

# The Narrativisation of Violence

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- *It is possible to distinguish two aspects in violent stories. Firstly, the definition of the act as violent and, secondly, the explanation of the violent act. This article shows how some acts are socially defined as violent and others are not, according to the social conventions of each historical period in a particular culture. It also shows different ways of justifying violence based on etiological and teleological strategies.*

Humans are narrative beings. One of the universal features of humanity is the narrativisation of reality. This is true from the broadest through to the most intimate of human experiences. Cultures construct the stories that will become shared mythical references and humans hold the micro-stories of their autobiographies. At the same time, the different social phenomena become discourses that take on a public dimension through the media. Violence is also narrativised in both interpersonal and media communication.

The aim of this article is to expand upon two aspects that strike me as essential in stories involving violence. In the narrativisation of violence we can see the possible appearance of two levels of production of meaning, i.e., comprehension and justification. Clearly, we are dealing with an analysis proposal that seeks narrative strategies for these stories. Very often the two aspects are mixed and one becomes confused with the other or, better said, one is masked as the other. It is therefore necessary to be

absolutely clear about the meaning that each contributes.

We can differentiate them in the following manner: *comprehension* involves providing violence with a meaning but not necessarily justifying it. It involves labelling particular phenomena as violent. *Justification* involves establishing legitimacy criteria that make it possible to evaluate different types of violence. As I have already said, it is common in many discourses for the two aspects to be inter-related. However, I think that by differentiating them we can arrive at a critical approximation of the discourses of violence.

Violent narratives are not simple; they are not provoked purely by casuistic processes but also by different ways from which the various cases can be approached. However, narratives constructed on violent conflict are very important because when it comes to resolving them it is not just the profound causes that led to the conflict that are influential but also their narrative representation. As Martínez de Murgía (1999, 149-150) says: "The difficulty in resolving conflict does not depend solely on the nature of the dispute in question, but the way in which the parties discuss it, the perception they have of what should be negotiated or not and the effect this could have on the other party (...), and on its public image". These elements with regard to the interpretation and representation of conflict are fundamental. Ross (1995, 244-245) says that for him, the more intense the conflict and the longer it lasts, the more likely it is that the interpretative component is important and that appreciating its role will be necessary to reach a viable agreement. People fight for real interests, he says, whether material or symbolic; but the way they fight, the intensity of their feelings and even how far adversaries will go to defend or achieve what they believe to be their legitimate property, is proof that the achievement of interests has an important psychocultural component that has yet to be well understood.

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The type of representation constructed is fundamental in the case of intercultural conflict (Rodrigo, 2003b). Ross (2001: 159) establishes his analysis of intercultural conflict, a type of conflict that appears frequently in the media, on the idea of psychocultural dramas. He says psychocultural dramas are apparently irresolvable conflicts between groups who fight over claims that affect central elements of each group with regard to their historical experience and identity and which lead to mistrust and fear of the adversary. Psychocultural dramas polarise events about cultural claims, threats and/or non-negotiable rights, which are important because they connect with narratives and the heart of the fundamental metaphors of the group's identity. These psychocultural dramas manifest themselves in various types of narratives. Ross (2001, 164) says that psychocultural interpretations are found in many forms, such as written material, historical documents, public discourses, government reports, laws, videos, theatre works, songs, systematic observations and opinion polls. All of these narratives contribute to the construction of social representations, but there is no doubt that news stories have a very significant social impact. This explains the importance of how violence is represented (Rodrigo, 1999).

Often, however, news stories about violence conceal (within the emotion that is typical to them) a construction of reality that has to be disseminated. That is why I propose analysing two aspects of these stories in order to consider what type of reality the media proposes. To begin with, let's look at the comprehension of violence.

## **From Aggression to Violence**

Violence is a social action that produces meanings. Different social discourses are constructed around violence and the significance of violence can change at different historical times. From this point of view, we could say that violence is a historical construction of meaning.

A key distinction when it comes to giving a meaning to violence is differentiating between aggression and violence. Aggression is considered to be an adaptive and, in short, positive response to environmental stimuli, while violence is seen as a social dysfunction.

We are thus looking at two different constructions.

Aggression corresponds to the worlds of neurobiology, behaviouristic psychology and evolutionary ethology and is presented as necessary, natural, innate and inevitable. Violence corresponds to the worlds of functional sociology, anthropology and social psychology and is considered to be contingent, acquired, cultural and reprehensible.

