Karol Chrobak

http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0922-5252
Szkoła Główna Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego w Warszawie
karol_chrobak@sggw.edu.pl

Structural Violence

> They make a desert and call it "peace"
> (Tacitus, 1999, p. 22)

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The article aims to analyse the concept of structural violence to outline its essential theoretical references.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The main problem raised in the text is the distinction of structural violence against other forms of violence. The article uses the method of conceptual analysis supplemented with case studies.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The definition of structural violence proposed in the paper emphasizes the presence of intentional or unintentional systemic conditions that violate or limit the rights of individuals or groups. In the order of analysis, structural violence is first distinguished from other forms of violence: personal and legitimist. There are three forms of structural violence manifestation: social injustice, direct violence caused by an unjust social system, and a permanent threat embedded in the social system. In connection with the above, the possibility of identifying structural violence with theoretical tools developed by John Rawls to specify the conditions of structural justice is indicated. As a critical complement to this approach, a caveat is discussed that shows that however useful, Rawls's approach may not be sufficient. Finally, the issue of cultural and symbolic violence is analysed.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The conclusion drawn from the presented analysis is that structural violence is inextricably linked with social structure. A significant difficulty in minimizing it is that its sources are often invisible, remaining

somewhat outside the framework of the current social paradigm. Therefore, the fight against this type of violence requires far-reaching interventions at the level of public awareness.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Recommendations that can be derived from the above considerations focus on the need to conduct social campaigns that have the opportunity to gradually change social awareness and the often unconscious social status quo.

KEYWORDS:

structural violence, direct violence, cultural violence, structural justice, structural injustice

INTRODUCTION

Violence is the subject of everyday conversations, political debates, and scientific analysis. It is a borderline phenomenon in which relations with loved ones significantly suffer, and the social and political order breaks down. The appearance of violence in relationships between individuals or groups proves that the existing rules of co-existence cease to apply, and we are entering shaky ground, where these rules give way to physical or psychological abuse. The early liberal thinkers referred to this state as the "state of nature." However, being in a situation marked by violence, we do not think this is natural. On the contrary, we see it as a symptom of the breakdown of a particular order, which we feel obligated to rebuild. It is difficult since violence as a border concept is highly vague and challenging to grasp unequivocally. This difficulty applies particularly to one form of violence, namely structural violence, which is – broadly speaking – the consequence of functioning in specific social and economic structures.

This article aims to explain the meaning of the concept of structural violence and outline the theoretical complications that are associated with it. Due to the theoretical character of the conducted research, the method of conceptual analysis was chosen as the leading one. To increase its practical character, the proposed concepts and classifications are illustrated with real life cases of violence. The order of the research is as follows. In the first place, it concerns the juxtaposition

of this form of violence with its other forms. Then, I consider the relationship between structural violence and the concept of structural justice as a kind of its theoretical counter-pole. Finally, I close my research with comments on cultural and symbolic violence.

TYPES OF VIOLENCE

Cecil Coady (2008, pp. 22–25) distinguishes three understandings of violence: narrow, broad, and legalistic. Violence in the first sense most closely corresponds to the common understanding of violence, where – without going into complexities of this definition – it is a direct, physical, or mental violation of the other person's integrity. It is violence, which we can also call "personal" or "direct" since the intention of this type of action is always directed against a specific person. For example, we can cite here the definition of John Harris, who "an act of violence [understands as] (…) injury or suffering (…) inflicted upon a person or persons by an agent who knows (or ought reasonably to have known), that his actions would result in the harm in question." (Harris, 1980, p. 19). This kind of interpretation of the concept of violence can be considered as prototypical to the other two.

The second understanding of violence is the broad understanding (also called "extended"), in which violence is treated as synonymous with injustice and social inequality. This understanding corresponds to the concept of structural violence. It refers to social and institutional solutions that limit the possibilities of realizing individuals' or groups' physical and mental potential. The uniqueness of the phenomenon of structural violence lies in the fact that it can be realized without any perpetrator and without its subject's awareness of being its actual victim. As a result, the classic definitions of violence do not apply to this form of violence, or they apply, but only to a limited extent. Hence, it should be assumed that structural violence is a unique case of the paradigmatic phenomenon of the direct violence. Therefore, following Barbara Chyrowicz, we can state that: "individually exercised violence may be considered a paradigm of structural and political violence" (Chyrowicz, 2014, p. 184).

