Infra-structural Violence: On the Violence that Holds Us Together

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Abstract:

How to define, and conceptualise, violence? This is a problem the social sciences and humanities have long wrestled with, often framing violence as an abstract, moral, and normative question, which prevented them from capturing its complexity. Violence, we suggest, is a tensional force that is constitutive of and immanent to social, material, and spatial relations, simultaneously weaving them together and threatening to disrupt them. At the same time, violence cannot be reduced to an epiphenomenon of an overarching process such as capitalism: it does not simply result from the unfolding of structures and global processes. Rather, it takes material existence in the frictional encounter with these very structures and processes. In this article, we build on and push beyond recent theorisations on infrastructure and infrastructural violence to introduce the concept of 'infra-structural violence' – where the hyphen emphasises the relational, tensional, and somatic in-between – as a way to rework symbolic, economic, and other notions of structural violence towards an ontological, epistemological, and ethical 'statics' of violence, which is attuned to its disruptive, constructive, and preserving qualities.

Keywords: infrastructure, political theory, structural violence, structure/agency, symbolic violence

Critique

What is violence? What are the somatic and technical contexts through which it moves? These questions carry the seeds of their own contradictions. Substantial definitions tend to posit violence outside of history, geography, and society; outside of the dense relationality that constitutes it. Hence the 'trick' that has oriented modern Western political thinking since at least Thomas Hobbes's conception of politics according to which violence has been conceived of in negative terms – a conception that has become naturalised over time. This move overlooks how experience is always mediated by relations of power, affect, technicity, somaticity, and knowledge; in other words, 'there are no experiences other than moral ones, not even in the realm of sense perception' (Nietzsche [1882–1887]2001: 114). As Walter Benjamin (1996: 236) writes, 'a cause becomes violent in the precise sense of the word, when it enters into moral relations.' Before unpacking what this could mean – that is, what it means to say that there is no unmediated or innocent experience which also means that there is no *natural* experience of violence *qua* violence – it is safe to say from the start that any trivial, self-evident understanding of violence paves the way for legalistic and statistical definitions that are blind to impersonal, systemic, and institutional forms of violence, invisibilised in turn by socio-historical filters (see Elias [1939]2000; Foucault [1977]2003; Balibar [2010]2015).

Critical scholarship and affect theory have challenged these positions by turning attention to the intangible, affective, and somatechnical qualities of violence, exploring the apparatuses of power and knowledge that configure it, while accounting for 'the all-pervading ambient anxiety, antipathy, lassitude, and terror that somatechnical capitalism engenders' (Carstens 2020: 96). This has helped to link the manifest event of violence to the cultural background that shapes its very manifestation, and to the silent invisible and systemic violence of economic, financial, legal, and political structures. Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) 'symbolic violence' and Johan Galtung's (1969) 'structural violence' can thus be taken as category-umbrellas encompassing a spectrum of notions covering a structuralist understanding of

violence's functionalist-economic and symbolic-cultural dimensions, and an exploration of their interrelation. Among the variations on the theme are, 'abstract' (Tyner and Inwood 2014), 'normalised' (Bourgois 2001), 'colonial' (Fanon [1961]1963), 'silent' (Watts 1983) or 'infrastructural' (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012), 'epistemic' (Spivak 1988), 'cultural' (Galtung 1990) 'normative' (Butler 2004) or 'gendered' (Pain 2014), and 'affective' (see Carstens 2020).

While these perspectives have done the necessary and invaluable work of de-essentialising and de-fetishising violence, we are aware of the risk of determinism that their structuralist premises carry, especially when framed within rigid Marxist approaches that tend to reduce violence an overarching substratum: that of economic relations. That such a functionalist-economic lens is in need of sophistication is by now a well-accepted argument, and yet it is one that is difficult to digest (see Castoriadis [1975]1987); and, for an extended reflection, Pavoni and Tulumello 2023: ch. 1). This is not surprising, given the epistemological assumptions that the notion of structural violence often betrays, for instance, the presupposition that the actions of members of a social class are guided solely by structures of power and exploitation. The implication of this argument takes place against the backstage of 'concrete' relations of production which members of specific social classes are presumably not aware of because they are somehow wholly unaware of the influence of the ideological superstructure they are guided by. A related assumption is then that it is only social scientists who are in a position to reveal these structures and relations (cf. Latour 2005: 250). For Moises L. Silva (2014) this very presupposition is itself a form of violence. Part of 'the violence of structural violence' imposed on the contexts being investigated is that it risks reproducing 'the same sort of grand schemes that divide individuals into those that are assumed to be "good" and those that still need to catch up with a certain ideal of "goodness"' (319). An implicit corollary is that when violence is framed as that which is generated solely by symbolic/economic structures, one may end up assuming that violence would disappear entirely if such structures

were removed. This is a dangerous illusion. This kind of 'innocence' of violence's appearance *qua* violence – which takes place when it is referred to in terms of symbolic-cultural and functionalist-economic structures – subsumes social relations into a functionalist-ideological pretext, simultaneously concealing the materiality of violence. While providing crucial tools for understanding the 'macro' forms of violence, when used to deterministically explain violence at the 'micro' level, notions of structural and symbolic violence risk abstracting violence.

