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Violence of Discourses – Discourses of Violence:

An Introduction

How can we speak about violence in a time which manifests a dislike for the 'givenness' of human facts, in a time that engages in the deconstruction of everything solid, in a time in which the insistence on the constructed nature of social or biological reality has become the order of the day? Do we finally live in a world in which the peaceful and imaginative construction of social relations has prevailed over the brute reality of relentless conflict and unspeakable suffering? While we do not hold the opinion that the critique of essentialism suggests a vision of a world finally reconciled with itself, the question must be raised how violence is inscribed into a world governed by frictions, divisions, and contradictions. The range of possible questions may be addressed from two opposite points of departure: Does violence point to some extra-linguistic social reality in which violence is ubiquitous, or does it collude with larger discursive formations and praxes that are constitutive of that reality? Tacitly or explicitly, the contributions to this volume start from the latter assumption, locating violence within the discursive order of the social. This, to be sure, is not the same as belittling violence to a collateral effect of language games; nor does it imply a dehistoricisation and hence mystification of the manifold instances of violence as so many expressions of one and the same, 'timeless' deep structure. To the contrary, we believe that it is precisely the insight into the discursivity of violence that enables analyses and critiques of different forms of violence in their specificities, it being understood that discourse formations themselves emerge, and change, historically. Thus, the violence of the Spanish conquest of the Americas differs widely from the violence of current ethnic/civil wars, let alone the violence played out in the theatre of the domestic. Yet they are all calibrated by, and inscribed into, particular orders of discourse that require to be analysed in order to arrive at an understanding, if not a critique, of the violence they trigger.

To insist on the discursivity of violence does not, however, imply that concrete acts of violence – whether suffered, observed, or even exerted – were unproblematically representable by way of textualisation, linguistic or otherwise. In fact, a central topos common to a wide range of accounts and testimonies of victims of different sorts of violence is precisely the 'unspeakability' of violence – an additionally painful experience of the hiatus between the lived exposure and its impossible presentation in signification. If violence thus appears to cause the 'end of language', of which it is scandalously in excess, it yet does not stand outside language for all that. The impossibility to communicate the concrete experience of violence much rather brings the fundamental nature of language as a representative system most critically to the fore: The survivor's struggling for words is futile only as long as it is measured against the categorically uncommunicable real of the situation survived. In this respect, however, the exposure to violence does not differ from the most quotidian situations imaginable. Unspeakability is in that sense not unique to violence; what is unique, nevertheless, is the painful insight into that unspeakability.

Nor does the notion that violence is located within discourse involve a claim to control or transparency since discourses can neither be controlled by individuals nor altered on their volition. Discourse, in other words, is taken here not as some imaginary universe opposed to the harsh realities of social power relations; instead, the social emerges itself in the manner of a 'text' as all social acts, following Wittgenstein, are always signifying acts. The social text, then, has no one individual author in full control, nor does it write itself. It rather operates as a weave whose demarcations are not accessible to the subjects implicated within it – even while those very subjects are interpellated in such a way that they continuously reproduce the social text. A matrix of (hierarchical) relations constituted and played out in discursive praxis, the social text provides/prescribes the script for subjectivities that are never autonomous but, instead, governed by discourse.

To locate violence in discourse does not imply that all forms of violence were the same because they could analytically be equally reduced to some discursive 'origin' from which they emanate. Not only would a concept of discourse 'as such' entail a mystification since discourse is itself dynamic and historical; furthermore, distinct discursive formations engender a multiplicity of very different violences. Historical discourse analysis as exemplified in the work of Foucault or in the critique of colonial discourse in the wake of Said's *Orientalism* amply testifies to the complex form(ulation)s of violence in specific situations governed by distinct discursive regimes – from the cartographies of territories and bodies to their exploitative appropriation and disciplinary subjection; from othering systems of representations to late Victorian genocides.

What such narratives reveal is the continuum that pertains between these apparently incommensurate forms of violence.