Sometimes, however, the two views are interlinked. It is important to determine whether we are dealing with manifestations of aggression or the sphere of violence. The borderline between aggression and violence is often not as clear as we believe. Moreover, the limits of this borderline can change over time. To that end, we have to ask where violence is located in our society, i.e., what violence is understood to be. Each society classifies particular types of behaviour as violent, while other forms of behaviour are considered to be just aggression.

Through its laws, each society establishes the violent behaviour it considers deserving of punishment. However, as we know, even in the best of cases the law lags behind social reality. Before a particular behaviour can be taken into account by legal regulations, it has been subjected to a discussion by the legislators and, before that, by society itself. It is in this public debate that the political and social parties with the most influence and power will create a particular climate of opinion, which in turns produces values that are presented as hegemonics and thus used to label particular phenomena as 'violent'.

If we accept these ideas, we could agree that things considered violent will be the product of a social convention subject to negotiation on the part of the political and social agents. The step from aggression to violence would be the result of this semiotic classification.

As I said in a previous work (Rodrigo, 1998), violence is a historical construction. That is why a social discussion about violence at any given time in history will produce zones of majority consensus, zones of dissent and zones of negotiation. This proposal of comprehending social debate can obviously be applied to other subjects besides violence, but this is the phenomenon we will focus on here.

Within the zones of consensus, the meaning of violence is shared by the majority, or at least is not systematically questioned. Furthermore, these zones are also where the centrality of some phenomena is established. Domestic violence today appears to belong to this zone, something

that would not have occurred a few years ago. It is precisely thanks to the role of the media that this phenomenon, which used to be considered part of people's private lives and was not labelled as violence, has acquired public visibility and a new social meaning.

Sensitivity and the perception of violence obviously continue to change and it is possible that dangerous driving, for example, could end up being considered a form of violence. But in order for that to happen, it will have to be made more visible and be classified, and move from the zone of dissent to the zone of negotiation and finally, possibly, the zone of consensus. Within the zones of dissent there are opposing views on labelling particular types of behaviour as violent. In these zones, the discussion has not entered the public debate, because the supposedly minority criterion has been unable to transform itself into a public interlocutor of the criterion considered to be the majority one. In short, in the zones of dissent we find all the phenomena that are not included within the definition of violence. For example, our society does not consider workplace accidents to be occupational violence, or football to be sports violence, even though we accept they can be aggressive.

Before going on to look at the zones of negotiation, I would like to point out that all these zones acquire a greater or lesser scope and more or less flexibility depending on how much social control is present at each historical time. Even the zones of consensus, where there may be a legal determination, are subject to a certain degree of negotiation. What the zones of negotiation establish is a public discussion on the classification that should be accorded to particular phenomena and the social, political and legislative actions to carry out based on this definition. Sometimes behaviour that is in the zones of dissent or negotiation can move into the zones of consensus. Here the correlation of forces that exist in a society will be decisive when it comes to imposing their point of view, interpretation of reality and values. These zones obviously have borders, i.e., areas in which you can move from one zone to another. The problem with the zones of negotiation is not that there is a 'no man's land' but rather an 'every man's land'. As Bauman (2002, 269) says: "The mortal threat against the very survival of social practice is not as threatening in the "no man's land" as it is in the "too-many-people land". Zones of negotiation

can thus become overcharged with significance. Moreover, as Appadurai (2003, 77) reminds us, "all moral and social taxonomies hate the categories that blur the dividing lines". In the zone of negotiation, the border between aggression and violence is blurred.

But sometimes, beyond the social debate over what constitutes violence, the social parties able to define it choose to mask it and present it as something else. As Lewis Carroll put it in his novel *Through the Looking Glass*, when Alice questions whether you can make words mean so many different things, Humpty Dumpty's response is blunt: "The question is which is to be master, that's all". But in a democratic system, it is not enough to just be master, it is also necessary to convince and acquire legitimacy. As Rousseau (1986, 13) said: "The strongest person is not strong enough to always be the master if he doesn't transform power into law and obedience into duty". Violence must become legitimate violence, not just legal violence. But somewhere along the way, violence loses its own label and becomes strength.

It is important to recognise that not all the violence in stories is equal. Some types of violence acquire a legitimacy denied to other types. Not just that, but identical behaviours can be valued differently according to the perpetrator of the violent act, as there are some social agents who have a monopoly on legitimate violence. This second movement of violent stories is very important because it changes the meaning of violence. Below we can see how this diverse evaluation of violence can come about.