In order to work towards an articulation of the macro *and* the micro, the economic, symbolic *and* materiality of violence need to be rethought through an approach sensible to the 'lures' that pull 'bodies into affective political economies of fear, lassitude and antagonism' (Carstens 2020: 98). This would render it capable of articulating political-economic analyses and epistemological deconstructions, but with a finer attention to the relational and material dimensions of violence. In this text we wish to do so by developing an infra-structural understanding of the 'social' where the attention is turned onto the tension-filled dynamics through which socio-material formations emerge, hold together or fall apart – the hyphen puts us in relation, at the same time as marking the differences with more conventional infrastructural approaches (see below), by emphasising the relational, somatic, and tensional in-between. We start by briefly introducing our ontological take: if the risk of structuralism is that of abstracting violence, thereby losing its grip on the materiality of the real, then it is to the body (soma) that we need to return. However, the notion of 'body' cannot be taken for granted, as it is usually done, for instance, when the concepts of direct or physical violence are foregrounded. For this purpose, we focus on the soma/body from a radically relational and non-essentialist approach. We do so by beginning with Spinozist approaches to relationality and consistency before presenting current approaches to technicity and infrastructure, with attention paid to their potential and limitations. Returning to violence, we discuss the meaning

of violence, its generative dimensions and its ambiguous relations with power, after which we present an interpretation of 'infra-structural' violence as the glue for holding these various threads together.

Relation

A body, in Baruch Spinoza's ontology, is the mode of a unique, all-encompassing (non-religious) substance, which he terms *God* or, more provocatively, given the time during which he was alive, *Nature* (Spinoza [1677]2002a: part 1). A body, as a mode, is further defined in kinetic and dynamic terms. First, it is a 'a complex relation between differential velocities' among the infinite particles that compose it: slowness, speed, rest, motion – the embodied dromology through which life unfolds (see Virilio [1977]2006).[1] Second, it is a capacity to affect and be affected, a power to enter into affective concatenations (Deleuze [1970]1988: 123): my body is affected by sunrays, a virus, an idea, an impetus of fear. A body, to be sure, is not a pre-formed substance where affections take place, but a bundle of affective relations that are inseparable from a given capacity to affect and be affected (Deleuze [1968]1990: 217–218). Likewise, a body is a *duration*, an oscillation between a 'more' and a 'less', because the capacity a body has to affect and be affected will be increased or decreased depending on the affections and relations it enters into: becoming more or less fearful, more or less cold, more or less strong (Spinoza [1677]2002a: part 3, def. 3). A body is constituted, moreover, by the passage between different affections and their differential rhythms.

If affection is a relation, affect is the oscillation between the capacities and incapacities that punctuate *a* life. Together, affection in space (as *relation*), and affect in time (as *duration*), mobilise 'subjects between collective assemblages of enunciation and machinic assemblages of bodies' (Carstens 2020: 96). Once the body is understood as being fully embedded in a relational field, the definition of what a body *is* loses prominence – 'a body can be anything'

(Deleuze [1970]1988: 127) – leaving space to the Spinozist question of exploring what a body is capable of *doing*. From a radically relational perspective, the question of capabilities – to recall Amartya Sen's well-known proposition (see, e.g., Sen 1999) – does not have to do with the kinds of action that a pre-constituted body can and does perform, but with the constant *becoming* of that very body in the concatenations in which it finds itself in. A body thus unfolds in variation, oscillating between relations that increase or decrease its power to act in 'joy' or in 'sadness.' For Spinoza. joy is the empowering of my ability to enter into novel relations and therefore to think, feel and live according to my own nature. Sadness, by contrast, is the disempowering of such an ability – that which debilitates me (Spinoza [1677]2002a: part 3). Reality, by this formulation, appears as a dynamic and processual ensemble of affective relations within which bodies are always part of concatenations that may be capacitating or incapacitating.

This conceptualisation is in no way a *moral* one; that is, it is not concerned with a normative set of abstract principles one is supposed to follow. Rather, it is attuned to *ethics*, or what might even be called *situational ethics*: a 'toxicology' of how relations affect bodies – and it is only in this sense that the genealogy of any morality can be properly understood. The consequences, first sketched by Spinoza ([1677]2002a: part 1, appendix) and then Friedrich Nietzsche ([1887/1888]1967), are that there exist no prior ontological forms, absolute orders or systems of values that may be assumed as given and from which transhistorical normative orientations may be provided. Michel Foucault ([1975]1977) draws on the consequences of these premises by showing how each historical epoch is characterised by regimes, regularities, normativities, and subjectivations, so that power (as *puissance*) is constantly channelled, intensified or depleted by all sorts of apparatuses (*dispositifs*) of power (as *pouvoir*). Apparatuses, as Foucault ([1977]1980: 194) writes, are:

> a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and

> philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.