By contrast, no diagnosis of the present can be produced with comparable lucidity and comprehensiveness. Some contours, however, have begun to emerge. Current political theory emphasises the weakening, if not demise, of the modern regime of legitimate power vested in the nation state as the definite space of representation. If this latter in globalization tends to evacuate the locus of power, the consensus on the state's monopoly of violence collapses, leaving in its wake the arena in which the 'new wars' are waged: no longer in the form of military conflicts between states or state alliances but either as allegedly ethnically motivated civil wars on, and over, the terrains of former nation states, or as transnational campaigns against that conveniently elusive other, 'terror', that can at times assume the guise of the ('rogue') state but mostly exists in the shape of the atopic underground network. Whether phantasmagoric or 'real', the terrorist network shares precisely this atopicality with the global dominant against which it is posited as other. The scene of the 'war on terror' is therefore truly global, neither territorially circumscribed nor temporally bounded, and hence allowing for no clear distinction of inside from outside.

This waning of the erstwhile constitutive demarcation line between inside and outside does obviously pertain to other domains of the social, too. Thus, the increasing privatisation of the former public sphere – in terms of space as well as institutions – tends to undo the public/private dichotomy, virtually effecting the disappearance of both these domains so constitutive for Western modernity. In the process, the symbolic efficiency of the nation-state is undermined from two sides: On the one hand, the nation-state as well as its sociological derivative, 'society', is challenged by 'global' developments and 'transnational' configurations which have, at least to a certain degree, contributed to the dispersion of formerly clearly circumscribed centres of political agency and control. On the other hand, nation-states have seen the erosion of their institutional constitution from within: Not only has the on-going crisis of the inclusion/exclusion problem in globalization contributed to what may be termed the current citizenship regime of 'global apartheid', but it has also reinforced the legal and social quasi-exclusion of vast parts of the population in the very midst of Western societies epitomized by the 'alien resident', the 'illegal migrant', or the working poor. The institutional fabric of society seems to be increasingly punctured by gaps and holes inhabited by subjects not fully defined by legal discourse. It is here, at the very limits of the institutional order of 'advanced societies', that the problem of discourse and violence becomes most virulent, for how can rights and protection be attributed to those who have to do without a proper definition of their social and legal position, who remain 'discursively invisible' as it were? While the antinomies of late-capitalist globalization have

conjured up dilemmas of representation increasingly haunting the cultural, social, and political imaginary, a number of interventions from a diversity of backgrounds have been ventured. By bringing together a number of critical contributions from the social sciences and humanities, this volume envisages to participate in this debate.

Comprising a selection of contributions to the international and interdisciplinary conference on "Discourses of Violence – Violence of Discourses" held at the Univeristy of Magdeburg in July, 2004, this volume reflects the diversity of starting points and perspectives on violence-related issues characteristic of the conference itself. In an attempt to foster the interaction and dialogue between the social sciences and the humanities, *Discourses of Violence – Violence of Discourses* includes articles from a variety of disciplinary and theoretical approaches, ranging from literary criticism to media studies, philosophy to international relations, colonial discourse studies to sociology. The volume is structured into three main chapters that follow up three of the main strands of discussion as they crystallised during the conference. The first set of essays explores, under the title 'aesthetics of textual violence', some of the crucial problems that any act of speaking/writing about violence has to confront. Offering critical readings of literary, pamphletary, and academic texts, the essays assembled not only raise questions concerning the representability of violence in texts, but also point at the violence inscribed into the textual itself.

Dilek Kantar's contribution focuses on the rhetorics of apocalypse as employed by Bartholomé de Las Casas in his *Devastation of the Indies* (1542), the first comprehensive (and highly accusatory) account of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. While Las Casas models his narrative of Spanish atrocities in the New World on the antecedents of Biblical apocalyptic prophecy (most conspicuous in Ezekiel), the religious code itself emerges, on Kantar's reading, as a fascinatingly multi-functional medium that authorises its speaker in a particular way; allows for a complex interplay of revelation and concealment; introduces an ethical manicheanism; and enables the prophetic invocation of future judgments on the perpetrators of large-scale violence.