### **From Violence to Strength**

As various authors have said, each society channels violent behaviour in accordance with its socially accepted values and rules of behaviour (Aran *et al.*, 2001: 37). As I said in a previous text (Rodrigo, 2003a), all cultures involve building an order and thus a meaning. We should bear in mind that providing a meaning involves organising a reality and putting the world in order. We know that the concept of culture is something that people have made many attempts to define. The concept of culture is a cultural construction. As Cuche (1996: 7) says: "It is significant that the word 'culture' does not have an equivalent in the majority of the oral

languages of the societies that ethnologists usually study. Even though it is not a universally shared proof of evidence, obviously it does not mean that these societies do not have culture, but rather that they do not look at the question or whether or not they have culture, much less define their own culture".

For my part, without pretending to understand everything involved, I subscribe to Geertz's (1989: 88) definition of culture as denoting a historically transmitted system of significances represented in symbols, a system of concepts inherited and expressed in symbolic forms through the ways that men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life.

If we start from this idea of culture, i.e., as a source of meaning, it is important to understand violence as a communicative act. Culture provides violence with meaning and thus contributes instruments for communication. Even senseless violence has a meaning of things that do not have any sense.

But culture not only provides violence with meaning, it also (or, better said, it now) legitimises and delegitimises it. Legitimated violence thus becomes strength. To indicate this move from violence to strength we could show the existence of two narrative strategies that are not mutually exclusive, i.e., teleological and etiological strategies. In a teleological strategy, the focus is on the purpose of violence, e.g., when people use violence to try to liberate a country, or to become rich or to carry out revenge, etc. Narratives that justify violence with a teleological strategy usually emphasise the purpose behind carrying out a violent act. An etiological strategy focuses on the person who perpetrates violence and the surrounding circumstances. Narratives that refer to the etiology of violence are particularly concerned with explaining the reason for which something occurs.

Teleological violence would be based on the concepts of worthy and unworthy violence, while etiological violence would be based on justified and unjustified violence. Crossing one with the other would give us four ways to give a meaning to violence. Of course, each culture will establish the behaviour it considers worthy and unworthy, justified or unjustified, depending on its historically established zones of consensus, dissent and negotiation. All of these categories must be understood as proposals for reading discourses about violence. It is extremely unlikely that an

act of violence would be worthy per se; however, many social discourses aim to make their own violence seem worthy. Thus, a flare-up between countries can be considered a "just war" and violence thus becomes strength. I shall not go into this point in any more depth, but I think we could find many examples in our own history or in the bellicose climate of today's world.

One way of narrating violence would be to present it as worthy and justified. This would be a discourse that showed us a type of correct behaviour. Even though it was violent behaviour, it suggests that the perpetrator did what he said he would do. In fact, this would be a case of legitimate violence. One example would be self-defence, or the defence of third parties, with means in proportion to the aggression. For example, this type of narrative would establish the following line of reasoning: if Iraq is endangering the whole of humanity, defending it by attacking this bellicose power is the least we can do.

Another narrative is one in which violence is worthy but unjustified. This would be the case of erroneous behaviour. In other words, even though the purposes pursued through violence are worthy, the causes that lead to it cannot be justified. This could be the case of self-defence or the defence of third parties with disproportionate means. When we talk about "disproportionate violence" we mean to say, on the other hand, that there are some criteria that make violence worthy. This type of narrative would establish the following line of reasoning: if Iraq threatens us, we have to defend ourselves. But are we talking about a real threat? If it does not have weapons of mass destruction, how can it be a threat?

Another narrative would be one of justified but unworthy violence. We would find this, for example, in violence based on due obedience. Bauman (1998) clearly suggests that one of the mechanisms that the people who perpetrated the Holocaust used to justify it was delegated responsibility. A possible narrative is one that suggested it would be unworthy to attack a country like Iraq, if we do not know whether or not it has weapons of mass destruction, but that it is important to help our allies and that the US knows what it is doing.

The final narrative about violence that I would like to discuss would be unworthy and unjustified violence. This would be the case of incomprehensible violence, such as

"gratuitous violence". To look once more at the case of Iraq, it would involve establishing that if Iraq was not a threat to humanity nor had weapons of mass destruction, what sense would it make to initiate a war? (Although in this case it might not be appropriate to talk about gratuitous violence, given the country's oilfields).