Far from getting rid of moral parameters of evaluation, Foucault's genealogical method analyses the historical apparatuses into which power comes to be organised. That is, power is not *held* by apparatuses but only exercised *through* them. Removing the absolute ground to morality is not, in other words, giving into some sort of relativism. Rather than disappearing, the notion of responsibility is reconfigured to a radically 'situated' practice, a response-ability dependent on the material obligations that characterise our common state of entanglement (Haraway 2016). In other words, we turn our attention from the normative commitment to a disembodied moral principle to the condition of being 'embedded in vital material forces involved in the constraints of everyday continuation and maintenance of life' (de la Bellacasa 2017: 22). María P. De la Bellacasa's emphasis on 'continuation' and 'maintenance' is particularly important here since it emphasises the 'infrastructural' question that is implicitly at the basis of the embodied somatechnical toxicology foregrounded by Spinoza: how to build a political organisation that is capable of composing and maintaining 'healthy' relations while minimising toxic ones (Spinoza [1677]2002b). Spinoza's somatechnical formulation of creation, maintenance, and destruction resonates with the three fundamental functions of violence outlined by Walter Benjamin in his famous *Critique*, which we will explore after addressing the question of consistency.

Consistency

Once a radically relational ontology is foregrounded, according to which reality is co-constituted by bodies that are human and nonhuman, tangible and intangible, simultaneously singular and in-relation, always taken into concatenations and yet never exhausted by them, the question of *consistency* surfaces: that is, how do bodies come and hold together? Gilles

Deleuze and Félix Guattari define consistency as 'the "holding together" of heterogeneous elements' ([1980]2004: 323) and develop the concept of *agencement* as a way to address it without having to postulate overarching structures or all-encompassing 'social facts.' The English translation is accepted as *assemblage*, though this term fails to express the dynamic connotation of the original, that is, its rhythmic assembling and agency-ing. The original term *agencement* expresses more potently the coming-together into a concatenation of two basic qualities: emergence and exteriority. Since an *agencement* is not just about connecting bodies, but also about *making* and being *made* by them, it displays concrete and historically situated emergent properties. Similarly, an *agencement* has a quality of exteriority because it is always open to the possibility of change (DeLanda 2016). This is the vital power of an assemblage and its capacity to affect and be affected (Pavoni and Tulumello 2023: ch. 6). Hence 'the problem of consistency concerns the manner in which the components of a territorial assemblage hold together. But it also concerns the manner in which different assemblages hold together, with components of passage and relay' (Deleuze and Guattari [1980]2004: 326). As David Lapoujade (2017: 204) explains:

> We could say that consistency implies a certain material solidity and consequently a form. This is true, but the same is still truer of the opposite. An aggregate is the more consistent the more it manages to hold together heterogeneous and unstable terms. The more a relation is solid and fixed, the less consistency it has. Inversely, the less stable a relation, the less fixed it is; the more susceptible to transformation it is, the more consistency it has.

While Lapoujade rightly suggests that consistency should not be interpreted in excessively rigid terms, his opposition between *stability* and *instability* could be confusing. What characterises the consistency of an *agencement* is neither of these terms, but rather a metastability. In contrast to *stability*, which in physics indicates an equilibrium in which forces are no longer in agitation, *metastability* refers to a pre-individual field of intensities that is

pregnant with becoming (cf. Simondon [1964]1992) and which gives rise to extensive formations. 'To put it differently, actualisation determines an individual to a certain extent without substantialising it (as in Aristotle's hylomorphic model)' (Gray 2020: 125). These notions should be further framed within Deleuze and Guattari's *dynamic* dyads (molar and molecular, intensive and extensive, pre-individual or dividual and individual) that exist on a continuum and as entangled with each other and thus as radically different to fixed dichotomies (individual-society, subject-object, body-technology) and their dialectical syntheses. These more fluid conceptualisations allow us to explore how any entity – whether physical, moral, or political – as a temporary and metastable consolidation of 'concrete' and historical processes.

Because the equilibrium in an *agencement* is metastable, it is not determined by rigid structures, but rather by the way such structures and their apparatuses, technics, techniques, and technologies intersperse the somatic. As John Protevi observes, Deleuze and Guattari, in this way, enable 'to construct a concept of "political physiology" which studies the way interlocking intensive processes articulate the patterns, thresholds, and triggers of emergent bodies, forming assemblages linking the social and the somatic' (2006: 29). As we will see below, it is also in this way that Spinoza's geometry of affects, Nietzsche's genealogical method, Foucault's micro-physics of power, and Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of *agencements* eventually converge, unfolding a somatechnics that opens up the body to 'to a world of forces and agencies that are strange, other and often deeply disturbing' (Henriksen and Radomska 2015: 113). Such a somatechnics implies zooming in into the 'chiasmatic interdependence of soma and techné' (Murray and Sullivan 2011: vi), and particularly on that 'capillary space of connection and circulation between macropolitical structurations of power and micropolitical techniques through which the lives of bodies become enmeshed in the lives of nations, states, and capital formations' (Stryker et al. 2008: 14). This space we explore here vis-à-vis the question of violence. To do so, we employ the notion of *infrastructure*.