As an early modern polemicist, Las Casas could still rely on the operativity of a religious master code that invested its speaker, as Dilek Kantar impressively works out, with the authority to even demand of the Spanish King the abolition of the politics of mass-destruction inflicted upon the Amerindians. The figure of the king as sovereignty embodied forms the *leitmotif* of the texts scrutinized by Dagmar Reichardt. As a scenic figure in early postcolonial francophone plays from the 1950s–70s, the king serves as a metaphor for violence and power, but even more an occasion for the articulation of social critique: Instead of subscribing to the paternal French myth of a glamorous king, the authors discussed by Reichardt create their own counter-strategies in order to unmask

the politico-symbolic constructions and constrictions imposed on them by colonialism. The topos of the tumbling king thus indicates a liberation: the discovery, for the dramatic texts, of specific ways of *writing back*.

Maryna Romanets' paper concentrates on 'mad intertextuality' in John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* (1989), Yuri Izdryk's *Wozzeck* (1997) and their precursor text – Georg Büchner's drama *Woyzeck* (1836, published 1879). Romanets reveals a disturbing link between culture, perception, and violence which are all focussed on an artist figure, and which represent fiction about fiction as well as exploring anxieties and pathologies of the male psyche. She compares the ways violence is articulated – either externalized or relegated to the realm of imagination and macabre visions, or in the form of hallucinatory confession as an exposure of a tragic personality split. Romanets tries to present the dualism of characters or spectralized selves and claims that both *The Book of Evidence* and *Wozzeck* are synthesized by a postmodern sensibility, with its aesthetics of citation, nostalgia, and undifferentiatedness. The postmodern stance of the novels makes them – to her mind – marginal, infringed, final, and at the same time open-ended.

Through a reading of Sebald's last novel *Austerlitz* Arne de Boever tries to understand the architectural debate that Austerlitz takes part in. Drawing from the work of the American philosopher Mark C. Taylor, he compares Sebald's project to 'deconstructivist architectural theory' (Philip Johnson), and to works by architects Bernard Tschumi and Daniel Libeskind. De Boever moves from the issues of deconstructivist architecture, and from his discussion on the dematerialisation of modernist architecture (of the violence done to the body by the emphatic attention to surface), into post-Levinasian philosophy. He focuses on the relation between violence and the body, embedded in Giorgio Agamben's work. Through his reading of Agamben and his discussion of the *Wunderkammer*, he focuses on the relation between Austerlitz, deconstruction, and the law. He asks for possibilities to overcome dematerialization in modern literature not by its dialectical opposite, but by non-dialectical means between which the two extremes of the body and of language can be suspended. Arne de Boever argues that the anonymous narrator is our own memory and *Austerlitz* a fictional memory that is perhaps a kind of space in which our own private memories can be released.

In Claire Potter's critique of the discourse on domestic violence, the question of the 'speakability' of violence figures prominently. In her reading of academic writings on domestic violence, Potter detects the recurrence of these two notions: that domestic violence is a phenomenon hidden from the public eye (an absence), and that via writing of/on domestic violence (a presence) the 'mythicality' of domestic harmony can be debunked. Deliberately avoiding the neutral position, this paper confers that these discourses institute a form of

neutral apothecary which in the least eclipses entirely the seriousness of the subject of domestic violence, and at worst promotes explicitly the notion of having contributed to a 'transgressive' body of knowledge, whilst promulgating implicitly a disavowed (Foucaultian) obsession based in the surveillance of (sexual) bodies, other than one's own. Deviating from such ambitions, this paper proposes that if domestic violence exists as concealed, as it is argued by certain authors, then at an earlier time it must have once existed as revealed, since a thing cannot be concealed without having been revealed: following Freud, an idea cannot be repressed without it having been thought – the erasure effected by the 'Mystic Writing-Pad' cannot take place without something having been written.

The second chapter of this volume, 'trajectories of violence', examines the new forms and manifestations of political violence as emerging from, and contributing to, the ongoing processes of globalization. Assuming that violence is inscribed into the very texture of the global social, analyses of globality (and its production) are always also analyses of violence.