If we accept that, at least in part, discourses about violence use the aforementioned bases, it is important to recall that each culture will establish the social regulations that provide the different forms of violence with meaning. Of course, these narratives of violence are not closed but can produce, particularly in the zones of negotiation, a discursive agonistics whereby different interpretations on violent phenomena are brought into confrontation, even to the point of discussing whether or not they are violent.

The discourses that prevail in each society will apply their own strategies for constructing different views about violence. Violence is justified from a teleological position in order to preserve a superior being, while alien violence is denied the interpretation of the perpetrators and is reinterpreted or removed to an etiological viewpoint in which the subject moves into the realm of individual pathology. This would be etiological, not teleological, violence.

Violence can thus be reduced in psychological terms. But, as Ross (1995: 19) says, we should not forget that the interpretative processes most commonly described in psychological terms are also profoundly cultural. The notion of a culture of conflict calls attention to how people in communities develop and share interpretations rooted in psychocultural dispositions. This approach forces us to consider common formative experiences and explicit practices and values shared by the people that grow up in a group and at the same time appreciate the importance of common identities, self-conception and external groups that serve as acceptable goals for externalisation and projection. As we can see, culture not only provides violence with meaning but also determines its goals and offers us acceptable justifications for legitimising or delegitimising it. As Delgado (1998: 59-64) reminds us, violent people are always other people. However, it is important to bear in mind that some cultures have more problems when it comes to managing conflict than others. In cultures where there is a high predisposition to define own and alien groups in diametrically different terms, in seeing the actions of others

as something threatening and provocative or in identifying oneself with few people from outside one's own group, it is not possible to modify internal psychic structures by managing conflict. However, one can propose analogies, metaphors and psychoculturally appropriate alternative images that could be more compatible with a constructive management of conflict (Ross, 1995: 271-272). That is why the social representations of the different types of violence are so important.

The representations of violence include the meaning given to violence, the legitimacy of the actors who carry out violent acts, and even the causalities attributed to it.

As Mannoni (2001: 61) suggests, social representations are dynamic, structuring and persistent. Social representations are cognitive and emotional processes that produce meaning and symbolic and dynamic realities. They also act as ways of thinking about how to organise reality. Finally, social representations ensure the permanence and congruence of what we believe. I would add that social representations are cultural products that form the basis of the comprehension, justification and attribution of violence. Mannoni (2001: 55) says that social representations are at the crossroads between subjective participation in sociality and the forms produced by the social body. Santamaría (2002: 11) reminds us that, "representations are (...) a particular way of *conceiving* reality in its cognitive sense, but also in terms of constructing and structuring. Representations form part of social relations, they are the product and generators of relations. It is important to emphasise that these representations are collective not just because they are shared by the members of a group but also because they are socially prepared, maintained and transformed within the heart of social relations and because they have a structuring scope of social relations themselves." In other words, social representations are socially constructed products and are constructors of social thought. However, it is important to remember what Mannoni (2001: 119-120) found, i.e., that "the problem that arises is not knowing the extent to which a representation is true or false, or the relationship this type of knowledge has with the truth. In effect, a representation, because it is a *representation*, is necessarily 'false', because it never says exactly what the object is, but at the same time it is 'true' because, for the subject, it is a type of valid knowledge upon which he can

act". Social representations, even if they usually have a certain historical and cultural continuity, can change according to the circumstances of a particular time and the perspective of the observers. A fundamental element in this change is the narratives behind the prevailing social representations or ones that offer alternatives. For Mannoni (2001:66), "the mentality of a particular group is in some way organised and led, i.e., conditioned by social discourses (...), in the same way that the narrative of a subject's life is open to interpretation according to his or her personal myth".

In a democratic and plural society there is a type of discursive agonistics in which the media plays a very important role. The media acts on the availability of social representations; by using some particular representations it promotes people's adherence to them.

"The media, and particularly television, is very important when it comes to constructing the social perception of reality" (Aran *et al.*, 2000: 32). The media shows representations of some forms of violence and conceals other ones. This is done by hiding particular types of violence, labelling them as 'aggression' or simply justifying them if they cannot be hidden. This is surely the immense power of the media, above and beyond more or less improbable causalities. As Cardús (1998: 26) says: "The relationship between television and violence is in fact crossed by a series of other cultural factors which necessarily put paid to any mono-causal analysis. Rather than considering television as the cause of violence, it might be necessary to speak of television as an almost perfect example of the violence intrinsic to our society".

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