially evident in the unavoidable acknowledgment of the victims' point of view: the notion that victims might have a need for recognition makes clear that violence causes hurt inasmuch as it singularizes and cannot amount to an "example" of the occurrence of general phenomena. It is because I have been a singular victim of a single act of violence that I require some recognition of it from others.

¹ See on the website [Eurozine](#)

² See on the website [Conflits](#)

Identification of the typology does not make up for the harm done nor for the suffering endured: to approach the subject of violence means moving from the case to the event. It is because of violence that history is not like the other social sciences. The social sciences have frequently been defined in terms of resemblances or points of contact with the exact sciences, so that attempts have been made to arrive at laws, types, norms, constants or invariables. The peculiarity of history, however, is that it has never believed that it could draw up laws, even though some of the facts with which it deals may closely resemble each other. The distinguishing feature of history is that it does not attempt to generalize. By individualizing each of the periods, each of the accidents, each of the events for which it strives to grasp the causality, history does not try to typify. It is not a matter of deciding whether the Valois or Capetian monarchy is or is not the equivalent of the monarchy that might have arisen in the same period in England or Spain. The main concern is to understand the specific features of a political regime, a social structure or the characteristics of a cultural model.

Consequently, the singularizing nature of history is what distinguishes it from all the social sciences that claim to identify laws, constants, and invariables. It is in terms of singularity that history confers meaning and not in terms of any hypothetical system of laws that it might claim to be able to establish. We must therefore arm ourselves against the spectre of false generalization that leads to a terrible euphemizing of violence. If violence were to be considered as a set of typical cases that could be grouped together in reference to laws, constants or statistics, then the violent aspect of violence would be denied. It would simply be seen as a social norm that negates its nature as an intentional act that is suffered or committed. The question of the meaning of violence necessarily refers to an intentional dimension, which cannot be accounted for within a statistical framework or be the subject of some analogy or search for recurrence. Correctly viewed, all violence is unique and singular.

Culture against violence

Does it not seem excessive to insist on this when one notes how violence appears in history as the very basis of everything? Is not history in effect the history of forms of violence and of the ways in which the various communities of mankind have tried to regulate it? Just as we should not look to find an ontology or essence of violence, so we should not ask what is the origin of violence: it is already there. It is part of what societies are made up of; it is that against which societies have to struggle; it is the negative aspect that is inherent in existence itself. Violence is there in the same sense that "scarcity" may be there, which only concerns us in proportion to our

need to survive, to move around or to be cultivated.³ We aim at cultural production, not at ignorance for its own sake. Admittedly, whilst there may be, in a cultured society, zones of ignorance, and the question of how ignorance is produced within a culture may then arise, ignorance as such has no essence, no origin for which we would have to seek the basis as if that might teach us something about ourselves. Ignorance is simply the reverse of culture, just as violence is the reverse of the human societies that strive to regulate it, to limit it, to circumscribe it within legitimate form, however rebarbative these may be. It is precisely our attempt to protect ourselves against violence that causes it to be seen as a threat.

Thucydides' wonderful account of the Peloponnesian War provides an example. He writes that the war waged by Athens and its allies against Sparta was the greatest political confrontation that had ever taken place. Thucydides then goes on to describe the material situation of Greek civilization at the time of the Peloponnesian War as a hitherto unequalled deployment of technological products, material equipment and human resources: in his view, that goes to prove that he has been witness – he was for a time a general in that war although we have no precise account of his campaigns – to an exemplary demonstration of all that men can inflict on other men. Thucydides explicitly concludes that, for any man who was present at this Peloponnesian War, no subsequent historical event will truly be unfamiliar. History makes it possible to identify the necessary framework for a systematic process of anticipation: Thucydides does not specifically anticipate the world wars of the twentieth century, yet the structure of events that makes a world war possible is accessible to a historian who was present and who has understood what was played out in terms of human rivalry, of the deployment of technical power, economic process and international diplomacy in the fourth century BC.

