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War and Violence

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War and Violence

I would like to address the relationship between war and violence. In my opinion, it is insufficient to speak about violence alone. The forms of violence – sexual violence, racial violence, the violence of exploitation – are a continuation of war by other means, as Clausewitz would say. However, before getting into this question, I will first have to introduce a particular type of war, that is, the war of subjugation.

One didn't have to be Lenin to understand that globalization, the monopolies, the oligopolies, and the hegemony of finance capital were going to once more drive us into an alternative between war and revolution, socialism or barbarism. War is certain, while revolution, given the state of contemporary political movements, presents itself as highly improbable.

The same situation occurred last century. The ways leading there may be different, yet the collapse of contemporary finance capital, saved by state intervention, the fragmentation and balkanization of globalization, the growing concentration of economic and political power to confront the difficulties of global finance and the global market, have produced similar results. In technical terms, war – the current war – represents a “catastrophe”;

that is, a “change of state”. We cannot predict what will happen, but what is certain is that the old world, the one we’ve known for the past fifty years, is collapsing. (In fact, it already collapsed some time ago!)

The roots of and reasons for the war in Ukraine lie in these processes and not in autocracy or the folly of a few individuals (like Putin). Everything will be decided among the great state machines, unlike what happened during the First World War when, thanks to the initiative of the Bolsheviks, revolution was established as a decisive actor in changes to the global order and in this way disrupted the plans of warring imperialisms to divide up the world. To the revolutionaries of the first half of the 20th century, capitalism was inconceivable without wars between states, without civil wars against the proletariat, without wars of conquest. This great political realism allowed them, unlike the consternation and disarray of our era, not to be taken by surprise and caught off guard by the start of the Great War.

What we lack is a class perspective on the relationship between capitalism, state, and war. It’s a matter of reconstructing it and drawing as well on the revolutionaries who, in the 20th century, waged and were subjected to war.

The War of Conquest and Subjugation

I would first like to talk about a particular kind of war, that is, the war of conquest or subjugation. Contrary to what economists, even Marxists, think, economic cycles start with wars of conquest and subjugation and end with wars between states (or revolution). This is certainly true of neoliberalism, but it was also true of classical liberalism. The former, neoliberalism, was supposed to overcome the contradictions of the latter which had led straight into the catastrophes of the first half of the 20th century. Instead, however, neoliberalism followed servilely in the footsteps of its predecessor; fanning the flames of various modes of internal civil war and war between imperialisms.

In capitalism, production, whether material or immaterial, affective or desiring, cognitive or neuronal, always presupposes the extra-economic, extra-affective, extra-cognitive production of social classes. This is a point of fundamental importance: for production, there must be class; and to produce class, there must be a war of subjugation.

Before producing goods, one must take, appropriate, expropriate by state force lands, populations,

bodies, means of production, resources – and divide up what has been taken. Historically, capitalism is born of a triple conquest: the conquest of land and peasants in Europe; the conquest of women (the witch hunt is the sign of their subjugation and of the expropriation of their knowledge); and the conquest of “unoccupied lands” of the New World, the conquest of indigenous people transformed into colonized people, and Africans reduced to slaves. Without these wars aiming at the conquest of bodies, which divides conquerors and conquered into property owners and non-property owners, no production could take place. Before talking about production, we therefore have to talk about class struggle. Class struggle precedes production.

The expropriation of lands and the means of production is accompanied by the expropriation of the knowledges, sensibilities and affections of the community. The war of conquest is also a cultural apocalypse, the “end of the world” of the vanquished people. These two operations must be repeated at the beginning of each cycle of accumulation. Thus, they occur not only at the time of primitive or original accumulation, however you say it in English, but at the beginning of each cycle of accumulation. This was also the case with the neoliberal cycle, with the civil wars in Latin America.

The current political impotence is a direct consequence of the exclusion of war from political theory which, in turn, is the result of another exclusion, that of class struggle. And this concerns all the different concepts of “production” which, since the 1960s, enriched, expanded, challenged, and attempted to go beyond Marxist theory: the libidinal economy (Lyotard), the economy of affects (Klossowski), the discourse of the capitalist (Lacan), desiring production (Deleuze and Guattari), the biopolitical (Foucault).