Infrastructure

The concept of infrastructure has been the subject of much interest lately, accompanying a growing interest in the relation between societies and the materials that compose the logistics of cities, states, and the entire planet. 'Infrastructures shape the rhythms and striations of social life' (Anand et al. 2018: 4), connecting them to the structural, the built, and the social. Looking at the complex, 'incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections' of 'objects, spaces, persons, and practices' that constitute African cities, for instance, AbdouMaliq Simone suggests that we understand this complexity through the notion of infrastructure: 'a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city' (2004: 406–407). Widening the understanding of infrastructure to the intangible infra-actions that make (urban) everyday life possible enables us to consider the material, dynamic, somatechnic, and processual nature of urban commons as relational and affective (Berlant 2016), Keller Easterling's concept of infrastructural space (2014) refers to those discourses, imaginaries and ideas that shape the expectations and imagination of planning, as well as the experience of movement in urban contexts. These notions are expanded by the concept of more-than-human infrastructures that demonstrate the limits of anthropocentric and state-centric approaches, showing 'how urban infrastructures work and how they are embedded in and constitutive of patchy urban ecologies' (Doherty 2019: S324). At this intersection, infrastructures appear as the intangible, fluid, dynamic forms organising the economy of movement, experience and desire in various ways, often evading representation and yet potentially leaving their 'imprint by displacing violence into forms of culture and exchange, into emotional relations and into language' (Aranda et al. 2012). James Ferguson (2012: 559) offers a useful clarification:

> The "infra-structure" that is of interest here is clearly not conceived as infra-structural in the Marxian sense (underlying, causally primary), nor is it imagined as a "structure" in the structuralist sense (a symbolically integrated system awaiting decoding). We are rather closer to the domain of engineering,

> with infra-structure imagined as a set of (often literally) concrete arrangements that both coexist with and enable or facilitate other such arrangements. It is both a support-system that makes it possible (or impossible) for other things to exist and a way of making up a particular kind of social world. And it is "infra" less in the sense of constituting a "base" than in the sense of swarming omnipresence that is implied in Foucault's (1980) idea of "infra-power."

A focus on this radical in-between unfolds a complexity of beings that are 'made' and 'held' together by articulations of infra-actions and infra-powers. This is a complex constellation, but it is our contention that the concept of infrastructure allows for an exploration of the ways in which the relations constituting the socio-natural *in between* of reality – that is, the shared space of coexistence – hold together, immanently, asymmetrically and in tension, in intricate arrangements of cables, wires, scaffoldings, wavelengths, practices, habits, norms, and affects. The use of the term has at least three advantages vis-à-vis thinking about violence. First, it allows for an empirical exploration of the question of consistency, overcoming the separation between bodies and technologies, to look at the tensional question of their holding together and the effect this has on their capacities. Second, it allows for a connection with the tangible dimension of infrastructures, increasingly crucial in our logistical world (Cuppini and Peano 2019; Pavoni and Tomassoni 2022) by zooming in on the intangible relations through which these are embedded – this is particularly the case for the notion of infrastructural violence we touch on below. Third, it allows for a finetuning of structural analysis with an attention to the 'lifeworld of structures,' as Laurent Berlant (2016: 394) puts it, and goes on to say:

> An infrastructural analysis helps us see that what we commonly call 'structure' is not what we usually call it, an intractable principle of continuity across time and space, but is really a convergence of force and value in patterns of movement that's only solid when seen from a distance.

The Meaning of Violence

As suggested by its etymology, violence has to do with both a disruptive process of *violation* and a creative process of *evaluation*. Violence, in fact, both weaves together and threatens to disrupt the fabric of the social.[2] Violence violates *and* evaluates. It creates and destroys value. Evidently, then, violence cannot be statically analysed vis-à-vis a pre-constituted value (dignity, security, civility), but must be explored in terms of the problematics of *evaluation* it helps to shape. Evaluation, here, is not understood as the static and abstract interpretation that a subject provides of an object; rather, it is a dynamic and concrete relation of valorisation through which subjectivation unfolds. Thus understood, the question of value is rescued from the abstract dogmatism of morality and framed within an embodied ethics.

This is, in fact, a possible interpretation of Nietzsche's enigmatic notion of the transvaluation of all values. Following the Heideggerian suggestion, this entails not simply the intention to substitute a system of values with another but refers to the genealogical implication that beings and values are not separated, in other words, that beings *are* nothing but values or continuous processes of evaluation (cf. Heidegger [1961]1979). Properly unpacking this understanding is crucial for a full appreciation of the genealogy of violence without falling into cultural relativism, with its naïve realist presupposition of nature as a passive surface on which cultural performances are inscribed. Anthropology has provided vast supporting material for attending to the fact that violence works as part of any system of values, or culture (Whitehead 2007b): there are no 'cultures of violence' – as the rhetoric of 'violent Orientalism' (Springer 2009: 308) goes – but there is culture *through* violence. Violence is a culture-producing force which creates, disrupts, or preserves the system of values that makes a culture. Following Nietzsche ([1887/1888]1967), we thus shift from relativism to radical perspectivism, where 'perspective' does not refer to the *projection* of a subject's mind over inert matter but emerges out of the *position* that a body is materially embedded in the world. Such an embodied perspectivism revokes the separation between ontology, epistemology, and ethics by asserting

the inextricable entanglement of matter, discourse, and value, thereby allowing an exploration of the historical surfacing and crystallisation of given systems or regimes of values. Regimes that are, as argued above, produced by somatechnical apparatuses that are material, discursive, and strategic at the same time. This reflection resonates with Karen Barad's notion of *intra-actions* that they develop to overcome the limit of the concept of *interaction* 'which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata' (2003: 815).