L. H. M. Ling exposes the violence inherent in neoliberal discourses by examining the mainstream narratives that framed the Enron collapse in 2001/02 and the Asian financial crisis in 1997/98. She convincingly argues that the ensuing analysis of corruption, due to hegemonic interests, treats both these events quite differently. While corporate corruption in the US is characterised as an unfortunate aberration in an otherwise superior system, Asian banking practices that precipitated the crisis are ultimately attributed to a cultural-moral failing, thus taking recourse to Orientalist discourses of earlier centuries. The same strategy is shown to have been used in post-9/11 political discourse on the war on terror and its justification for military action, another instance of neoliberal neocolonialism ensuring the interests of its elites.

Soenke Zehle revisits the controversy that followed the Rwandan genocide in the context of more recent interventionist media initiatives. He analyses the ICTR's (International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda) 'media trial' that – for the first time since the Nuremberg Trials – examined the role of 'hate media' in the context of international criminal justice. Zehle explores some of its implications for theories of interventionist media: What happens to the idea of an 'intervention' in the context of mass violence, incited and sustained by the media, when 'intervention' is no longer conceptualized in the subversive terms of an autonomous counter-imperial multitude, over and against corporate media spheres and overpowering states, but may have to be rearticulated in the imperial terms of an interventionist 'peace media' in response to violent conflict in weak or failing states. Focusing on the emergence of 'state failure' as a permanent feature of the postcolonial era and as conflict-analytical concern, Zehle identifies possible vectors of inquiry, studies the rise of the media as a

new direction in humanitarian intervention, interprets the media as autonomous actors in conflict-analytical work, and implies an imperial humanitarian interventionism for 'alternative' theories of media.

The growing interest in the cultural history of violence faces a number of significant challenges posed by difficulties in (and disagreements over) identifying the precise role of discourse in maintaining particular constellations of attitudes about violent behavior. In dealing with these issues, historians have become increasingly interested in Norbert Elias's theory of the 'civilizing process'. J. Carter Wood discusses this perspective in his paper with regard to a case study of violence in nineteenth-century England. Although the civilizing process has proven to be very useful, Wood identifies problematic issues raised by Elias's approach. These include the relationship between the civilizing process and culture, the tendency for civilizing and de-civilizing trends to coexist and the impact of different national contexts upon the civilizing process.

Holger Rossow's paper outlines necessary steps towards a critical model for the analysis of the discourse of globalism. While Rossow starts from the assumption that it is necessary to distinguish between what is commonly described as 'globalisation' and globalism, he argues that the discourse of globalism deserves more critical attention than it has hitherto attracted. Globalism is understood as a discourse that (i) claims to provide authoritative descriptions of and explanations for the current processes and phenomena subsumed under the term 'globalisation', (ii) contributes actively to the shaping of 'globalisation' processes and (iii) is continuously shaped itself by those processes. If the discourse of globalism has restructured the whole debate of the causes, dimensions and consequences of 'globalisation', it currently dominates and has authority over all other discourses. Critical and alternative opinions have become forcibly displaced from mainstream discourses on 'globalisation' – the authoritative voice of globalism has become common sense in many domains.

In order to conceptualise social realities from a point of view beyond the nation-state Jens Greve compares world society theories to globalisation theories. In highlighting the differences, he argues that globalisation theory mainly looks at processes which may eventually lead to the unity of the world, whereas world society theory assumes that world society is already a given reality. Furthermore, world society approaches offer a top-down explanation of the events and structures which occur throughout the globe. In contrast, the globalisation outlook mainly conceives of the world as a field of intensifying interactions and as something that increasingly serves as a common point of reference. While Greve suggests starting from the assumption of a world society, he opts for a weak conception of world society and criticises a strong conception according to which world society is identified with world culture (Meyer) or established functional differentiation (Luhmann). It is argued that

there are at least four themes where insights of globalisation theory can be used to criticise and complement world society theory: the significance of local culture, the simultaneity of homogeneity and heterogeneity, the challenge to modern culture, and the dynamic element in culture.

