

Introduction: On Conflict and Violence

Cristian Ciocan, Paul Marinescu

University of Bucharest

In the world we live in, the presence of violence is undeniable: its phenomenal field spreads from extreme forms of destruction, which often set the bloody milestones of our history, to expressions entangled in our everyday life. Equally undeniable is the destabilizing effect that the experience of violence has on those who are involved, under different hypostases, as victims, actors, or witnesses. Indeed, throughout the experience of violence—regardless of its historical or everyday expression—the constitutive dimensions of subjectivity get distorted in relationship with the body, affectivity and understanding, otherness, spatiality, and temporality.

For example, if we refer to primary violence, when individuals confront one another physically, the relationship with my own body is reset according to the double framing of “I can”: since my own body can be both an agent of violence and a sufferer of violence, I can equally produce or endure pain. Going forward, violence—taking the form of atrocity—can push any attempt at understanding it as such to the limits of representation, thus opposing the rational, the discursive, and the meaningful. Violence can also alter any confrontation between I and You, modulating alterity into adversity, throughout any episode of interpersonal conflict or even crime. Violence is at the same time a happening, in the sense of a disruptive event that engages the existential possibilities of spatiality and temporality. Thus violent interactions between subjects can take various forms depending on how we define the human dwelling and what stands outside of it, as well as the border between inside and outside, proximity and distance; each of these territorial areas can prompt specific forms of violence. While violence varies according to the modalities of territoriality—the proximity of the “here” and the distance of the “there”—the situation is slightly different if we focus on the essential possibilities of temporalization in their relation to violence. Violence is temporalized differently depending on the three ekstases of the past, present, and future.

This can clearly be seen when violence is experienced as present and as the efficacy of presence, with the emphasis lying on sensitivity and bodily vulnerability, on pain and suffering. Or when violence is temporalized in the direction of the past, in connection with memory, it manifests as trauma of affectivity and as a trace or scar of an embodied vulnerability. Or finally, when violence is experienced as a future, as a threatening possibility that stands before us, it takes the form of fear and terror.

Given its irruptive presence and its manifold distorting effects on the fundamental dimensions of subjectivity, the phenomenon of violence constitutes a real challenge for any attempt at in-depth philosophical questioning, especially when focusing on how it is given and appears in our experience. In phenomenology, the questions of violence and of related phenomena (conflict, force, power, war, terror, vulnerability, suffering, murder, etc.) have recurrently been tackled, although rather marginally, in the writings of the authors belonging to the “phenomenological canon.” Most of the questioning has dealt with this topic in reaction to the violent history of the 20th century. But it is only during the past two decades that violence has been discussed by phenomenologists in a more applied manner, not only in a series of collective volumes, but also in works of authors such as James Dodd, James Mensch, Michael Staudigl, or Bernhard Waldenfels.

On a more general level, the premise of the present issue of *Studia Phenomenologica* is that phenomenology, by virtue of its being anchored in the concrete experience of subjectivity, of its specific conceptual endeavour and descriptive approach, has a unique theoretical potential not only to understand how the various aspects of violence are articulated with fundamental existential structures, but also to bring to light the intertwined meanings of the phenomenon of violence. In particular, the present issue is engaged in the task of capturing the complexity of the experience of violence by criss-crossing phenomenological perspectives on intersubjectivity (e.g., the problem of the hostile other, understood as an adversarial alterity), affectivity (e.g., the emergence of irritation, anger, wrath, and rage as a condition for conflict), and embodiment (e.g., the problem of vulnerability and of the infliction of pain intended by those involved in the factual situation of violence, having murder, the ultimate violence, as a limit). Another major reflection at stake is to consider how these structures of the phenomenon of violence are modalized according to the essential possibilities of spatiality and temporality, either by coming to the fore, or by fading, or by changing their configuration. In this case, it is only the description of the variations of the phenomenon of violence as a whole that can indeed reveal the modifications of its fundamental structures.

The articles published in this special issue address this topic in various ways. The dossier opens with **Bernhard Waldenfels**' article, which shows that our topic cannot be phenomenologically addressed starting from the basic

question “*what* is violence,” but only by describing the processes through which something becomes violence, in the plural metamorphoses of this phenomenon. Focusing on the intersubjective duality of victim and perpetrator, Waldenfels understands violence as an addressing act aiming to annihilate the addressee, thus involving the reification of the other—namely, his/her transformation into a thing, through a negation of his/her claim of being. However, this negation (a “no”) does not appear as such, but it is often disguised in various metamorphoses. As such, violence is a phenomenon that shows itself precisely by hiding itself, in connection with various related phenomena (such as exerting power, coercion, or acting in someone else’s place), involving our senses in different ways (as in hostile touch, coercive hearing, or intrusive seeing, etc.). The metamorphoses of this kind of tacit violence implicate various mechanisms, such as making victims into accomplices or anonymisation through hiding behind circumstances, roles, functions, or institutions. In exploring the areas of violence, Waldenfels shows that even if everydayness is the basic ground for diverse forms of violence (varying from thoughtlessness to intimidation and harassment), it is nevertheless not limited to it, since it can play a decisive role in other areas as well, such as economics, politics, administration, or medicine.