In the third – "legalistic" – sense, the category of violence becomes related to the concept of the legal order. Any action that violates this

order is treated as violence; any action that establishes or protects it (even if it involves the use of force) is not considered to be violence. Robert P. Wolff, for example, defines legalistic violence as "the illegitimate or unauthorized use of force to effect decisions against the will or desire of others." (Wolff, 1969, p. 606).

In summary, there are three types of violence:
1. Personal (direct) violence – taking place in the relationship: "person vs person,"
2. Structural violence – taking place in the relationship: "system vs person,"
3. Legalistic violence – taking place in the relation: "person vs system."

The first type is prototypical, while the other two extend the understanding of the act of violence to the contexts of a person's relationship to the current political system/legal order.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

The "father" of the concept of structural violence is considered to be Johan Galtung, the founder of the academic field of peace studies. According to Galtung, this kind of violence manifests itself in situations where "human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (Galtung, 2009, p. 80). Galtung's definition is radical in its essence, as the point of reference is not so much the current state of the victim but its potential state. In this case, Galtung inverts the metaphysical relation of actuality to potentiality:

> in classical metaphysics – writes Barbara Chyrowicz – being in potency (having potential) consists in actualizing, i.e., reaching the optimum (the being actualizes its potency), while Galtung understands actuality as a factual state that is defective if 'here and now' it does not reach the optimum available (Chyrowicz, 2014, pp. 191).

Behind this radical definition of violence lies an equally radical ideal of peace. As Galtung claims: "an extended concept of violence leads to an extended concept of peace" (Galtung, 2009, p. 99), which is not only a negative ideal (lack of personal violence) but becomes

a positive postulate: peace is the implementation of the principles of social justice. With the bar set so high, it turns out "that peace theory is intimately connected not only with conflict theory, but equally with development theory" (Galtung, 2009, p. 99). Thus, violence that abuses social peace turns out to be an unjust social system that leads to the creation of such unwished-for social phenomena as: poverty enclaves,[1] an unfair system of remuneration for employees (e.g., gender pay gap), the inefficiency of the health care system towards specific social groups, inequality in access to education, etc. *Therefore, structural violence can be understood broadly as the intentional or unintentional violation or limitation of the rights of individuals or groups resulting from systemic conditions. These conditions might occur within institutional, cultural, and social systems.*

FORMS OF MANIFESTATION OF STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Structural violence can manifest in three ways: (1) as social injustice in the absence of any acts of violence in the narrow sense (for example, lack of access to the education system), (2) as an act of direct violence caused by an unjust social or institutional system (brutality of prisoners, suicide) and (3) as a constant threat, inscribed somehow in the social system, of launching a reaction based on violence (docility of the discriminated minority to unjust law because of fear of possible reprisals). In the latter case, it is also sometimes referred to as "dormant violence," that is, one that is invisible but can be mobilized at any moment (cf. Lawrence & Karim, 2007, p. 393).

In the case of (1) and (2), the violence is carried out by individual actions. In the first case, this involvement is passive, as it consists only in completing the procedures required by the system. In the second, it is active because it implements the subjective intention of

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1   The definition of poverty as a form of structural violence can be found in Steven Lee: "Poverty (…) is an institutional injustice that causes or contributes to causing significant harm. In my understanding, it is only when someone's poverty is a harmful injustice that someone is affected by poverty" (Lee, 2009, p. 323).

the perpetrator based on certain systemic conditions (or because of them). Type (2) violence shows how closely structural violence is related to direct violence. This mutual dependency is particularly evident in the case of economic violence, which in turn results in a whole range of social pathologies. This relationship is strongly emphasized by Pierre Bourdieu, who wrote that:

> the structural violence exerted by the financial markets, in the form of layoffs, loss of security, etc., is matched sooner or later in the form of suicides, crime and delinquency, drug addiction, alcoholism, a whole host of minor and major everyday acts of violence (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 40).

The difficulty in distinguishing between type (1) and (2) of structural violence lies in differentiating between passive and active involvement cases.[2] This distinction can be better explained by using the idea of immoral law in terms of Lon Fuller. In his opinion, one of the criteria of the morality of law is its clarity and consistency (Fuller, 1969, pp. 63–70). The legitimacy of these criteria can be explained as follows: the lack of clarity of legal regulations, not to mention their internal consistency, may make it a tool of violence in the hands of courts or officials issuing arbitrary decisions. Therefore, an unclear law is immoral as it opens up more room for manoeuvre for individuals wishing to exploit structural violence actively.