All of these theories seem to take us one step forward in relation to Marxist theory, because capitalism also functions with desires and affects and because it is precisely desires and affects which heavily contribute to creating revolutionary ruptures. However, politically, they take us two steps backwards because, in the end, they have contributed to pacifying capitalism by separating it from war and class struggle.

Contemporary elaborations of the immaterial, cognitive, neuronal, informational production, of the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière), continue this work of depoliticization, which removes the conquering and warring nature of the state-capital machine. We could say the same thing about those feminisms which analyze violence but not war. The cartography of forms of

exploitation and domination was considerably broadened and specified in comparison with Marxism, in the 1960s and 1970s, whereas war is not a problematized subject and consequently the debate over “force” is not addressed, except as forms of self-defence.

In reality, however, the concept of war can also be found in certain feminisms, specifically in relation to the war of conquest, which we are discussing here. French materialist feminism and Silvia Federici accord a central place to the question of conquest and subjugation: women are objects of appropriation by men in the same way that workers and slaves were “captured” by the war of conquest and primitive accumulation. Federici talks about the “war against women” as an original act of appropriation that must be repeated at the beginning of each new phase of accumulation.

Verónica Gago tries to expand the significance of the concept of war beyond primitive accumulation by showing that – once victory over women, workers and colonized people is achieved – this war of conquest continues through a multiplicity of forms of violence that it is not sufficient to quantify or categorize, because it refers to a strategy of class and war. “The notion of war emphasizes a dynamic of forces in conflict”, writes Gago, rather than focusing on “the pathologies of bad men”;

it avoids discourses about “crimes of passion” predicated on an “individualist psychology”. Thus, attempts to move from a discussion of violence to a consideration of war can also be found in feminism.

We have to keep in mind that capitalism presupposes what Foucault seems to deny: that is, a domination imposed by force which is designed to determine the oppositions, polarizations, dualisms in labour, race and gender. Capitalism begins with the affirmation of dualism. The concept of power developed by Foucault refuses to depart from the real conditions of capitalism – that is, “a massive and primal condition of domination, a binary structure with ‘dominators’ on one side and ‘dominated’ on the other” – and privileges instead a “multiform production of relations of domination” or the codification of multiple “relations of power”. But capitalism does not start like that. It starts with a war of conquest.

The divisions between property owners and non-property owners, the domination of men over women, of whites over non-whites, are not the result of production, but are presupposed by it. They do not come after, they come before production. Subsequently, these dualisms – as original dualisms – are intensified or weakened according to the development of power relations. But they remain what is at stake: capitalism necessarily

reproduces them, and the dominated must explode them, starting from the multiplicity constituted by the classes of workers, women and colonized people. We must therefore expand the concept of war of conquest and subjugation.

The conquest of the body, which I just referred to, is articulated at the level of the global market; and it is, through the conquest of America, produced and stabilized in different ways in the North and in the South (a very important fact that the above-mentioned theories, due to their eurocentrism, do not properly take into account). In the North, the consolidation of the conquerors' power mobilized the law, wages, consumption, and all the instruments that the theories of the 1960s and 1970s focused on – affection, desire, enjoyment, etc. – with a view to integrating the vanquished. In the South, on the other hand, over the institutionalization of labour, integration through welfare, action through the affects and the “enjoyment” of consumption the preference was given to colonial violence, governmentality through racism and permanent civil war.

This differential violence between North and South, between centre and periphery, arising from the wars of conquest since 1492, constitutes the second political condition of production. Thus, we have dualism as the first

condition. The second condition is that these dualisms are produced at a global level, with a difference between North and South. Moreover, we still need to discuss a third condition which makes production possible.

The third condition is represented by what the aforementioned theories (Klossowski, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, Lacan, etc.) do not say: subjectivities can only be mobilized, norms of power can only be internalized, affects can only be effectively involved, once the war of conquest has produced a separation between victors and vanquished. That is, subjectivity can only be mobilized and integrated into society, because it has been conquered in the first place. The governmentality that continues the war of conquest by other means can only act on subjectivity after having defeated the latter, thus realizing Thatcher's programme: economics are the method, the object is to capture the individual's soul. After conquering the body by force, the soul must be conquered by mobilizing the affections.

So, in the beginning there is always civil war, the war of conquest. Afterwards, there can be governmentality and integration. However, it is war which must determine who are the victors and who the vanquished, who are property owners and who are not property owners. Otherwise, production cannot start.