Pascal Delhom focuses on the experience of endured violence, asking precisely what it means to be subjected to violence. He argues that the experience of being hurt, following the assumption of a malignant intention or at least of a responsibility, should be analysed first of all in relation to the radical passivity of the subject, and then in regard to the conscious perception of injury in the active constitution of this experience. Starting from the tension between the act of consciousness that constitutes its object and the radical passivity of the suffering, the author distinguishes three types of suffered violence: intrusion (of a foreign element into one’s own existential space, harming one’s integrity); exclusion (from one’s own physical or social environment, destroying one’s belongingness); and coercion (being forced to act and behave in a manner against one’s own will, limiting one’s existential liberty). In relation to these three types of endured violence, Delhom explores the three modalities in which it can be given for a phenomenological approach: in living it as such in one’s own direct experience, in witnessing violence as it is endured by others, and in hearing others’ testimonies about the violence they or someone else have suffered. The author analyses the difficulties and limitations of each of these three ways of givenness of suffered violence for a reliable phenomenological approach.

It is precisely such a genuine testimony of endured violence that is taken into consideration by **James Mensch**’s inquiry. Starting from a phenomenological reading of Jean Améry’s *At the Mind’s Limits*, a biographical account recalling the detention period and torture endured in Breendonk and Auschwitz under the Nazi regime, Mensch phenomenologically explores the

relation between violence and trust. Trust is understood as a basic form of our “being-in-the-world,” and as such, it is constitutive for the intersubjective world, for the world lived as “for everyone.” Following Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Mensch shows that this basic “trust in the world” is constituted by embodiment, in the intertwining of sensing and being sensed, in the reciprocal inherence of the within and the without, and by intersubjectivity: the trust in the world that grounds any perceptual faith is also anchored in and mediated by the trust in others through which a common world is given. Mensch investigates the way in which violence (and especially torture) radically undermines this basic trust in relation to the world, to the others, and finally to the self. Discussing yet other violent examples (such as the annihilation of aboriginal cultures by European colonists, or the destruction of the small Peruvian village Uchuraccay), Mensch shows that in the experience of endured violence, the world as such becomes alien to the human subject, and in this estrangement, human beings no longer find their place in the world, becoming ontologically homeless.

Michael Staudigl continues his long-term engagement with the phenomenology of violence, aiming to explore the discursive legitimization of violence, focusing mainly on war as collective violence. The discursive process of legitimation in which reason affirms its own counter-violence in relation to the other, seen as fundamentally “irrational, violent, cruel,” is first read in the margin of the “war machine” of Ancient Greeks (namely, in Plato, Thucydides, and Herodotus). The difference Greeks–Barbarians mirrors the difference between the rational and irrational parts of the soul in the architectonic of the human being, articulating the “just violence” against outside forces and the “violent justice” inside the polis. This “war machine” of the Greeks in which violence primordially belongs to the abject other while reason is legitimately counter-violent, constitutes the framework of any subsequent “political economy of violence” in European history, up to the genocide in the Americas or the institutionalized crimes of the 20th century (the “barbarian” being replaced by the “cannibal,” the “heretic,” the “sorcerer,” the “terrorist”). Staudigl emphasizes the idea that the discourse on violence is constitutive for the phenomenon of violence—namely, that it pre-structures all the social practices of violence—in order finally to focus on the “poetics of collective violence” and on the imaginary constructs engendering violence.

The reflection on war is also tackled by **Burkhard Liebsch**. Under the title of “polemological considerations,” the author aims at a phenomenological revelation of the *logos* of the *polemos*. In order to achieve a comprehension of “what war is” and a determination of the “meaning of warfare,” the author opposes the idea of an “inescapable rule of war” present in various theories of war that approach this topic in an indifferent manner as a neutral object of thought. Instead, Liebsch pleads, in the wake of Levinasian non-indifferent thinking, for a phenomenological understanding anchored in the

very proximity of war. Despite the Kantian hope for an “eternal peace,” there is always a fragile equilibrium between the dominion of peace and the dominion of war, since the promises of peace marked by any treaties are not absolute guarantees of peace. Essential in this context is the understanding of the process of becoming enemies that is preliminary to any war, be it classic war or new war (cyber-war, information war, economic war, etc.). Liebsch finally argues that the phenomenological approach to war should consider precisely how we are exposed to war—namely, how the present actuality of war affects us in contrast to imaginary representation or theoretical distant approaches—yet should also consider how a resistance to such a rule of war can be envisioned starting from the experience of war lived in proximity.