The concept of structural violence significantly "differs" from the prototypical understanding of violence as direct violence. In the first place, structural violence does not have to meet the three critical conditions of Harris' definition: (a) it does not have to be "aimed" at specific persons, (b) it does not have to be originating from an identified person of the perpetrator, and (c) it does not have to be intentional. That structural violence does not have to be intentional significantly distinguishes it from personal violence. Structural violence can result

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2   The latter case poses an additional problem which is determining to what extent the act of violence is the result of structural conditions and to what extent it is the result of an autonomous decision of the perpetrator. Depending on its interpretation, the same act may be regarded either as a manifestation of structural violence or as an isolated instance of direct violence. An important indicator in this case, in favour of interpreting an action as a manifestation of structural violence, is the possibility of its location into a broader phenomenon or trend.

from neglect or a lack of awareness. This makes structural violence much less visible and, therefore, easily disappearing from sight. The question of responsibility is vague in a similar way: although the effects of structural violence can be as painful as direct physical violence, either the perpetrator's responsibility is blurred behind the veil of bureaucracy (it is enough to recall the arguments of Adolf Eichmann from the Jerusalem trial), or the perpetrator is impossible to identify or to catch (because, for example, of having been dead).

In the case of structural violence, just as the question of responsibility is blurred, so is the concept of the victim. The victim does not always have to be aware of being in a subordinate relationship and sometimes may even consider it completely normal or even desirable. The victim's unawareness may come from two sources. It may be either because (1) the victim simply does not know a social order other than that in which they were born (for example, the caste system in India) or because (2) they had been gradually deprived of their freedoms so that they had time to get adapted to unfavourable living conditions. Kornel Filipowicz aptly captured the latter case in the poem *Slavery*. At the end of it, he writes about the failure of perceiving the lack of freedom which has been lost increasingly over time: "(...) we will not know about it / We will be convinced / That it should be like this / Because it has always been so."

Since structural violence can take almost imperceptible forms, it is also referred to as "tacit violence" or "slow violence." The latter is defined by Rob Nixon as follows: "By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). This violence, which is almost unnoticeable, leads imperceptibly to the suffering of victims whom no one even perceives as victims. The victims of armed conflicts may include, for example, children born decades afterwards. An example is the use of Agent Orange by US troops during the Vietnam War. Currently, this herbicide and defoliant is gradually poisoning the population who ingest it along with the meat of animals grazing in contaminated areas (cf. Nixon, 2011, pp. 13–14). A similar phenomenon of – let us say – delayed violence occurs in the case of violence caused by the explosive remnants of war (such as anti-personnel mines in the former Yugoslavia).

STRUCTURAL JUSTICE & INJUSTICE

It has been already mentioned above that the concept of structural violence is a fundamentally radical category, as its point of reference is not the current state of the victim but their ideal state. For the present study, I assume that the counter-pole for structural violence is the concept of the "decent society." In principle, it is a society whose institutions do not violate the rights of citizens and thus do not expose them to humiliation or exclusion. This concept was introduced by Avishai Margalit, who in the book *The Decent Society* describes it as follows: "a decent society is one whose institutions do not humiliate people. I distinguish between a decent society and a civilized one. A civilized society is one whose members do not humiliate one another, while a decent society is one in which the institutions do not humiliate people" (Margalit, 1998, p. 1). The concept of a decent society is closely related (although it is not identical, cf. Margalit, 1998, pp. 284–291) with the concept of a just society in John Rawls. This similarity is essential as it allows the use of the notion of the basic structure ("the arrangement of major social institutions into one scheme of cooperation" [Rawls, 1999, p. 47]) and the principles of justice to a deeper understanding of the foundations of a decent society. It should be recognized that any violation of the principles of justice by the basic structure results in a breach of the principle of public decency and thus generates some form of structural violence. Therefore, it is worth quoting these principles and briefly considering them:

> First: each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others.
>
> Second: social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all (Rawls, 1999, p. 53).

The above principles define the terms of distributive justice. The goods covered by these conditions are, first, fundamental freedoms – such as freedom of speech, conscience, freedom of movement – and, second, economic goods. The first principle concerns the equal right

of every person to goods of the first kind (considering the respect for the similar freedoms of every other person). On the other hand, the second rule covers justified cases of unequal access to goods of the second type. Principle 2a indicates a moral condition that any system-level inequality must meet. This principle states that "while the distribution of wealth and income need not be equal, it must be to everyone's advantage" (Rawls, 1999, p. 53). It is also called the "maxi-min rule" as it assumes that any systemic change involving economic inequalities should be designed to bring maximum benefit to those worst off. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that Rawls's principles are arranged in order of significance. Therefore, in their light, economic differences are permissible only insofar as they do not violate the equal distribution of fundamental freedoms. Principle 2b postulates that all positions and offices – relevant to the distribution of economic goods – should be access opened. This general concept of justice, which also defines the ideal of a just society, can be reduced to a simple rule:

> All social values – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone's advantage (Rawls, 1999, p. 54).