No form of economic, sexual and racial normalization can be established in a situation characterized by a high level of class struggle. A preventive normalization, both political and subjective, is necessary, whereby recourse to violence and civil war varies according to the circumstances. Consequently, at first war is required, the norm comes after. That is, the norms of Foucault can only be explained afterwards. It is only under these conditions that norms and affects can act on individuals, shape them, construct them, subject them. The productive norm, like the legal norm, is not applicable to “chaos”. It is not applicable to the class struggle as such. It presupposes “a normality in the structuring of the life relations”. This normality is not an “external presupposition that we can ignore; on the contrary, it directly concerns its immediate effectiveness”.

The necessity to conquer subjectivity in order to be able to normalize a situation, to produce norms, laws, affects, a legal system, crystallized even in my own experience: the 70s wasn't a time when the category of self-entrepreneurial human capital could be imposed; it didn't matter at all, we were having a revolution. Besides, we know what happened in Latin America, right? It's only after the revolution had been defeated that these categories could be imposed.

These three conditions – the binary division between dominant and dominated, the articulation of such divisions at the level of the global market, and normalization by force – precede the normalization by norms and affects. Consequently, they are found at the beginning of each cycle of accumulation.

Violence, War and Revolution

The normalization of power established by governmentality is a continuation of the war of subjugation by other means. Thus, the normality in which we live – governmentality – is the continuation of war by other means, according to the definition by Clausewitz (broadly used in the 20th century). However, once the power of the victors has been consolidated and stabilized, the mere stimulation of desires, passions, drives through production and consumption, various regulatory mechanisms, and disciplinary or biopolitical techniques is not enough to govern the vanquished, because exploitation, sexual and racial domination can always feed revolt and class struggle. It is therefore necessary to have other techniques, which I am now going to talk about. And these techniques include violence.

Governmentality must necessarily be accompanied by the transformation of the use of force as deployed during conquest into a panoply of forms of violence over the vanquished. The armed force that characterized the conquest is in fact transformed into a whole series of forms of violence: sexual violence, violence of exploitation, police violence, carceral violence, the impersonal violence of financial expropriation, racial violence, violence

against migrants, violence of poverty, violence of all hierarchical relations. Violence is the individualization of the war of conquest. It is not only its continuation, but its individualization.

In times of “peace”, the state delegates violence not only to the police but to a series of social groups which use it every day to defend property, class division, white supremacy and male supremacy. The reproduction of power relations is not only carried out by institutional mechanisms or through work, welfare, citizenship, but also through forms of personal power, because the work of pacification must permeate the smallest folds of society. Power is not only impersonal: it continues to take these personal forms, which capitalism is normally considered to have left behind. But this isn’t true: alongside impersonal forms, there are personal ways to exercise power.

The system of machines in the factory needs the “despotic” violence of the boss to make it work. Alone, no automatism would have the force to impose itself. The appropriation of women, transformed into “habituation” to heterosexuality (another type of automatism), requires the daily violence of men on women to reproduce the relation of subordination. White supremacy requires continual exercise of rejection, insult,

suspicion, and murder, without making any difference between who exercises it, police or community members (as America, or rather the Americas, demonstrate in an exemplary manner). Despite the action of production, money, welfare, and law, class division is not reproduced without a load of personal violence overseen by the police. Without this personal, generalized, omnipresent violence, the mechanisms of subjugation would not produce docile bodies.

There has never been preservation of life for everyone (Hobbes), nor an increase in life-power for the entire population (Foucault), nor the protection of the lives of citizens without discrimination. Lives are selected according to divisions of class, sex and race. Some lives deserve to be preserved, others are sacrificed; some lives must be protected, others exposed to violence.

The individualization to which conquered people are subjected (to become individual subjects) is primarily an individualization of war, which becomes an invisible form of violence precisely because it is individualized. Violence happens between one individual and another and has an every-day look; it is local, appears as familiar. It does not have the spectacular character of war, even though it is nothing but the transformation of war.

To understand the relation between war and violence, I will introduce some reflections on media violence that can be found in the work of Frantz Fanon. It is very interesting to see how Fanon thinks about the relationship between war and violence; in my view, even though he refers to a colonial situation, his reflections provide a model for thinking about the relation between war and violence. Fanon wrote this about Algeria and it's a magnificent base for understanding how media functions – and more specifically, for understanding media violence during the Algerian war against French colonialism.