The fact that there are phenomena capable, through their complex architecture, of dismantling or of leading to a reformulation of phenomenological description is no longer a novelty for research today. Social violence is a good example of such a phenomenon, which—as **Delia Popa** explains in her article—shows a strong resistance to the phenomenological reduction. Not only does social violence alter the subject’s ability to give meaning to experience, but its field of manifestation spreads at the level of the social structures within which subjective life as such is constituted. Under the effect of social violence, the subject suffers a sort of alienation, or more precisely, a “loss of contact” with him/herself and others, a “specific forcing” of perception. As such, social violence can only be the object of a phenomenological description provided that the latter’s frameworks are modified, in the sense of an openness to the necessary literary, psychoanalytic, sociological, and political reflections. This explains Delia Popa’s careful consideration of literary testimonies about various situations of social violence: its goal is to release the descriptive dimensions—such as heterogeneity, solidarity, and anchorage—capable of ensuring that phenomenological description has access to the meaning of social violence.

In the case of a phenomenology of social violence, it is necessary to distinguish between a so-called neutral “monstration” of this phenomenon—which could ultimately legitimize it—and a phenomenological description that necessarily involves a critical and ethical dimension. This guidance derived from Delia Popa’s paper could serve very well as an introduction to **Irene Breuer**’s article focused on places and memorials of violence. In fact, the horror of any genocide and the brutal violence leading to the atrocious annihilation of races or people have already been the subject of some well-known reflections tackling the question of the limits of representation in particular. However, Irene Breuer succeeds very well in providing a fresh look at this approach. The original note lies in the way she tackles the question of how the unspeakable character of violence can be expressed: the accent is no longer placed on discursive representation, but on place memory, on monuments as symbolic commemorations, or at a more general level, on the architecture capable of

developing a narrative function. Like the written word, argues Irene Breuer, architecture can also have a commemorative function, especially by “its affective and narrative power over implaced bodies.” However, the relationship between place, violence, and memory becomes much more problematic and challenging when the commemorated event refers to an unimaginable violence that suspends history. In order to understand the event of such violence, one could follow Derrida’s strategy of questioning presence and gradually erasing its correlative ontological significance. Such a project finds an echo in the works of some contemporary architects who have tried to bring absence to bodily experience. Eisenman’s and Libeskind’s memorials in Berlin are proof of this: here, as Irene Breuer claims, the spatial synthesis of heterogeneous elements is either delayed or fractured, thus making the work of mourning possible.

Violence can sometimes take the form of salvage, especially when it is exercised at the hermeneutic level: this would be, in short, the main idea that **Mihai Ometiță** argues for. After delineating what is at stake in the Davos debate between Heidegger and Cassirer, Ometiță distinguishes the hermeneutical attitudes that animated the two philosophers in their way of reading Kant, while discussing their stances toward hermeneutic realism, hermeneutic relativism, and last but not least, the option for the historical objectivity of the interpretation. Once the context and the dynamics of the debate have been clarified, the author seeks to shed light on what he calls the rationale of hermeneutic violence in Heidegger. He suggests that in Heidegger, hermeneutic violence plays the role of a genuine method of interpreting texts, a method that comprises two moves. The first—appropriation—involves clarifying the presuppositions of the interpreter who engages this hermeneutic experience. The second—elaboration—seeks to critically limit the projection of meaning coming from the interpreter by confronting it with the whole of the text. Both moments of hermeneutic violence target one and the same “object”: the ossified reception of a text within an interpretive milieu dominated by the “impersonal authoritarianism of idle talk.” At the end of this spirited article, however, we cannot help but wonder: is this violence, which Heidegger endows with hermeneutic expressions, really a method of interpreting the meaning of texts, or is it just a hermeneutic attitude that merely prepares the ground for a true understanding?

