

About the fascination of violence and the attempt to overcome it

Violence as an expression of a desperate, partly criminal and infantile yearning for the ending of inconsistencies

Human beings do use violence – in an open way, brutal, subtle or directed against one's own person. That has to do with life being full of conflicts. There is no time in life where we do not have to be prepared for situations of conflict. Friedhelm Neidhardt expresses in his article "Violence and counter violence": "The problems in the dealings with violence are problems of balancing, and its solution is a question of appropriate dosages."

(in: Heitmeyer/ Möller, Juventa 1989).

Violence, says Fromm citing Simone Weil, is the ability to turn a human being into a body. All violence is based in the end on the power to be able to kill. As sexuality may cause life, violence may destroy life. The influence of people like Hitler and Stalin simply is based on their absolute ability and willingness to kill. The openness of the future and the openness of freedom is feared and hated by necrophiliac people, says Fromm. They are characterized by an intense desire for a definite, final certainty.

To make life controllable in a risk-free way, a violence is to be used that holds the possibility of death – death is the only sure thing in life. This necrophilia therefore is that answer to life that stands in total opposition to life itself; it is the most degenerated and most dangerous among all orientations of life man is able to think of.

However, the one who is biophilic, the one who loves life, says Fromm, is attracted by processes of life and growth of all fields and areas. He rather wants to create something new than to keep something old. In contrast to Freud, Erich Fromm talks about the impulse of life as the primary potential of man. However, if there are no adequate preconditions, necrophiliac tendencies and affections occur in man and gain power over him. The present social dismissals, the enormous extent of uncertainty of values, fears for one's existence, the worry for workplaces, rent increases, cost of living – with the simultaneously aggravated craving for consumption – lead to the escalations we currently experience at many points within our society. Besides, there are fears of a lot of new situations, the open borders, the strangers, the foreigners, the incalculable political problems of the Eastern Bloc, of the Balkans, of the Middle East, the two-third world.

You may definitely have the right to ask: what kind of inner stability do we need as human beings anyway to be able to cope with all that? Maybe this applies: the violent young people are doing what many normal grown-ups also wish to do – only that we do not do it or just in a more careful way: We are frighteningly experiencing it within their "replacement acts". We get a fright from them – and with that we actually get a fright from our own abysses. We ourselves lost our balance and they are our mirror image in it.

To achieve hatred and violence although you want love

The present living conditions of the high-risk-society / hazard society (Beck) cause an extremely critical situation in the family milieu. The role of woman seems to be totally unclear, many men are confronted with the problem of unemployment which is absolutely new for them, the passive consumption(ism) causes an unrelatedness between the people. This dramatic situation is the breeding ground for extremist attitudes towards life among children and young persons. The shifting in values / the collapse of values in such

completeness causes a situation where the longing for simplifying solutions and answers is to be created. The depiction in black and white / the attitude of “if you are not for us, you are against us” is not unknown to children and juveniles and was considerably supported by the GDR-educational theory. Now it converts into the yearning for clarity and for the ending of conflict-scenarios – in contrast to the relativities of civil democracy. With such interfaces, solutions of violence are to be born /created/ caused.

In the autobiography of the criminal Fritz Mertens, “I wanted love and learned how to hate”, it becomes clear what a family situation may do to a child. The use of violence / child abuse / withdrawal of love / spoiling has repercussions. Violent solutions produce acts of imitation. They have an effect, they become suggestive. Fritz Mertens describes violence in the family – between the parents, between the brothers and sisters, between parents and children. It is an extreme situation where he lives in and from which he emerges only as a criminal and broken man. He uses violence in his imagination and in reality – up to the death of two people.

Violence in the urban industrial society

The urban situation is overtaxing the single human being – the mass society where the individual has to look after himself very much. The risks within this society are very high. It is correct that we live in a high-risk-society and hazardous world where man is confronted with an inestimable pluralisation as a single person which he is not able to cope with, being lonely and isolated. Unions on a voluntary basis make the situation emotionally more bearable for the individual – life in associations and clubs cushions many social problems – where it was able to develop and exists. That means: the self-constructed world to live in is taking the place of the traditional extended family, of the neighbourhood or of the village.

Young persons, especially with complicated family structures and a difficult social milieu, experience similar in the gang, the band, in the clique. The structures there are authoritarian; there is a strict, often unspoken consensus of standards.