Frantz Fanon tells us that, to struggle against the every-day use of violence, the latter must be recognized as the individualization of the war of subjugation; that is, it must be politicized as an expression of (white and racialized) class violence. Violence is the transformation of the force of appropriating bodies into an individualized exercise of domination. The political task is to transform the violence suffered individually into a collective political force and to use it offensively. (Not just to defend oneself: obviously self-defense is important, but here it is about attacking.) Among the forms of violence which affect subjectivity, Fanon names semantic violence, violence of the mediatized word, and the psychic violence of affects produced by the French “colonial radio” through

orders, threats, insults, which are felt by the colonized population in Algeria and hence act on the souls of the subjugated indigenous people.

The action of speech on minorities (addressed in a racist or sexist manner) is at the center of a more recent debate, wherein it is defined as “injurious speech”, as “racist, sexist, homophobic hate speech”, which does not merely describe, but tries to establish through speech what the hate speech expresses. Thus, it is about performative speech. “The body is alternately sustained and threatened through modes of address”, writes Judith Butler. Even this I find a bit limited, however, in comparison to the revolutionary significance and the revolutionary rupture we find in Fanon. So I’ll quickly review how this violence works according to Fanon.

The French landed in Algeria in 1830 with 150,000 soldiers and conquered it by defeating the Algerians. After the conquest of the body through arms, the colonizers wanted to continue with the conquest of the soul. After their “peace” had been imposed, radio (broadcast by the French station *Radio-Alger*) played an integral part in the French colonizers’ strategies of subjugation. In the colony, writes Fanon, “the social dichotomy reached an incomparable intensity” to the point that the voice of the radio became the “voice of the oppressor, the voice of the

enemy”. It was a form of violence experienced individually, a violence that each person suffered on their own. Every French word received via the radio was experienced as an order, a threat, or an insult.

The radio, its affections or, in Fanon’s words, “sensorial powers” as well as its “intellectual powers” were objects of refusal in Algeria: “The speech delivered is not received, deciphered, understood, but rejected.” But this refusal was at first passive, it did not aim at overturning the general power relations: “there was no organized resistance”, writes Fanon. The rejection of the radio and its information was not the expression of an “explicit, organized, and motivated resistance”; it remained an individual refusal. And it is here that we encounter the relation between the violence of speech and the individual, which presents itself as a relation of individual violence.

The affects and the violence of the radio on subjectivity stand out strongly when analyzed from a psycho-pathological perspective, which Fanon did because he was a psychiatrist: “The monographs written on Algerians suffering from hallucinations constantly pointed out the presence in the so-called external-action phase of highly aggressive and hostile radio voices. These metallic, cutting, insulting, disagreeable voices all have for ‘the Algerian’ an accusing, inquisitorial character.”

The conquered subjectivity is never reduced to “voluntary servitude”. Even though conquered, this subjectivity resists in fact from the very first day – in the double form of simultaneous subjugation and refusal, yet ready to be socialized once the “desire” for liberation finds, in an extra-legal perspective, the force to overturn the victors’ order. There is voluntary subjugation only because we don’t arrive at collective action and don’t manage to overthrow the enemy. Fanon explains, and this is the interesting thing, when and how a mutation takes place that is directed against these individual forms of violence.

A “true mutation” took place on November 1st, 1954, with the first call by the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) to the Algerian people, which marked the beginning of the war of independence; and later, in 1956, with the start of radio programmes by the liberation army, that is, the radio of the civil war against colonialism (*La voix de l’Algérie libre*). “Challenging the very principle of foreign domination brings about essential mutations in the consciousness of the colonized, in the manner in which he perceives the colonizer, in his human status in the world”, writes Fanon. – Thus, it was the declaration of war that would change subjectivity: changes in subjectivity cannot occur individually, they take place in the moment of a political rupture.

I don't know if the declaration of war falls into the category of the performative, from which one attempts to develop a critique of "injurious words" and "insulting speech". I doubt it. On the contrary, I am sure that it was the event of a collective declaration which cut history in two, so as to create a before and after November 1st, 1954. The political subject did not pre-exist this rupture, it was constituted within it. The "subjective mutation" emerges from political practices and apparatuses that are strategic: because they designate the enemy, because they politicize its violence as class violence, because they make it visible as a form of colonial war, and because they demonstrate how to fight it. Emancipation from the personal, daily, and omnipresent violence of the colonizer cannot be limited to self-defence but necessarily involves the "expropriation of the expropriators" (Marx), that is, overturning the result of the war of subjugation. The war of conquest must be overthrown so as to allow for a subjective rupture, for subjectivity to change.