For those familiar with Claude Romano’s considerations on eventual hermeneutics, it is obvious that the event can exceed the significant openness provided by our being-in-the-world and can surpass the possible that can be subjectively orchestrated. The event can prove, in its disruption, a form of creative violence. Even though it does not belong to the world, the event can reconfigure the world; this is precisely what **Chiara Pesaresi** shows throughout her subtle reflection on the meaning that the event acquires in Patočka’s and Maldiney’s thinking. The “cross-reading” she carries out between Patočka

and Maldiney aims at bringing into dialogue two theories that—despite differences of approach—share a common concern for understanding the event in its anarchic character, in its ability to generate crisis. Indeed, for both philosophers, the different forms of the relationship between event and crisis are in fact different ways in which existence is exposed to an unsettling abyssality, either at the individual level (Maldiney) or at the historical level (Patočka). Chiara Pesaresi's cross-interpretation manages to highlight another common element in both phenomenological psychopathology and phenomenological reflection on the meaning of history: namely, the uprooting event that—through its display of the experience of conflict and non-sense—deeply enhances the subject's capacity to receive and meet the other, understood in its intersubjective and communal dimension.

There are several topics in Ricœur's philosophy that constantly give rise to thought: besides the symbol and evil, we could add violence as well. This is the starting point of the article **Jason W. Alvis** dedicates to Ricœur's thinking, specifically to the relationship between violence and religion. To capture the particularity of this relationship, the author examines three articles Ricœur wrote between 1955 and 1999, dealing with the question of violence in different contexts, such as ethical, political, and religious. Despite the time span between the three articles, Alvis manages to outline the coherent and unitary character of Ricœur's various reflections on violence and even to formulate the unique thesis supporting them. To put it briefly, for Ricœur, violence does not have a constitutive character either for religious or political experience. The negative expression suggests that at the core of his position there stands a critical response to certain already existing theories; indeed, when Ricœur situates violence at the level of the subject's capacity, as an internal uncontrollable reality, he distances himself from theories claiming that violence derives from human beings' attempts to create the transcendent (Maurice Bloch's *La Violence du religieux*). Likewise, while Ricœur takes violence to be only the "dark side" of the political, and not the whole of it, he could have in mind Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*—more precisely, his way of considering violence as constitutive of the political. Formulated in a positive register, Ricœur's thesis claims that the violence manifested within a historical community is a residual violence, and the main form it can take is the constant threat in and to religious and political experience. As such, Alvis concludes, violence offers a "productive disclosure" of our ethical, political, and religious atmospheres of experience.

In his article, **Michael Barber** offers a defence of Levinas's view against the recent criticism made by Eddo Evink in relation to "transcendental violence," a notion coined by Derrida in his reading of *Totality and Infinity*. After summarizing the objections Evink raises against Levinas's view and showing their partial coherence with Derrida's critique in *Violence and Metaphysics* (the violence of naming, the violence of knowing, the violence of concept, the

violence of intentionality, the violence of trauma and obsession, the violence of the summons of the other, the violence of the desire for the absolute), Barber advocates the view that Levinas's position is somewhat more subtle than Evink believes. He detects in Evink's critique the tendency to continue to understand the Levinasian movement "against Being" in an ontological framework, while the entire Levinasian intrigue should instead be placed beyond the ontological domain. Barber also criticizes Derrida's tendency to "entrap" Levinas within the framework of negative theology (which still remains a form of ontological approach): what Derrida disregards throughout his interpretation is precisely that in Levinas, the ethical "otherwise than being" has no common measure with ontology. Thus Barber emphasizes that Evink's and Derrida's insistence on a supposedly "transcendental violence" in relation to Levinas's genuine ethical intentions is somewhat misleading.

Our issue concerning conflict and violence closes with an open conclusion. And this is not just an ordinary figure of speech, especially when the final paper gives us a short yet striking reflection on an undecidable in Derrida—the gift and the kind of violence it implies. **Leonard Lawlor** conducts a two-step analysis of this topic. First, he aims to reconstruct the logic of the gift in light of its correlative aporia, listed by Derrida in *Given Time*. Of particular interest is the aporia that captures the double violence of the gift: when it is understood as a gift, it demands a counter-gift; when it is not recognized as such, the gift has the violence of a total sur-prise. Second, after having highlighted the impossible character of the pure gift, Lawlor dives deeper by analyzing the possible ways of approximating the pure gift and what can be inherently prescribed for the impure/pure gift. The case of counterfeit money, discussed by Derrida starting from one of Baudelaire's stories, exposes the way in which the gift could generate impure/pure violence. However, prescribing this kind of gift-giving can lead to disastrous consequences, as Lawlor shows, if it were to be extended to friendship or love.¹

¹ The editorial work on this issue is part of the project *The Structures of Conflict: A Phenomenological Approach to Violence* (PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2016-0273) funded by UEFISCDI.