Considerations on the Relationship Between Violence, Social Fear, and Urban Transformations[*]

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The purpose of this paper is to reflect on violence, social fear, and urban transformations in order to elicit some discussions about the relationship between these phenomena and their possible repercussions in the life of the social actors that inhabit the cities. In this way, we intend to initiate our reflection by deconstructing the binary character of violence in relation to the conceptual framework already known, proposing an approach to its characteristic, that is, to conceive it as a movement. We also intend to explain the feeling of fear as a mechanism of survival, its social particularity of orchestration and its implications in the lives of the urban social actors. Furthermore, we aim at explaining the urban transformations that are closely linked to the metropolises, highlighting their peculiarities and their consequences in order to emphasize the impacts on their inhabitants. In this way, we intend to conclude this study with some considerations regarding the interactions between these three phenomena that are strongly interrelated with life in the great metropolises.

Keywords: violence, social fear, social memory, city

Introduction

In order to approach the complexity outlined by the approximation among these three phenomena, it is prudent to resort to the Aristotelian exhortation about his conception of city as it follows: "And not only does a city consist of a multitude of human beings, it consists of human beings differing in kind" (Aristotle, 1959). If we take this quotation literally, we find that the heterogeneity, both relative to human dynamism or its different architectural configuration, is a characteristic of cities. Following the line of reasoning proposed in the Aristotelian legacy, Velho (1996, p. 10) pointed out that "the difference is both the basis of social life and a permanent source of tension and conflict", so it should be added, even being extremely obvious, that cities, that are full of differences, antagonisms, and paradoxes, are also a purely human invention, motivated by the accumulation, consumption, and production of waste. Next, we make use of the excerpt "violence is inherent in the life of metropolises" (Lessa, 2000, p. 17) to draw the first stage of our analysis: the relationship between violence and city.

Closely linked to violence, there is the social fear as a strong power that regulates the dynamism of cities and being often used by the state apparatus to justify serving some regions of the city while abandoning others. Here is the second vector of our analysis.

Considering the issue of violence related to social fear, we reach the third aspect of this study, the urban transformations, by analyzing them from different angles, mainly in terms of the need to carry them out.

In relation to violence, we would like to point out that we consider the conceptual framework already produced, but we will choose a certain path for our considerations. It is the understanding of violence as a universal phenomenon, relative to the constitution of the universe, which follows the laws of destruction and creation, and therefore is not possible to eliminate from the bosom of the human condition.

Regarding social fear, we consider it as a social creation linked to violence used as a prerogative for the development of social dynamics that can generate certain actions and processes. The circumscription that we intend to carry out derives from the context that focuses on social fear as one of the vectors, potentially used to justify, roughly, the realization of urban transformations, many of them motivated by interests that deviate from human well-being.

In this way, urban transformations in large metropolises are almost always seen as projects whose expressions mark the auspices of the classes that hold power. It is interesting to note that the diffusion of the need for urban transformation reaches, in a global way, a consensus that converts into naturalization.

The Chaos, the Order, and the Movement of Violence

In the human and social sciences, most of the readings of violence do not escape from a binary approach, in which the concept of violence assumes two extremes. When the aspects of malignity, destructiveness, and contagion are evident, it is usually said that the violence resulting from these effects has negative connotations. However, any action that threatens life and freedom is also considered negative forms of violence.

Nowadays, there are other meanders to think about violence, either because of its negativity as exemplified by Mbembe (2018), or because of its positivity, as characterized in situations of cooperation that result from violent actions.

By choosing an understanding that is not guided by the dimensions mentioned hitherto, we begin by sketching violence from one of its characteristics, since, according to Han (2017), violence is immanent to the state of chaos, the origin of life, its maintenance and its purpose. When thinking of violence as a movement, we could claim it as the vestige of the most pregnant memory that constantly reminds us of our state of transience and vulnerability, in the same way as it makes us reflect on the instability of the world and everything that exists in it. In this sense, violence is, according to Sofsky (2006, p. 8), "omnipresent. It dominates the history of the human species from the beginning to the end. Violence engenders chaos and order engenders violence".

We need to go deeper into this approach to violence. Firstly, because it refers to the origin of relations between human beings, understood as a state of shock, that is, a meeting between two worldly things, an explanatory principle of all and any organization, extending to humans in terms of movement, but also of immobility.

This dichotomous way of understanding the issue produced a negative meaning for understanding the chaos produced by violence, without paying attention to the fact that the order called for by pacification movements is also a producer of violence. Therefore, both chaos and order are embedded in violence, which is why we cannot follow a linear reasoning of cause and effect, so that we do not run the risk of categorizing things based on reflections full of binaries and tight ideas.

In short, any human action that disregards precariousness is, according to Butler (2004), violence, often in completely irreversible ways, producing indelible traces in the history of humanity. It is worth emphasizing that once we are aware of the precarious condition of life, we must adopt some principles of reciprocity in the context of recognition, and that is, we must be aware that every form of life is grievable. Moreover, we understand order, chaos, and movement not as tight terms, but rather as part of a dynamic that interweaves them through violence.