Organized resistance impedes and reverses the functioning of "individual" colonial violence. In revolutionary war, colonized persons become a collective subject, even if, at an individual level, they do not directly participate in political organization; because the radio includes them

in “a community in act” in which they feel as an “actor”, as Fanon says. The reception of information is no longer personal, no longer happens in isolation and fear, but takes places within a “community”, a “social body” in which the listener is an active participant. “The ‘truth’ of the oppressor, formerly rejected as an absolute lie, is now countered by another, an acted truth”, to once more use Fanon’s words. Another truth must be opposed to the truth of power. And to become a “partisan” of information, we need a political rupture and a political machine which not only divides information but society.

Fanon also observes a radical change from a psychopathological point of view, that is, a transformation of individual subjectivity that is brought about by the rupture introduced by the declaration of war. In hallucinatory psychosis, “the radio voices become protective, become accomplices” after the radio of the civil war starts broadcasting. “Insults and accusations disappear and give way to words of encouragement.” Thus, the voices are received very differently after the political rupture, the general political rupture. Fanon attributes many of these violence-produced pathologies not to the technical machine of the radio, but to the war machine of colonialism; and he works to build a revolutionary organization, to which he entrusts the task, if not of psychopathological

healing, at least of modifying the environment to make it favourable to the positive evolution of the wounded psyche. For with the radio of the civil war, writes Fanon, “every Algerian feels himself to be called upon and wants to become a reverberating element of the vast network of meanings born of the liberating combat”.

To conclude: the transition from the experience of individual, “micro-political”, violence to the dimension of collective organization produces the conditions for a subjective mutation because it makes it possible to attack, to take initiative, to decide the terrain of confrontation, breaking the time of individual subjugation, of solely defensive practices, pushing fear into the enemy’s camp.

I think this is fundamental: to move towards attacking, to not only remain on the defensive. It’s something we have completely forgotten. But in order to attack, we need conditions different from the ones we have today. Even so, it’s at that moment that we will choose the terrain of confrontation. Now we are fighting on a terrain of confrontation imposed on us, and on which we don’t even manage to defend ourselves: we only ever lose, for fifty years we have only ever lost. Defense or self-defense is only one of the practicable forms of struggle. The colonized Algerians no longer heard the hassling and threatening voices from the French radio, because there was a real possibility of turning subjugation into political subjectivation through collective practices and strategies.

The normalization we face today is catastrophic, because it not only produces violence but also the belief

in governmentality as organization of the equilibrium (homeostasis, as Foucault says) between autonomy and the control of economic subjects, between economic imperatives and the capacity to live a fruitful life, between the autonomization of subjects and their consent. This equilibrium, in its claim to be something more than just precarious and temporary, is an ideology that power self-complacently continues to talk about, because, on the contrary, it is necessarily destined to explode. There is no possible equilibrium in capitalism; all there is, are forms of disequilibrium. As far as Foucault is concerned, once he had abandoned the civil war of appropriation and subjugation of bodies through which the classes were formed, he no longer had the means to understand the impossibility of this equilibrium. It is this impossibility, however, that has led us into the current war.

The war of conquest of women, workers and slaves imposes a disequilibrium between property owners and non-property owners, between dominant and dominated, which the ensuing production can only amplify and not fill. In disregard of any equilibrium between the multiplicity of centers of power, disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms, neoliberalism has made class differences, racism, and sexism explode, resuscitating

fascism and turning the “tolerance of minorities” formulated in Foucault’s *Birth of Biopolitics* into a rage against the poor, the losers, the under-performers, all minorities. What we encounter at this point, are insurmountable contradictions which – sooner or later – cannot but lead to war, as the revolutionaries knew very well.

It is therefore a matter of once again raising the question concerning the relation between violence and war. And it is of fundamental importance, in this context, to re-introduce discourses on war, including into existing discourses on violence suffered individually: sexual violence, racial violence, violence of exploitation, all kinds of violence. There is a lot of work to do.

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* Editors’ note: the references have been provided by the translator.

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