Thucydides came to the clear conclusion that the more powerful coalition, that of Athens, though invincible because of its sea power, was nevertheless weak once it engaged in long-distance ventures in which its soldiers, diplomats and resources were not at ease as they would have been if they had been defending their own territory. This would have the radical effect of diluting the courage, purpose and virtue that were characteristic of Athenian democracy. Thucydides presents Pericles' funeral oration in which he honours the Athenian soldiers who had fallen in combat and reminds his fellow-citizens that only virtue, the driving force of patriotism, can justify and preserve power, certainly not the enterprise of conquest for its own sake and as an unending goal in some distant place. Pericles' speech anticipates the loss of liberty for Athens that neither Pericles nor Thucydides experienced and, before the event, suggests its cause to be the

³ Jean-Paul Sartre stresses the internal relationship linking "scarcity" (*rareté*) to our intimate deceptions, much more than to any actual "scarcity of resources" (*Critique of dialectical reason*, 1960).

transformation of a democracy that took care of civic needs within a city that respected its own limits into a regime focused on power and trade, power and investments in the colonies.

Let us shift now to the eighteenth century and the establishment of national spaces and constitutions that took place in Europe and America at that time: American independence, the Declaration of Human Rights, the French Revolution. A century after English revolution had brought parliament in its modern form onto the scene, these events unfolded against a background of reflection, on both philosophical and legal levels, relating to the degrees of individual autonomy. While the Abbé de Saint-Pierre⁴ and Rousseau foreshadowed the French Revolution, it was Immanuel Kant who expounded a reflection on peace, through law, at the time of the event itself. If his approach seems somewhat foreign to us, it is because it is not intended to be a reflection based on international relations, nor that of a strategist or diplomat, but of a philosopher and a moralist.

What is war? According to Kant and to a tradition that goes back to antiquity, it is an excess of passion. War is to be explained primarily in terms of the failure to temper human passions. In that sense, then, war is an anthropological phenomenon before it ever becomes political or social. On that basis, to conceive of peace is, for Kant, a problem of morality, a problem concerned with moral rules, with the construction of a space in which moral virtues may be practised. Thus it concerns the limitations placed on the space left free to experience that passion that exceeds the limits of what a reasonable being may wish for themselves and for the communities that such a being inhabits.

Mastering the masters

For Kant and his contemporaries, the paradox is the paradox of power. Hobbes expounds a theory that is emblematic of power in the seventeenth century. *Leviathan* puts forward the idea that, since, in the state of nature, individuals may freely harm each other, it is desirable to have a sovereign power that might punish the excesses of individuals. According to Hobbes's hypothesis, this sovereign power would be exempt from the sway of the passions providing that it was guaranteed that the sovereign himself would not be threatened: the more just and impartial the sovereign power, the less would his power be disputed and the surer he will be of being allowed to continue in his role: the sovereign's own interest will lead him in the direction of equitable behaviour. Such a mechanism, deliberately artificial, takes no account of the actual behaviour of sovereign powers. The political theories of the eighteenth century were all to try their hands at proposing alternatives to Hobbes' thesis. Montesquieu nevertheless retains some part of it when

⁴ Charles Irénée Castel, Abbé de Saint-Pierre (1658-1743), author of *Projet de paix perpétuelle* (1713), in which he proposes that European monarchs should unite to form a joint parliament and court of law.

he writes that "only power can check power". And yet, this thesis, widely shared by his contemporaries, sounds the death-knell for any notion of the neutrality of power. Any sovereign who held all power and who was limited by no other power, far from showing himself to be just, as Hobbes proposes, may turn out to be completely ruled by boundless passions. Since power is given to him without restriction, he is therefore free to use it in whatever way suits him.

Kant regards this notion as axiomatic: indeed, he regards sovereigns or heads of state as being those in whom the passions are expressed with the least degree of restraint, and that this is the case no matter what the political regime. The defining characteristic of power is that it corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely: "Absolute power corrupts absolutely because it is in the nature of power to incite the passions to be unleashed...", says Kant. Consequently the political thinking of the seventeenth century is totally invalidated by this anthropological hypothesis according to which power, far from reassuring those who wield it, drives them mad, makes them incapable of controlling themselves. As a result, peace is made more impossible than ever. The institutions supposed to govern peace and war are no better than the men who represent them.

Kant wonders therefore how to ensure that those men who assume power are controlled automatically by institutions from which they cannot free themselves. This is a total reversal of Hobbes's system: it is not a matter of controlling the citizens who are in a state of nature by setting up some superior power, but controlling those who hold power by enclosing them in a network of rules from which they would be unable to escape. Such is the paradoxical model proposed by Kant for establishing everlasting peace between nations. His aim is not initially concerned with diplomacy or international relations; it is rather to create sufficiently powerful legal bonds between nations as to make it quite impossible for any one head of state to free himself from them. If we make heads of state slaves to the rules, then we will be giving peace a chance. This may be a utopian project, but it is one that we can date with precision.

