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Editorial

Is it better to suffer violence than to exert it? regarding a dualism embedded in culture

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In "The Flight to God," one of the stories that compose "Great Moments of Humanity," Stefan Zweig (2002) allows himself to use fiction to give an epilogue to an unfinished drama by Leo Tolstoy and represent the last days of the Russian writer when he finally leaves his home after more than twenty-five years of a painful inner crisis. In the plot created by Zweig, one of the turning points that drives Tolstoy to make this drastic decision is the visit of two students who came to him on behalf of the revolutionary youth of Russia to question him about his apparent indifference to the revolution, because, for them, it was incomprehensible that the author whose works had inspired them to fight against injustice chose to remain on the sidelines of the revolutionary process.

Although a single word from Tolstoy was enough to mobilize an entire army, he always preferred to step aside and remain silent. For the young people in the story, this reluctance was nothing more than a way to endorse the violence that sustained the status quo. Tolstoy, however, held a completely contrary opinion, arguing that violence could not be the means to create a new social order; for him, when violence presented itself as the only possible recourse, it was "a hundred thousand times better to suffer with conviction than to kill for it" (Zweig, 2002, p. 215). Although this position caused him multiple internal conflicts, Tolstoy (both the historical figure and the fictional one) always chose writing as his critical weapon against tsarist Russia, bureaucracy, the nobility, and even the Church; therefore, until the end of his days, he was a fervent advocate of nonviolent resistance and never intervened in rebellion.

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The debate between Tolstoy and the young students allows us to glimpse a dichotomous logic that is indeed deeply rooted in our culture: in the realm of violence, one is either an agent or a patient, one exerts it or suffers it, but there is no beyond it. If within the circle of violence there is no alternative other than to strike or be struck, then was the students' demand valid? Is violence the only possible response to oppression and injustice? Is it the only way the oppressed can overcome their situation by becoming oppressors? Tolstoy himself was troubled by these doubts.

Some political positions defend the "just" use of violence by arguing that many individuals and social groups already permanently inhabit the realm of violence. Within this conception, some may wonder whether it is preferable to act with or without violence, revealing a privilege not everyone has. Thus, violent struggle becomes the legitimate response of those who are already subjected to violence, expressing their right to persist in the world (Butler, 2020). However, this perspective becomes trapped within the instrumentalist framework of ends and means, as Walter Benjamin (2001) shed much light upon in his famous essay "Critique of Violence." As a means, Benjamin tells us (p. 32), violence is always either law-making or law-preserving; in its law-making function, it promises to be the appropriate tool to overthrow a certain order and establish a new one, which leads to the Law doing everything possible to manage it, as the State itself fears that this law-making violence may annul its authority. However, proponents of this perspective often forget, as Benjamin pointed out, that "from a contractual right, there never follows a resolution of conflicts without recourse to violence" (p. 33). When violence is at the foundation of a State, an institution, or a certain social order, it always remains as a latent force destined to ensure and preserve the power from which it originated and which it itself established.

The question of violence as "legitimate defense" becomes even more complex when we consider, as Judith Butler (2020) notes, that violence is always interpreted within very diverse frames of meaning (p. 29). What is labeled as violent usually arises within specific frameworks (such as the State, for example), and justifications are established therein to "defend" against that perceived violence. In some cases, certain privileged groups holding power can legitimize their violence as defense by perceiving the other as a threat to their privileges, even when that other has done nothing against them. Moreover, when it is disproportionately established that some lives are more worthy of being valued than others (Butler, 2020) and the humanity of certain individuals is questioned, classifying them as dispensable and relegating them to the realm of non-being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007), an inequality is created that defines what is considered violence or not, depending on who the recipient of it is.

With this, it is not very clear when the violence exercised in the name of defense and justice is truly legitimate. As Butler (2020) aptly expresses in "The Force of Nonviolence," the question arises about the difference between the violence I use to defend myself and the violence exerted upon me; in both cases, a dichotomy is established between a "self" or "ourselves" and an "other" or "them," which implies a separation that entails a hierarchization presupposing that certain lives deserve to be violated. However, the criteria delineating this distinction and the definition of the "self" deserving of defense are not clear or univocal; they can easily become exclusionary tools

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encompassing within their "self" all those who share similarities in color, class, and privilege, and thus expelling from the regime of the subject/self all those who bear the mark of difference in that system (Butler, 2020, p. 26). Therefore, even for those who have historically suffered violence and exclusion, legitimizing violence as a means to restore justice is enormously problematic; not only is there the imminent risk that violence will go astray –if it isn't always the case, as Butler (2020, p. 27) keenly senses–, but also there is no way to establish when violence ceases to function as a means and when it becomes an end in itself. If the only response to violence is more violence and there is no way to break this cycle, then it is possible that, unwittingly, what began as a means becomes its own end, since, under this logic, the expansion of violence would be infinite.

So, should we conclude that it is preferable to suffer violence than to exert it and that only through a certain passivity can we hope to break the endless cycle of violence? The truth is that in no case should we naturalize the idea that some people are condemned to live in the realm of violence from before birth. Faced with Tolstoy's words –"it is a hundred thousand times better to suffer with conviction than to kill for it" (Zweig, 2002, p. 215)– we should argue that no one should face the choice between killing or suffering for a conviction. If the defense of justice or the right to exist in the world inevitably implies suffering and endangering one's own life, this is an indication that violence has been mythified and that mechanisms of adaptation and naturalization of it have been installed in culture.