Under the heading of 'thinking through violence', a third group of essays engages with analytical approaches to the production and reproduction of discursive violence: either by offering critical readings of the very processes through which violence materialises concretely in the social order, or by presenting theoretical propositions that themselves engage critically with actual formations of violence, and possible alternatives.

Petra Kuppinger's paper deals with the dramatic changes the world has experienced since September 11. Kuppinger is rather concerned about how September 11 and the political crisis in its aftermath have figured in public debates and events in a small town context in the United States. She asks how global events are being discussed, and in which discursive contexts different kinds of knowledge are articulated in a particular local context. Identifying a few exemplary sites of public debates, Kuppinger studies these with regard to their social context and points out discursive fields and conceptual categories that dominate these debates. Subsequently, she identifies issues that most urgently need to be addressed, and/or deconstructed in order to facilitate more adequate debates, which could contribute to a revised understanding of the Middle East and the Muslim world. Finally, Kuppinger pleads for adopting mediating roles and responsibilities that small town intellectuals can and should take up in local public debates in times of political crises and daily bloodshed.

Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism, as read by Ulf Schulenberg, is undoubtedly one of the most stimulating and thought-provoking versions of American neopragmatism. Schulenberg delineates how West's complex theoretical endeavour offers new perspectives on the question of pragmatism and its usefulness for contemporary leftist theory. Concentrating on two aspects, Schulenberg seeks to explain West's understanding of prophetic pragmatism as radical cultural criticism, and attempts to elucidate the dialectic of race and class as mirrored in West's theoretical approach. Furthermore, the essay calls attention to the fact that it is crucial to grasp that West's version of pragmatism is characterized by an interpretation of the political, and by a notion of cultural criticism which profoundly differs from those proposed by neopragmatists such as Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish. West has repeatedly underscored that his cultural criticism ought to be seen as a worldly and oppositional criticism. This gesture of returning criticism to the world, it is argued, still deserves our attention.

Katharina Peter explores the heated debates surrounding the publication of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* which became infamous for its depiction of pornography and graphic violence. While his novel initially saw an extreme bashing in the US, critics from other countries were much quicker to perceive its moral intent. Rather than employing violence for violence's sake, as Peter convincingly argues, Ellis draws on Fredric Jameson's notion of the 'end of individualism' to express his critique of US American consumerism by exposing violence as an effect of the loss of individuality and identity induced by corporate capitalism.

Also drawing on notions of morality, Jessica Baños Poo explores the problems inherent in current trends of political philosophy that adopt the distinction between universalism and particularism. Taking as her point of departure the latest works of Michael Walzer and John Rawls, Baños Poo argues that both these approaches, due to their relativist assumptions, neglect internal diversity, thus tending to regard other cultures as closed and homogenous systems. In order to overcome the predetermined cultural assumptions following from these theories, she proposes a consequentialist analysis that adequately takes pluralism into account.

The last article in this section impressively explores some of the theoretical implications of defending a paradigm of restorative justice in transitional stages. Taking recent developments in South Africa as an example, Clara Ramírez-Barat compares Desmond Tutu's defence of forgiveness, which is based on the ideal of *ubuntu*, to David Crocker's retributive approach. Locating the arguments and values on which both positions rely and analysing the different premises on how reconciliation can be reached, Ramírez-Barat argues for a path of restorative forgiveness that takes into account the most significant concerns and criticisms raised by the retributive approach. As it is of paramount importance to understand forgiveness as a political concept, it has to be accompanied by other transitional justice mechanisms, such as Truth Commissions, in order to be credible.

This volume unites a diversity of approaches dealing with the discursive dimension of violence: with 'symbolic' and 'unspeakable' violence, with its settings, inscriptions, and places as well as with the discursive representation of violence. Our hope is that this interdisciplinary volume will contribute to the multi-faceted discussion on the discourses of violence and the violence of discourses.