Kant's text dates from 1795 and was immediately sent to Sieyès, who was then a member of the Directory in Paris.⁵ The model of society that Kant had in mind, even though he called it a "Republic", corresponds to the type of regime which, in France, took the form of the Directory and, to some extent, corresponds also to the constitutional monarchy of the post-Napoleonic period.⁶ It is a regime in which the elites govern, in theory under strict controls that they are supposed to apply to themselves, in particular in the context of relations between states.

⁵ Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (1748-1836), author of *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état ?*, supporter of Napoléon Bonaparte and a consul.

⁶ 1815-1848 under Louis XVIII and Louis-Philippe I.

Diplomacy and the rules that bind states were intended to be the principal means of regulating human passions and ensuring that relations were kept peaceful within each state.

The political structure that most closely resembles what Kant had in mind is not, contrary to what is often claimed, the system represented by the United Nations or the League of Nations, but rather the structure that is being built within the European Union. The processes that supposedly involve the ceding of sovereignty by each state would have been considered by Kant to be precisely such automatic regulators, something that would prevent the national parliaments of each of the countries from promulgating, in the name of popular sovereignty, rules infringing the rights of the citizens. Consider what has happened in Austria over the last two or three years and how, in the end, European public law carried the day against hate-filled political passions. One might be inclined to conclude that things are going in the right direction.

This Kantian model, utopian though it may be, is perhaps not without its concrete applications. In its own day, the 1795 Directory did not last: the armed alliances of the European military powers, fighting against the contagion of revolution and Napoleon's imperial seizure of the Revolution's heritage, set Europe back on the path of wars between nations – based on nationalism, sovereignty, the state and, in the end, on the omnipotence of those heads of state that Kant considered to be excessively slaves to their passions.

Universalization or globalization?

The Kantian regime was never, in the end, applied in eighteenth-century Europe. The alternative finally emerged as the choice between a philosophy of history that endows history with a glorious end, provided that men are heroic (the view of Fichte, Hegel, and, in part, Marx) and a system of thought based on regulations, which nowadays takes the form of what is called globalization. The first choice, the Hegelian philosophy of history, thinks in terms of universalization and claims that this will happen once states are capable of setting up a legal framework for sovereignty, of creating institutions, even through wars, or else – and this is the Marxist hypothesis – when the proletariat throws off the chains imposed on it by labour, the conditions for which it has not chosen and whose rules it has no control over. This is the idea of universalization in the name of history. Faced with the hypothesis requiring that humanity makes some sort of leap that would enable it to escape the contradictions of present-day history and to think in terms of universalization, so as to establish a regime based on peace (how many wars would it take to establish such a regime?), the alternative is globalization. This means the abolition of frontiers, the abolition of nations. In the nineteenth century, talk was of "free trade", which is not necessarily the same thing as political liberalism. Free trade and globalization take the view that history must be brought to an end precisely because history is the history of violence: to

bring history to an end is to create a world without frontiers, a world that rejects historical time and is regulated at its foundations by automatic processes. Economic regulation would replace historical will. One might point out here that universalization and globalization, when defined in this way (there are other possible definitions), have two opposing senses: universalization is on the side of history, globalization is on the side of the end of history. If that is the case, we would have to say that universalization, as willed by history, does indeed present a problem: it has to accept violence. There is a violence of history, a tragedy of history that historical philosophies have to accept. But, on the side of globalization, of free trade, there is a negation of violence: relations based on free trade are supposed to be peaceable; violence becomes entirely the province of individuals who have no particular means of saying anything about it at all. Each individual accepts as best he can the situation that the market-places impose on him; the existence of each individual is thrown back upon his own competence in the global market-place where abilities are exchanged and given value. On that basis, there is no longer any place for suffering or violence in such a theory.