However, it should be borne in mind that Rawls's idealistic view of individuals as essentially identical may eventually lead to social injustice. This injustice stems from structural solutions that are blind to the essential differences between, on the one hand, privileged groups and, on the other, marginalized groups (hence this type of injustice is called "structural"). The latter include women, people with disabilities, people discriminated against because of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.

According to Christopher Maboloc, Rawls's theory, while focusing solely on institutional justice, overlooks the influence of cultural factors on the chances of individuals to participate in goods. He states that the structural conditions imposed by the principles of justice as fairness are not sufficient as practical social and cultural conditions may influence the final position of an individual (cf. Maboloc, 2018, p. 1186). Iris Marion Young describes these conditions as "structural inequalities" (cf. Young, 2009, p. 363). Structural inequalities can take

many forms, depending on the positioning of individuals along the social axis of status, power, access to resources for the development of competencies and the acquisition of goods. All these issues – according to Young – cannot be reduced only to the issue of redistribution of goods. She writes that:

> There are many such claims about justice and injustice in our society which are not primarily about the distribution of income, resources, or positions. A focus on the distribution of material goods and resources inappropriately restricts the scope of justice because it fails to bring social structures and institutional contexts under evaluation (Young, 1990, p. 20).

The analysis of structural violence – besides institutional conditions – must also address the issue of social inequalities. The latter can be measured by the level of social inclusion and cohesion. What should be considered in assessing them are, for example, the level of discrimination and social stigma, the level of social stratification, inequalities in the labour market, the lack of appropriate support programs for groups most at risk of social exclusion, or simply the inability to effectively use these programs. By focusing on the distribution of social goods (inclusive redistribution), Rawls's solutions lose sight of who the people are who are supposed to benefit from them. This omission was first noticed by social movements of the 1980s (mainly feminist and anti-racist activists), which drew attention to the phenomenon of overlooking such aspects as gender or race within the dominant paradigm of equality and inclusion. The key principle the paradigm is based on is the principle of non-discrimination (which consists in applying the same principles of assessment and distribution to all people regardless of their social status, gender, race, etc.).

The approach focused on the category of structural inequalities emphasizes that the difference-blind approach not only fails to identify persistent structural inequalities but may even lead to their legitimacy and further reinforcement. Hence, to remove social injustice, it is necessary to pay attention to the differences between groups and take actions to compensate for unfavourable positioning in the social structure, revalue specific properties, activities, or social characteristics, and strengthen disadvantaged members groups. In the first place, these actions should concern disabled people (entirely omitted

by John Rawls; cf. Nussbaum 2007, p. 33), who, equalled with all other citizens, are in a lost cause. For example, a person in a wheelchair who tries to get to the office, which can be accessed only by stairs, will not be pleased in any way knowing that all citizens are treated equally by the office. The point here is not the equality of rights but the equality of opportunities in using these rights.

According to critics of the universalist approach (represented, for example, by John Rawls), it is not enough to talk about equality in the sense of an individual 'piece of cake,' but instead to consider the equality of access to certain goods in the context of mutual relations of all members of a given community. In this approach, instead of talking about equal rights, one should rather talk about equal opportunities (Cavanagh, 2003, p. 121). Equal chances should not be confused here with equal opportunities. While the opportunities, for example, to apply for specific positions, might be equal for different groups, the chances of obtaining them may differ significantly. Opportunities are contextual and require considering specific social and cultural conditions to remove external constraints (e.g., prejudices, unequal access to education, etc.) that may significantly reduce the chances of members of a specific social group in getting access to a given type of goods.

As a summary of the issue of structural injustice, it seems appropriate to quote the words by Bertrand Russell. In *Sceptical Essays*, he claims that social equality should be understood as the equality of social relations that do not make either party envious because of having a less privileged position. He points out, however, that this definition applies only to those – as Avishai Margalit might say – civilized societies that are free from prejudices and where citizens are not "tainted" by the belief in the natural character of social inequalities:

> I should (…) define justice as the arrangement of producing the least envy. This would mean equality in a community free from superstition, but not in one which firmly believed in social inequality (Russell, 2004, pp. 154–155).