Barad (2007) introduces this concept in the context of their agential realism, an approach that overcomes the opposition between critical realism and social constructivism by zooming in on the material-discursive intra-actions that articulate the real, and whose potential indeterminacy is only resolved locally, where it is shaped by spatially and historically situated apparatuses. In Barad's materialist interpretation (2007), an apparatus performs a 'cut' in the multiplicity of the world, producing a particular intelligibility, visibility, and truth from a specific perspective. Knowledge claims therefore emerge out of material-discourse relations – they are perspectival and, in this sense, 'naturalistic' (Rouse 2009): not merely the result of idealistic projections, knowledge claims are a material emergence with a causality that is *dependent* on specific relational arrangements. 'The world,' it follows, 'is not an epistemically homogeneous space of reasons and normative authority' (2009: 201), as is implied by those approaches that assume that knowledge of, and access to, the world take place between pre-constituted rational agents that share a common frame of reference. This tendency may be seen surreptitiously at play in otherwise compelling accounts of urban violence (see, for example, Caldeira 2000; Holston 2007), which Gabriel Feltran (2020: 12) observes still relies on a certain 'naturalised set of assumptions; that is to say, that of the state, which, explicitly or implicitly, presupposes democracy, citizenship and the public sphere as universals to be reached.' Agential realism removes these presuppositions without falling into an unbridled relativism. As in the proverbial Schrödinger's cat example, the possibility of objective

knowledge remains, yet this 'objectivity' results from a local process of emergence and intra-actional dynamic structuration, rather than being presupposed in advance via deterministic structures.

Drawing on this reflection, we understand Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe I. Bourgois' argument that 'violence is in the eye of the beholder' rather 'than *sui generis*', (2004: 2) in terms of its most radical conclusion: violence is in the *bodies* that compose a given socio-material configuration, in the tension force holding them together. Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois's observation that the 'social and cultural dimensions of violence are what give it its force and meaning' (318) can likewise be understood through these agential realist lenses: violence neither belongs to nature nor to culture; it belongs to both insofar as violence is socio-natural (and socio-material). The mainstream understanding of violence, as we saw, is still organised around a major 'cut,' Alfred North Whitehead's 'bifurcation of nature' (1920): the separation between mind and matter that articulates a binary thinking about violence, including the duality between a supposedly 'real' and objective (direct, physical) violence, and a 'cultural' form of violence assumed as relativistic. The manifestation of violence, as a result, is assumed as a fact, rather than understood as the aesthetic result of a given material-discursive arrangement fed by that very distinction between society and violence (needless to say, key distinctions such as order/disorder or normal/abnormal, but also epistemology/ontology, are articulated around this very cut).[3]

Discourse, meaning, language, representations, and evaluations emerge out of the world's ongoing mattering, as the result of historical conditions, or apparatuses, which articulate the domains of what can be said, seen or thought. By assuming epistemology and ontology as inextricable, we are able to radically interpret Simon Springer's observation that 'violence […] takes on and gathers meaning because of its affective and cultural content, where violence is felt as meaningful' (2011: 92). There is always a 'sense' (in its multiple sensoriality,

meaning, and affective expression) to the event of violence that emerges from the coming together of discourses, power-structured relations *and* mutually affecting bodies as they organise around a given 'cut' and the relative apparatus. The meaning of violence is a feature of the world and its aesthetic, affective, discursive, and technological patterning. It is not, in other words, an ideational or immaterial process, but rather a specific material infra-structuration whose potential indeterminacy is always resolved locally, and thus historically, emerging from bodies' affective, material-discursive, and more-than-human co-mingling.[4] The attention thus shifts from the 'observers' to the 'phenomena', from the 'eye of the beholder' to the bodies that hold together, and therefore to the apparatuses through which they are 'observed' (cf. Rouse 2009: 205).