Globalization, however, conceals violent relations and makes the suffering of individuals incomprehensible. Note, for example, how in societies which themselves claim to have eradicated violence, it springs up again in the form of suicide, schoolchildren attacking each other with firearms, fantasy violence played out by everyone in the form of television serials – which may be popular worldwide, but are also an indication of our collective neuroses. Transformation into unreality is the rule; everyone sees their everyday problems removed, problems that, in this regime of globalization and the rejection of historical expression, become inexpressible. And if one can say that the period for philosophies of history was the high point of novel-writing – Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is both historical novel and a novel of personal destinies, Dickens explores in reverse the mute solitude of individuals dependent only upon themselves – one can see how the contemporary reduction of the novel form reverts to the abolition of the individual's tragic status, or the status where the individual actually has meaning. Of course, the *telenovela* is no kind of substitute for the kind of novel that can give meaning to the individual's unique experience, even if, for a century now, the cinema has been extending its narrative formulation.

We have gone back to another "Directory", made up of international institutions, the United Nations, G8, the WTO and other organizations, which, from the point of view of free trade, are analogous with what the Directory might have been in around 1795. We do not know whether the apparent pacification in international relations has, as its downside, greater suffering on the part of individuals and, taking things to extremes, a general condemnation of all those peoples in the world who do not possess something that they can defend: a skill, a raw material, an economic system in which they can turn to good account the unique character of whatever they can offer to

the global market. Our "Directory" is a period in which the principal violence committed within humanity lies in the economic decree by which at least one-third of the world's population may be considered useless in terms of the collective existence of all the rest. The sufferings of those that have nothing are written off by the very system by which the world is governed. If this really is the case, then we are in a very serious situation indeed.

It means that all those humanist convictions to which Europeans have conceived within their philosophical systems, in their criticism of wars, of colonial slavery or of acts of genocide, are demolished by the practices that have flowed from them. What meaning can free will and the desire to do good have if everyone is assigned their place by a global system that, in the final analysis, only allows the individual the freedom to sacrifice himself but not the ability to transform the conditions of real life in the environment that he inhabits? What meaning can progress or civilization have if such progress and such civilization simply turn out to be the subjection of all to the development of technologies that no one can control? What meaning can peace have if peace just means the denial of the aspirations of all those who possess no arms with which to make their wishes heard?

The question that then arises is that of the link that may still be forged between singular and collective existence. Can I, as an individual subject, possessed of intentionality, still recognize myself in collectives that could, by their own power, as Rousseau wished and as Kant believed, wield an influence on the society in which they exist such as to move it in the direction of a better application of human reason in the social, economic and cultural environment? The characteristic of modern wars is to make clear to each individual his own impotence. The ideological purpose of modern-day wars is not merely to destroy equipment or people, it is also, even in countries currently at peace, to indicate to each individual that it is useless to resist. This is a basic premise, and its paradoxical consequence is that the problem of war in its relation to history is not, despite what the media may claim, the problem of international warfare but rather of what may be called "civil war".

Violence and morality

Fundamental reflections on these questions were produced soon after World War II. Jean-Paul Sartre, in a work that he wrote just after the war ended, expresses that when it comes to violence, it is not the end that justifies the means but the means that justify the end. It does this by conferring on the end, by means of violence, an absolute value. Since any action is

simultaneously a value, violence contains its own justification; that is, by its very existence, violence demands the right to violence:

Violence is thus Manichean, believing as it does in a world order that is given but disguised by evil intention. All you have to do is to destroy the obstacle and order will reappear. This ranges from anti-Semitism, which will reveal the order in the world by destroying the Jews, to Surrealism, which will cause the surreal to appear on the horizon of destruction. Thus violence implies confidence in good but, instead of thinking of good as something to be created, thinks of it as something to liberate. Paradoxically, therefore, violence emerges as absolute morality. It is in the name of a rule that the violent man of course believes that he is within his rights in inflicting on another the proposition that a world order must emerge from violence, even in the name of a justification that need not justify itself. The deed creates the right.⁷

What is the violent man for Sartre?

He wants others to see him as an element so that his biological singularity and his weaknesses are not revealed. Terms such as "pitiless" or "implacable" are often to be found in the discourse of the violent man; as much as being meant to inspire fear, they are for him precautions against himself and rituals intended to give an acceptable image of himself to the other. Thus pure violence and pure right are one and the same. If I am sure I am in the right, then I refuse to discuss, to compromise; I resort to force, I call the police or I hit out. All violence appears as recovery of one's right and, inversely, any right that is uncompromisingly maintained is violence in embryo. Thus doubt is at the heart of any reduction in violence. To assert one's rights is perhaps the seed of violence precisely because it takes no account of doubt.⁸