There are perspectives, some of a religious nature, that idealize suffering and even normalize the structural violence to which many people are subjected. Erroneously, a binary logic is accepted in which violence is an absolute against which there are only two alternatives: being an agent or a patient; these imaginaries create sharp divisions, such as victims and victimizers, and tend to overlook the complex ways in which violence is rooted in culture. Moreover, they do not recognize the various forms of structural and systemic violence that are often not even named or understood; they also ignore the fact that the State itself is founded on violence, such as racial violence, which continues to be systematically applied against minorities.

Therefore, it is important to remember that violence is not limited to its physical manifestation and that violence exerted on bodies is always a symptom of a larger structure (Butler, 2020). Often, violence is so deeply rooted in everyday life that it remains invisible; even in countries like Colombia, where violence seems evident due to the long duration of the armed conflict, its deeper dimensions often go unnoticed; this has led to a mistaken conception of peace as the "silence of guns" instead of a project for the comprehensive transformation of the territory (Truth Commission, 2022a, p. 96).

Certainly, something is interrupted in this endless cycle when someone chooses not to respond to violence with more violence. But we cannot understand the nonviolent response as pure passivity, nor can we accept that some are condemned to suffer violence without being able to do anything about it. Tolstoy himself may have been aware of all this when, despite all the influence he held over a good part of society, he never used it or relied on revolutionary justifications for violence; instead,

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he chose to demonstrate with his own work that nonviolent resistance was possible. We could say that Leo Tolstoy already recognized "the force of nonviolence," if we borrow Judith Butler's expression.

While some insist on denying the humanity and importance of the other to justify the violent actions committed against them, thereby normalizing the constant confrontation with death as an existential condition for some individuals, others, on the contrary, recognize the traces of others in their own constitution and choose not to respond with violence to the violence they suffer because they firmly believe that the lives of those others deserve to be mourned (Butler, 2020) and because they know that the death of those other bodies would scandalize them (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). It is a generous subjectivity that refuses to renounce its responsibility towards others, whom it recognizes as a founding part of its own self. For Judith Butler (2020), an ethics and politics of nonviolence would be based, then, on a critique of individualism, because it recognizes that there is something that unites the self and the other. In this sense, when the continuum of violence is suspended with a nonviolent response, it seeks to restore that previous relationship that is fundamental to social order and that violence has fractured; this ethical and political position transcends individualism by recognizing that the self is formed through its relationships with others; therefore, preserving the life and integrity of the other implies assuming the care of the relationships that constitute us.

Despite the fact that the division between violence and nonviolence still maintains a dichotomous scheme that we must overcome to stop the most destructive effects of violence (Quintana, 2021, p. 317), it is undeniable that nonviolence introduces ruptures in the continuous flow of violence and presents itself as a way to contemplate historical alternatives that transcend the binary logics that have supported violence. Thus, when the mythification of violence seems to predetermine how differences are resolved, nonviolence presents itself as a way to demystify it, dismantle it, or redirect it; a response that also uses various means to introduce change, such as the body, discourse, collective practices, performance, aesthetic configurations, rituals, symbolic acts, among others. Therefore, it is not at all a form of passivity; on the contrary, nonviolence becomes a political action that can express anger, rage, indignation, and other affects, but that at the same time cares for the lives of others, even at the risk of one's own (and that is why it remains trapped in the dichotomous scheme of exerting or suffering). It is a way of resisting through the body that is full of gestures and modes. In many cases, the individual deliberately exposes their body in the field of violence; they confront external power to resist and to oppose "one force against another force" (Butler, 2020, p. 37).

Thus, in response to the question of whether it is better to exert or suffer violence, nonviolence shows us the risks and fallacies of that dichotomy. It does not accept violence as an inevitable destiny that we must endure, nor does it consider the use of violence to be a legitimate means, not even to defend against violence itself. Instead of choosing between exerting or suffering, nonviolence advocates rejecting both alternatives. Although individuals may have to risk their own bodies to break this scheme, they do so to demonstrate that they are not subjects who passively accept suffering, but nor are they willing to do so at the expense of others' lives.

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It is important to highlight, finally, that those who have suffered the most from the ravages of violence are precisely those who best teach us how to escape the logic of violence. In the Colombian context, several memory reports reveal that victims have used various forms of nonviolent resistance to defy war and its arbitrariness; these forms of nonviolent resistance include peaceful confrontation, civil disobedience, the performance of funeral rituals, the adoption of the nameless bodies found on the banks of rivers, and even dialogue with perpetrators whom they have welcomed as if they were their own disappeared family members (a notable example is the work in prisons by the Mothers of Candelaria). Additionally, many people have had the courage to directly confront armed actors by defying the mandates of violence and exposing their bodies on the battlefield, courage that has provoked moments when "the silent experience of the victim" has directly faced the "public experience of the perpetrator," temporarily altering the established order (Truth Commission, 2022b, p. 335). Thus, it is the victims who best exemplify Butler's idea (2020, pp. 38-39) that nonviolence challenges our understanding of strength by revealing a force that emanates from apparent "weakness," a force related to the power of those who are considered weak, as it allows them to claim their presence in public space and reaffirm their dignity as lives that deserve to be recognized and valued.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interest with any institution or commercial association of any kind.

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