If we do not understand why young persons band together and behave this way and how they do it, we are a priori not able to cope with these problems in a responsible way. That means: the gang is something like a family substitute. The structures in this gang are authoritarian, as a rule. The acts of the gang, up to dreadful violent incidents or criminal acts against supposed enemies or opponents on one hand have a group-stabilizing-function like every concept of an enemy; and on the other hand they are the ideological link in the common “struggle for survival to come through”. From the world of the adults it is passed on at many levels that life is a fright where one has to gain acceptance and assert oneself, and so they fight.

Seduction to violence through effects of habituation – seduction through the media

The fascination of violence finds its special expression in the media. It attracts attention that the various media really vie with one another for the communication and mediation of cruelties – what Fromm already named clearly. Video shops provide a wide range of violent offers, films of all kind are at one’s disposal at any time to provide people of all classes with the desired type of brutality, killing, murder, torture. But also the news more and more fancies itself in reporting most terrible scenes, for example if you think of the news about the military conflict in Yugoslavia. Maybe all this does not really create violence in man, as Bettelheim seems to see it, but there doubtlessly is an effect of habituation and of becoming inured, that adds to the evoking factors of violence and intensifies them. So, I do not follow the thesis that people do work off because of the cruelty and brutality of the media.

Authoritarian structures and violence

This point is not a matter of extraordinary structures like prison or military situations at war, but a matter of authoritarian structures of normal kind in the family, in education; so it concerns the school, university and professional training, it concerns kindergarten teachers, teachers of infants. Stanley Milgram describes an experiment that was conducted in the United States after the end of the Vietnam war. The test subjects acted and functioned as teachers but they did not know that they were the true test objects, they thought that the test subjects were the pupils sitting opposite them. To reach the desired results, they were allowed to use electric shocks.

The authority of scientists gave them the possibility to use this gruesome method for the reaching of the educational goal. It is astonishing and alarming to which extent people were and still are able to use violence, if an authority of any kind demands it – some with scruples, but others obviously without hesitation. Obviously, the authoritarian structure neutralizes inhibitions. Because we, as a rule, also have to do with groups being structured in an authoritarian way – with gangs being ready for forceful intervention and violence – the results of the Milgram-experiment are of exceptional, outstanding significance.

Milgram writes: *“We only want to repeat here, that our American soldiers burned down villages as a matter of routine, they carried on a strategy of a “free protective field”, they used napalm in an extensive way, used the most progressive technology against a primitive army, they defoliated wide areas of the country, they obtained the evacuation of sick and old people by force for reasons of military suitability and they organized direct massacres among hundreds of unarmed civilians. For the psychologist, these are no impersonal historical events, but acts carried out by people like you and me, people that have been transformed by authority and, as a result, lost any feeling for personal responsibility. How is it that a respectable, decent human being is made to kill other people and his conscience does not place any restrictions?...”*

Perspectives to overcome racism and violence – a challenge to a future culture of life

If it is true – what became quite clear here in various respects – that the acceptance and the use of violence or rather the critical examination of violence and the willingness to use it, are performances of balance of human beings, of the society, of the state, then it is also correct to say that this is a matter of cultural challenge. The minimization of violence is a cultural achievement among human beings that is connected with his desire for life and survival. Human beings and the human society put their hopes on the future and on a common life in future when they are struggling for the minimization of violence, they fight for a common future of the society with many others. The struggling for the minimization of violence therefore is a willful decision against definite other tendencies in human beings and in the society, but also in nature itself. The one who wants reduction of violence will refrain from hegemony and oppression of life, but also from the discrimination of dissidents and persons of a different lifestyle.

Behind the efforts for a minimization of violence, there is a concept of life, a philosophical draft, a human concept for the future of mankind.

Conclusion

The Sisyphian Stone is constantly rolling up and down – that is what stones do. The troubles that are yet to come will not become smaller. But, if the human society is to develop further on with a human perspective, if we ourselves count on such a perspective, then the Sisyphian Stone is to be pushed up to the top again and again, then we have to do our bit to help minimizing violence, that people may discover themselves and others as a treasure.

The organization of life and the perception of responsibility is very hard and is similar to the effort of Sisyphus, who again and again rolls the stone up on top, but this behavior is not absurd at all, but full of hope for the future, full of life. At present, cynicism seems to be developing and establishing as the concept of life for many people. I just do not follow this concept of life, full of cynicism.

(Rudi Pahnke, Brandenburg 1992)

Translated by Bergit Doege

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