The Feeling of Fear and Its Social Orchestration

We begin the reflection on social fear from its conceptual significance in consonance with Baierl (2004), who understands fear, in general, as a feeling of huge importance for the maintenance of life. It is a natural alert that shows us risk situations, an inherent factor in living beings, putting them in readiness for a possible reaction or escape to the situation of imminent danger.

In their journeys, living beings adapt to certain situations in which they face warning signs, developing reactions of impotence, escape, avoidance, or confrontation. As for survival, fear has the connotation of preservation. However, the range of reactions may derive from social learning. In this way, the reaction to fear is distinguished from fear itself by not being natural, but rather learned and socially constructed over time and arising from certain situations that require an answer or reaction in response to that stimulus. In this respect, Baierl (2004, p. 39) pointed out that "fear has been used as an instrument of people manipulation, subjugating them, making them slaves of particular individuals, groups or situations". That is, from the feelings and sensations of fear towards certain situations in certain social contexts, this natural feeling of alert becomes then an instrument for forms of domination and control among the human beings through a socially constructed reaction for those ends.

Given this fact, regarding social fear, we bring this question out to understand the dynamics of life in the great human settlements that inhabit the cities, in a kind of encounter marked by the production of survival mechanisms, a process that often overlaps the bonds of solidarity in circumstances of social fractures which show violent actions.

Thus, we begin to take into consideration life in big cities, full of circumstances which, at any moment, can trigger us feelings of fear, whether it is because of traffic routes, imminent sources of danger to the lives of passers-by who need to get around cars, buses, and trucks at high speed; either by its monumental skyscrapers that due to gigantic height raise, from its top, reactions of vertigo in the face of the possibility of falling, being therefore configured as a source of threat to life.

In addition, there are other risks in big cities related mainly to the condition that refers to their creation, that is, the huge accumulation that ends up generating social inequalities, the main reason of conflicts between social actors that compose societies based on a capitalist and neoliberal system that preaches a strong individualism, leading to everyday situations marked by violence, such as thefts, robberies, assaults, homicides, among others that enhance social actors of certain signs of danger and attention, making fear a common feeling.

Deepening the question, we make use of Velho's observation (1996, p. 17) about individualism that, by occupying "spaces previously characterized by face-to-face contact, physical violence has become routine, becoming a mark of everyday life", that is, we can infer that social actors less and less interact or create affective bonds between them, bonds that are essential for a peaceful and harmonious coexistence.

In this way, with the increase of violence in large urban areas, social actors change their routines, their social relations, their daily paths, their schedules, their leisure environments, even modifying their distribution in urban space in search of a possible escape to this feeling of fear that affects society almost in an epidemic way. All these reactions vary from social actor to social actor, because they bump into their singularities, which dictate the way in which a certain type of reaction will be presented in front of the different types of situation that trigger it. Therefore, humans, as well as animals, must have sensitivity to the signs of danger and know the fear, individually and collectively, in managing the necessary conditions for survival.

Given the observed aspects of social fear, we highlight an interesting analysis made by Bursztyn (2000, p. 39) on the process of concealment of social violence, which, in its first stage, is carried out through the elaboration process of an ideological discourse of disqualification "in which a demonized image of the other is built, associated with problems of disorder, insecurity, epidemics and criminality, serving as a legitimation to a rupture of the social contract". That is, it is the use of social fear as an operationalization of an instrument that, due to the violence itself or even under the heading of hiding an arbitrary and violent action, justifications are created based on certain social aspects that refer to the feeling of fear, which makes the social actors predispose to pay high prices not to face fear. Besides these aspects, we can then denote the interconnection between social fear and violence, phenomena that sneak, side by side, in the urban environment of big cities, mainly with the purpose of realizing certain urban transformations that use social fear to hide social violence.

The Interface Between Urban Transformations, Violence and Social Fear

Cities are characterized by a socio-spatial construction that is constantly changing due to the dynamics related to the functioning of society, its mode of production, the obstacles derived from the passage of time and natural phenomena.

In order to put an end to the transformations of the urban space, with creations and disappearances of regions, it is imperative to use arguments that underlie these works. Therefore, aiming at interests, just as capitalism creates necessities for products to be marketed in order to supply them, ways of justifying urban transformations are devised, so that they have the necessary means to put them into practice, such as popular support, financial support, permissions, and licenses of government agencies.

The means often used to carry out these works are a rigorous and insightful process of orchestration of fear in social actors so that, once convinced and coerced, they give backing, even if the consequences are subjectively harmful or costly. Usually the use of this strategy is powerful to master and control population segments under the claim of dangerousness of these contingents through the propagation of hygienic and eugenic discourses linked to the risk of spreading diseases; discourses based on violence, disorder, and crime; discourses linked to decadence, abandonment, and unproductiveness.