This requires a simultaneous engagement with violence's epistemological, ontological, and ethical dimensions (205): an ethico-onto-epistem-ology of violence (cf. Barad 2007: 185). A punch or gunshot is not 'violent' *per se*, even though they may surely be harmful. And yet, the materiality of the *agencement* in which a 'punch' or a 'gunshot' *becomes* violent cannot be explained only with reference to economic/ideological structures. In Barad's (2007: 152) synthesis: 'the point is not merely that there are important material factors in addition to discursive ones; rather, the issue is the conjoined material-discursive nature of constraints, conditions, and practices.' Guns, for instance, do play a role as agential matter that cannot simply be reduced to either the socio-economic violence or the imaginary of gun violence of a given society. The 'stray bullets' of Rio de Janeiro rupture the urban economy of violence, introducing a wildly aleatory element that is transversal to social classes, contributing 'to the reification of violence as an out of control "thing", and the essentialisation of Rio as a "violent city"' (Penglase 2011: 414). This occurs not simply as result of the meaning of socio-economic relations inscribed in stray bullets, but also as a result of the 'meaning' that their material existence produces in the frictional encounter with these very structures and processes.[5] The

meaning of violence is produced by the situated intra-actions it results from; it is a local process of emergence and intra-actional dynamic structuration. These processes and their 'cuts' are never simply spontaneous but always filtered *through* spatially and historically situated apparatuses out of which an 'objective', yet partial, perspective is enacted. 'Partial', in this sense, has nothing to do with a relativism premised on the 'free' interpretation of an abstract subject, but refers rather to the *necessarily* partial perspective of a 'situated' body.

The Generative Force of Violence

Merging the tangible and the intangible, the spatial with the aesthetic, and the affective with the normative in the concept of infrastructure allows for a zooming in on the microphysics of infra-power and infra-politics that slip through the net of functionalist economics and ideology, and through which violence flows as a tensional force that weaves together, and yet threatens to disrupt, the fabric of the social.[6] This cannot take place if the concept of violence is reduced to an abstract, moral, and normative question through the lenses of a pre-defined judgement. Similarly problematic is the *moral condemnation* of violence as merely negative and destructive (cf. Schinkel 2010) with respect to an implicit *a priori* – a God, the self, the community or life itself – whose status is in fact far from uncontroversial.[7] Following Roberto Esposito ([2002]2011), the history of the modern (Western) juridical-political paradigm could be seen as a (violent) attempt at neutralising the immanent tendency of social relations to overflow by patrolling the boundaries of that very *a priori*. Violence could be better understood as co-substantial with the surfacing of social formations, rationality and politico-legal institutions: an ontological, epistemological, and ethical question at once, one that necessitates that attention be paid to the material and relational specificities of a given situation. A tripartite conceptualisation can thus be sketched.

First, violence is a diffuse *continuum* (cf. Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004) which does not 'sit' in places, species, classes or races, but overflows these boundaries while contributing to keeping them in place (Springer 2011). Violence is equivocal, ambiguous, and disseminated (Balibar [2010]2015) – in this sense, it is akin to Foucauldian power in that violence does not belong to individuals or acts but emerges from intra-actions and their somatechnical configurations. Second, violence is *endogenous* to the social; that is, it is always articulated through social-historical relations, while at the same time 'spilling over' (Lawrence and Karim 2007: 10), therefore being never fully explainable through those relations. Mobile, metamorphic, and fluid, violence appears as an asubjective, viscous plasma that is all-pervasive, non-deterministic and differentially felt on bodies (Austin 2023).[8] Third, violence is an ontologically *productive* process: not only disruptive of existent relations, but also generative of new ones (Handel 2021; Wall 2021). In summation, we propose that violence be understood as a diffuse, endogenous, excessive, and generative process.[9] To be sure, our definition of violence seems rather close to the Foucauldian definition of power, to the point of threatening to make to the two terms undistinguishable. For some, like Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim (2007: 13), this is not problematic: assuming violence as 'equivalent to power and endemic to the human condition', they argue, helps to bring attention 'to ways that one can respond to its outcomes'. For others, like Johanna Oksala (2012), coalescing violence and power may be conceptually inhibiting and politically dangerous since it risks de-legitimising several forms of political contestation, for instance, how to distinguish between fascist and anti-fascist violence, if they remain ontologically indistinguishable?[10] Looking for a way out, Jacob Maze (2018) follows Hannah Arendt in proposing that power be understood as what *allows* for the possibility to act *otherwise* while violence is that which *prevents* this possibility from emerging. Violence, thus, would be akin to Foucault's 'domination,' 'when an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations' (1997: 283). This is only a

partially satisfying response, however, and this is arguably a consequence of Foucault's own ambiguity as regards the term.

In *Discipline and Punish*, power and violence enter a zone of indistinction with respect to forms of coercion prior to disciplinary ones. In later works, however, Foucault seems to settle for a narrower understanding of violence that, differently from the 'action upon action' that characterises power, is defined as that which 'acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks on the wheel, it destroys, or it closes the door on all possibilities' ([1982]2000: 340). This oscillation mirrors a strategic challenge. On the one hand, Foucault is aware of the political danger of confusing violence and power, and he also knows that it would be equally dangerous to suggest the possibility of a violence-free power. What is violence, for instance, in the context of biopolitics if not a mode of governance that requires – in fact constantly manufactures ([2004]2010: 65) – the freedom of its subjects? Evidently, this violence is not an action upon bodies or things but, we could argue, a toxic effect which further affects the very relation holding the bodies together, their common 'atmosphere' (cf. Pavoni and Tulumello 2023, ch. 6). This is the suffocating effect the colonial 'atmosphere of violence' has on the black bodies (Fanon [1961]1963; see Perera and Pugliese 2011) – the 'affective ankylosis' thrust on the social by racism and which inhibits the capacity to *feel* otherwise (Fanon [1952]1970; see Al-Saji 2014), all the while 'wearing out' the neoliberal subject as she endures her precarious life (Berlant 2011).