So, at the extreme of doubt, we have the postulations that Sartre examined and that, as always, he examined in relation to actual cases – no general rule, but rather historical situations. For Sartre, the individual situation is worked out through biography, since it is biography that brings together the generality of the situation of each of us with the singularity of an experience. Sartre deals with the question of violence in his biography of Genet. Let us quote a few sentences:

He discovers that this desire for nothingness was disguising recourse to being and therefore to optimism and therefore to good. Thus he wished to transform the greatest possible proportion of being into nothingness but, since his act is a fulfilment, it turns out at the same time that nothingness is transformed into being and that the supremacy of the evil man is enslaved. As long as it remains at the stage of solitary rumination, experience of evil is a dazzling cogito that reveals to our consciousness its singularity in the face of being. I wish to be a monster, a hurricane, all

⁷ Sartre, J.-P., *Cahiers pour une morale*, Paris: Gallimard 1983, 182. This and all subsequent quotes trans. M.R.

⁸ *ibid.*, 184.

that is human is foreign to me. I transgress all laws drawn up by men, I trample on all values. Nothing that is can define or limit me, and yet I exist, I will be the icy blast that exterminates all life.⁹

In short, one can see the lyricism of violence as an absolute imagined world, that limitless imagined world linked to power – given that the most absolute form of power is obviously that of the imagination. Imagination goes beyond the idea of boundless passion for power that Kant speaks of.

I look with irony upon the imperatives of the collective, outside myself and even within myself; I see where education has laid them down. They are there, but they no longer affect me. I have placed the world in parentheses; being is illuminated by the dark light of non-being, and the universal by the light of exception. Crime is a miracle; it will render legality superfluous, the wondrous, dizzying freedom of the evil man; it is terror.¹⁰

Sartre continues:

I commit the crime. At a stroke, this whole phantasmagoria bursts like a bubble. I am once more a being amongst other beings. By killing I have given to myself a nature. And this nature is the end of everything: there is no longer the imagined world of violence and in its place there is an interplay of pressure and repression that transforms the individual into a statistical unit in a society that controls violence and passes laws against it.¹¹

The point that I want to establish is that, whilst it may not be possible to put forward a general rule or ontology of violence, which is always singular, that does not mean that one cannot study it, that one cannot analyse it: Sartre tried to do so in his *Critique de la raison dialectique*, which attempts to understand the question by using that same example of Directory-style societies. What he deals with is the power of the Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution. Regulation of violence is that impossible yardstick in terms of which societies must justify their own institutional existence. The problem arises from the fact that automatic regulation by economic factors, by law or by compulsion, is incapable of comprehending that psychological status of the individuals without whom these societies could have no future. Individuals, says Sartre, interiorize the demands of the material and then re-exteriorize these demands as those of man. He even goes so far as to say that, in the end, everyone, each of us, by acquiring a skill or an education, have transformed ourselves into a demand¹² inherent in society, a demand for that skill that we have made part of ourselves. In whatever way seems to us the most appropriate,

⁹ Sartre, J.-P., *Saint-Genet, comédien et martyr*, Paris: Gallimard 1952, 265-266.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² "*Exigence*", which for Sartre refers to a structural imperative to which we submit our will as we would not in recognizing a categorical imperative.

ultimately all we really do is act as the spokesman of the forces that motivate us, without being aware of what are, in part, historical forces, and therefore forces that are man-made. This is what Sartre means by the term *contre-finalités* (conflicting purposes).

Any reflection on violence and history has to take seriously historical singularity and not reduce it to euphemistic forms of generality; it has to understand how, through each of these singular experiences, there appears what philosophers call an analogon. We can conceive of our own situation through comparisons or analogies and put ourselves into a situation instead of, in the place of, another, as if we ourselves had to commit violence or undergo it. The exercise of imagined history is probably one of the best antidotes to violence – if it is not naivety itself that causes the intellectual to speak of his faith in culture. This idea is based on the fact that mental changes are the very impulse behind the ability to speak, the ability to exchange, because experiences will be compared, one to another, and will give rise to new discourses and to a new temporality. Temporality is thus created between humans; its basis is not of a biological kind, nor of a natural kind, but is a temporality of discourse and indeed has its origin, if origin it must have, in reflection upon history, in comparison of social and historical situations that each of us may experience by exercise of the imagination. There is a whole reflection on violence that can, I believe, be continued on the basis of the hypotheses developed in Kant and in Sartre, and that constitute a small part of our European rationalist heritage.