Another aspect of space, in general, is presented by Santos (2014) who describes it as the "locus" of reproduction of social relations of production, and must be analyzed in relation to four categories: form, function, structure, and process. Based on this point of view, we then converge to the analysis of the complexity that arises when we take as the focus of discussion the city crossed by violence in the form of social fear that assumes its own contours in these four categories: Violence modifies the form and dynamism of cities; social fear creates particular circumstances in relation to its function and structure, giving rise to the production of zones considered safe, generally well illuminated by the state's view and areas considered insecure relegated, almost always, to abandonment.

In relation to this, we find in Corrêa (2000) the sense that, in the case of cities, the form would be the visible face, easily detectable, being, therefore, the scenario in which the wear and tear derived from natural and human obstacles are readily apparent, configuring themselves in spaces of fear and dread, thus obliging their circulators to decide on the paths to be followed or avoided. It is worth noting that the form, in spite of the other categories, is the aspect that deserves greater consideration when attempting to make an urban transformation. However, it is worth mentioning that these four categories are inseparable aspects for a careful analysis of space.

The life cycle of large metropolises, especially in relation to the aspect of their form dynamically modified by new functions and those that disappear, producing distinct profiles, shows signs of aging and wear, which, depending on interests, can be considered as motivations for large enterprises of urban reforms or even to be naturalized and ignored. Often, before the resistance from social groups, these signs are not very consistent to justify a revitalization process. In this case, the authorities resort to an element of great functional content: the imposition of social fear, by assigning a negative connotation to the region, either on the grounds of being the focus of epidemics or concentrating "violent" people or even socially segregated, due to their ethnic and economic characteristics.

No matter how efficient an urban reform is, in the sense of not leaving a visible vestige of a city's past, it is not possible to disassociate the content related to the dynamism of a city from its form, that is, from the geographic objects arranged in space since each form brings with it a part of the content of that society. In this way, to follow this path, according to Santos (2014, pp. 30-31), means to conceive that space is "a set of forms each containing fractions of society in motion. Therefore, forms have a role in social attainment".

Nevertheless, we are not proposing a relation of linear determination between the trilogy chosen in this reflection, since the terms violence, social fear, and urban transformations conform true concentric circles in a kind of paradoxical web, that is, each movement in one of them directly affects others as well as is also affected. Thus, we have a dynamic that, curiously, has no beginning or ending, since we can only seize it in a process.

Figure 1. Conceptual operators (Source: Abrahão, 2018).

Therefore, processes of conservation and destruction are also forms of violence, especially if we consider what motives lead a culture to conserve or destroy regions of a city, on the grounds of transmitting a legacy to future generations or revitalize in order to fulfill economic interests and speculative manifests.

As a matter of reflection, it is worth thinking about the fate of considerable sums from the public money to reform buildings placed under governmental trust, compared to the amount related to housing policies: It is important to preserve, but it is equally important to produce solutions for adults in situation of social abandonment, so that they do not sleep on the sidewalks and do not starve to death in big cities, the "locus" that best demonstrates the process of social inequality.

Thus, we are lead to relativize what we understand by violence, not in the sense of minimizing it, but in relation to its present condition in the history of humanity, as an essential prerequisite for life, since we understand violence as a sense of movement.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we tried to understand the interrelationships between violence, social fear, and urban transformations and their repercussions in urban social actors.

We realized a deconstruction of the concept of violence and we conceived it as a network phenomenon, unavoidable in the organization of the universe due to the principle that when we consider all bodies in moving space, the ever-present friction configures its structural form of existence. When we consider the movement, directly linked to time and space as precedents to the universe, we can reflect on the endless character of violence.

Subsequently, we explained the phenomenon of social fear and its connection with violence, being used as a device of control over social actors for certain purposes. By its use, especially in cities, its peculiarity of urban agglomerations linked to the forms and structures linked to the capitalist system which, at the height of the rise of neoliberalism, preaches an individualist society that extinguishes bonds of affection among social actors, constituting increasingly violent cities and societies, from the development of huge ditches between social segments that configure colossal inequalities, side by side, in urban space.

In this way, we consider the urban space as something alive, so we can think of the transformations through different processes that, through the dynamics between forms, functions, and processes, cause spatial transformations that directly impact on the contingent of actors that inhabit it. These processes of urban transformation reveal to us that for their realization various types of justification are used, even making use of social fear, which softens the subjective damages to the social actors, through arguments that persuade them.

Regarding the complex relationship among these phenomena, it was possible to conceive that violence perpetuates itself in the daily life of the metropolises without supportive subjects, without a majority group, without a dominant class, and the system itself is a kind of self-sustaining ecosystem since it is through a complex network between violence, social fear, and urban transformations that cities arise and develop, but also collapse throughout history.

Finally, we aimed at contributing to the reflection of the theme without the pretension of closing or arriving at tight conclusions. We intend to continue the discussion in order to try to understand these complex networks of violence that have made and are part of human life in order to contribute in some way to the development of alternatives that will lessen their spreading and their perverse effects in society.

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