On the other hand, violence can also be a force that unblocks a congealed relation by *violating* it – a breach in the social glasshouse that allows the air to come through and release the possibility for being otherwise. This is the 'latency, potentiality or virtuality of violence' Frantz Fanon hints at, as a lingering force that 'is "operative" in the sense that it shapes the capacity of those within the atmosphere to act' (Wall 2021: 180), providing an ambiguous reserve-potentiality that is toxic but can also provide the means to 'pass from the atmosphere

of violence to violence in action' (Fanon [1961]1963: 71). Violence, in these terms, appears to consist 'in a destruction of form, in a decomposition of relation' (Zourabichvili [1994]2012: 69), which at the same time, *by means of* destructing, opens the space for the possibility of creation to emerge (cf. Deleuze [1964]2000: 15–16). The disruptive quality of violence as violation is what holds its creative potential to *unblock* a field of power relations. Therefore, while always coexistent with power, violence does not coincide with it: if power is a relation of forces, violence has to do to what 'happens' to this relation, and this can only be assessed contextually. As a tensional force concerning the immanent 'consistency' of the social – its 'holding-together' – violence can both prevent (that is, disrupt) the unfolding of 'new relations of forces' that may threaten the stability of a configuration, or unblock that very configuration, making the unfolding of 'new relations of forces' possible (Zourabichvili [1994]2012: 69). Foregrounding the genetic role that violence (as violation/evaluation) plays vis-à-vis systems of values – and social orders – thus leads to an understanding that any process of ordering unavoidably entails a degree of violence.[11] With respect to these processes of ordering, violence, rather than simply a 'notion' framed within the power relations and discourses of a given context, is either a tensional, rupturing, and generational force, or a preserving force of maintenance, or even a potential force of disruption of the infra-structural consistency of the world.

Infra-structural Violence

Rodgers and O'Neill's notion of 'infrastructural violence' complements structural violence by looking at the concrete forms through which the latter is mediated and reproduced, thereby revealing how 'relationships of power and hierarchy translate into palpable forms of physical and emotional harm' (2012: 403). Taking a step forward, we complement their perspective with an agential realist one that, borrowing from Evelien Geerts and colleagues (2023: 33),

'conceptualises the world as consisting of multiple *intra-acting* agency-possessing phenomena, which can only be understood by looking at the material-discursive practices by which they are co-constituted'. In other words, what we add to the mix is the infrastructural articulations of intra-actions and infra-powers that are historically congealed into given patterns and modes of being. In this sense, we propose to explore violence as the infra-structural tensional force that holds these configurations together or makes them fall apart. This novel ontological understanding makes way for an exploration of the ways in which the relations constituting the socio-natural *in between* of reality hold together in intricate arrangements, by highlighting the *infra* that the notion of infrastructure expresses (see Ferguson 2012, quoted above). Not only a connection of subjects, things and spaces, the infrastructure is also about *making* – and being *made* by – them: a somatechnical praxis of world-making shaped by history, power, and structures.

Overcoming ontological separations by gazing into this 'in between' opens to a heterogeneous complexity of beings that are 'made' and 'held' together by all sorts of asymmetrical infra-structures – articulations of intra-actions and infra-powers that are historically congealed into given patterns and modes of being. This approach, we argue, makes up for the limits of structuralist approaches to violence without jettisoning their value. Rather than just considering how economic structures are reproduced, and violently so, as infrastructures, we suggest that the contingent materiality and concrete relations through which the latter take place be looked at. Not smoothly reproduced onto space, capitalist structures are held together by a complexity of infrastructures in which glitches, breakdowns, and frictions abound. The violence of logistics, for instance, does not simply flow causally from the abstract working of supply-chain capitalism: it emerges from the material contingency of an infrastructure in which different technologies, temporalities, aesthetics, imaginaries, and bodies are articulated (Cowen 2014). Or, looking at the violence *of* urbanisation (Pavoni and

Tulumello 2023) through these terms means understanding (planetary) urbanisation as always unfolding as a patchy, often-chaotic process that is less a reproduction of socio-economic relations onto everyday social space (cf. Lefebvre 1974) than a *disorganisation* of everyday life in socio-economic, spatial, affective, and neurological senses (Berlant 2011: 68). In their attempt to fabricate order, structural forces generate frictions and produce material and discursive fractures.