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND CULTURAL VIOLENCE

After what has been said above, there is another point worth addressing related to structural violence. Namely, one should consider the issue of the relationship between structural and cultural violence (of which symbolic violence is a particular case). This problem is not simple, as culture influences social structures, and the latter may impact in return the cultural system that legitimizes them. So, it is best to start with the definition. Johan Galtung defines cultural violence as follows: these are

> those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence (Galtung, 1990, p. 291).

This definition indicates that cultural violence is different from structural violence and can serve to justify (or legitimize) it. This kind of cultural legitimacy of the social structure is, for example, the case of the subordinate position of women in comparison to men in some Muslim countries. Similarly, structural violence can be further used to legitimize certain acts of direct violence. Although the above description implies a layered relationship between the three indicated forms of violence, Galtung finds this way of presenting their interdependence misleading. Instead, he claims that they constitute three aspects of violence, each of which – under favourable circumstances – can be fundamental and lead to the other two (hence he considers the triangle diagram to be more adequate to illustrate their interdependencies).

As an example, Galtung gives the history of slavery. In this case, the first "step" was direct violence (capture, transport, forced labour), which only after many years of practicing "settled down" in the form of structural violence (white race supremacy), and finally – after the disappearance of the classic forms of slavery – took the form of "subcutaneous" social tensions and "faded" academic categories (like "discrimination" and "prejudice"). According to Galtung, this kind of academic "sanitation of language (…) itself [is a form of] cultural violence" (Galtung, 1990, p. 295).

In closing this section, it can be stated that the three indicated forms of violence define three dimensions within which the phenomenon of violence functions. Each of these dimensions has an entirely different dynamics and time perspective, making it possible for them to interact in many different configurations. Direct violence is related to short-time events meaning short episodes of individual actions. Structural violence, in turn, has the character of long-term trends, which may even last for generations. Finally, cultural violence – the longest of them all – takes the form of, let us say, "pulsating background" and thus constitutes the final point of reference for the other two. Thus, guided by structural and cultural violence categories, the social researcher enters a broad, historical time dimension. In this context, they fulfil the expectations of Fernand Braudel included in the essay *History and Sociology*. The French historian writes there as follows:

> A sociology of events clutters up our libraries, the files of governments and businesses. Far be it from me to revolt against the fashion or declare it useless. But whatever can its scientific value be, if it does not record the direction, the speed or slowness, the ascent or descent of the movement that carries along any social phenomenon, and if it does not attach itself to the movement of history, to the resounding dialectic which runs from the past to the present, and even to the future? (Braudel, 1980, pp. 79–80).

CONCLUSION

The researchers distinguished the examples of structural violence indicated in the article based on an arbitrarily assumed field of observation, intentionally narrowed in terms of a specific research goal. However, all these phenomena are closely related, as they are a manifestation of one, common to all of them, original violent structure. Hence, direct violence is still the theoretical point of reference for all researchers of structural violence (although it does not have to appear as one of its aspects). The main difficulty associated with countering violence is that its one case that has been fought in one area may soon come to the fore in another, so far less protected or simply overlooked. In this sense, we can talk about the plasticity of violence, which can smoothly adapt to the existing possibilities of expression. For example, where

it can no longer take the form of physical discrimination, it can still manifest as "innocent" legalistic violence. This explains why the fight against structural violence sometimes resembles the fight against the mythical Lernaean Hydra, which, when Hercules cut off one of her heads, immediately replaced it with another.

The fight against structural violence is so difficult, above all, because it deals with contents that most of the society is simply unaware of. Since these contents are located below the threshold of consciousness most people take them over completely mechanically (along with the acculturation process) and further reproduce. Efforts to neutralize this content must take the form of a gradual re-education of the society, especially of the youngest generation. It is the young people who should be the key to overcoming the violent status quo. Changing their worldview – which is surely simpler than it would be in the case of older generations – will affect both their parents' generation as well as – in foreseeable future – the forthcoming one. Activities of this kind can be undertaken both by primary and higher education (in the latter case, a special role should be assigned to social and humanities departments). An important role should also be played by grassroots social initiatives (foundations, social movements, civic initiatives), which would raise the awareness of the problem among wide social groups. To fight structural violence, it is surely not enough to have conscious and committed politicians, it is necessary to have a conscious and committed society.

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