Take for instance Feltran's São Paulo, where a long history of racial discrimination, economic exploitation and unequal urbanisation engendered a fragmented spatiality that is daily negotiated by inhabitants holding incommensurable 'normative regimes' – that is, epistemological and aesthetic infrastructures of social patterning offering 'a plausible set of orientations for the empirical action of subjects' (2020: 15). Inhabiting a fractured space, they must nonetheless share this space, which means that the incommunicable is often bridged through violence. Around these fractures, different normative regimes clash and the possibility of violence (from police to mere discrimination, from physical to affective fear) is higher – these fractures are thresholds in which different sets of values overlap and violations become actualised. Then, to Rodgers and O'Neill's suggestion (2012) that infrastructures are ideal ethnographic sites to explore structural violence, we add that they are ideal ethnographic sites for exploring the turbulent encounter between structural violence and (urban/social/situated) experience (for example, Rahola 2014). How these diffractions hold together is the question we wish to address: not the smooth reproduction of planetary processes, but their tensional holding together, in the contingency of everyday life, and their potentially toxic effects. To be sure, this is not a matter of emphasising the primacy of empirical observation over abstraction, as often implied (for example, Silva 2014). It is instead a question of exploring the somatechnical infrastructures of being-together that emerge out of the frictional encounter between structures and experience, the abstract and the concrete, in order to 'decipher global

processes through their concrete manifestation in the situated, affective fabrics of human and nonhuman existence' (Arboleda 2020: 20), including 'the frequently violent tensions between what the fractured urban order is and, especially, what it should be' (Feltran 2020: 17).

If we take serious the idea that violence operates 'along a continuum from direct physical assault to symbolic violence and routinised everyday violence, including the chronic, historically embedded structural violence' (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 318), then we need to go beyond a determinist causality that systematically robs the experience and agency of those very subjects that are supposed to undergo, endure, re-produce, and *live* violence (Whitehead 2007a: 70–71). This is what infra-structural violence sets out to do: addressing 'how violence shapes space, understood in its broad political and processual sense, and how space shapes violence beyond the instrumental way of analysing spatial patterns to help "explain" violence' (Springer and Le Billon 2016: 1). Moreover, the heterogenous complexity of infrastructures and their more-than-human, more-than-physical materiality (for example, Doherty 2019) makes the distributed quality of agency easier to comprehend, while also bringing into view the conceptual and empirical 'non-human agencies without letting go of human ones' (Jensen and Morita 2017: 622).

Conclusion

Exploring violence on either side of the structure/experience dichotomy is not enough. A deeper understanding can be achieved by looking how violence functions at the level of its frictional encounters, where neither order nor disorder, but rather the infra-structural consistency of everyday life, unfolds. The friction, here, is what overflows as the different scales intersect the surface of the social, the bodies that populate it, the abstractions that insist on and produce its spatiality: it is also the excess of violence that spills over linear causal explanations, the violence that creeps out of the unfolding of everyday life. This approach

expands beyond the seemingly purposeful logic of state violence with a more diffuse and less unidirectional understanding of violence as something that 'flows like a viscous plasma around us all' (Austin 2023: 120), not causally stemming from institutions, although often being reified and reproduced by them. The potential of the concept of infra-structural violence can be seen in recent efforts by scholars like Rob Nixon, Laurent Berlant, Renisa Mawani, Jasbir Puar, Christina Sharpe, and many others, who have attempted to grasp a violence that is neither evident nor explicit, but rather unfolds slowly, through unobvious temporalities, as an incremental, accretive, and attritional force that gradually wears out bodies and space. Infra-structural violence incorporates all of these senses within an all-encompassing epistemological, ontological, and ethical understanding, where the overcoming of the functionalist/symbolic, structure/agency, and discourse/material dichotomies gives way to an exploration of the role violence plays vis-à-vis the ontological fabric of co-existence, as a force of construction, maintenance, and destruction.

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Notes

1. Dromology is a 'science of speed' (from *dromos*, the Greek term for racecourse, running, path, etc.), a term coined by Paul Virilio to explore history through the phenomenon of spatiotemporal acceleration that societies undergo in all their domains, from economy to politics to the military and beyond. If Deleuze has particularly insisted on the dynamic relationality through which Spinoza framed his understanding of the body, it would be very tempting to integrate this approach with Virilio's attention to the technical and technological velocities that increasingly shape and transforms it: a promising somatechnical direction of research that remains to be written.
2. The root of violence, *vi-*, is also associated to the notion of *vimine*, that is, osier or, more generally, wicker. Violence accordingly has to do with an interweaving, tensional force of holding together.
3. As discussed elsewhere (see Pavoni and Tulumello 2023: ch. 4), from the society/violence cut that articulates the dominant understanding of (urban) violence, there emerges a security apparatus made of laws, institutions, and *savoirs*, through which urban violence is made visible and invisible at the same time.
4. Following this argument, we argued elsewhere the urban indicates the specific, aesthetic, affective, discursive, and material infra-structuration of the world out of which urban violence surfaces (see Pavoni and Tulumello 2023).

5. For a similar approach, where the manifestation of (counter) terrorism events is 'examined in tandem with the intra-actions between human and more-than-human agential phenomena' (31), see Geerts et al. 2023.
6. There is more than a hint here to Walter Benjamin's (1996) tripartite understanding of violence as a force that can be law-positing, law-preserving, and law-destroying; see Pavoni and Tulumello 2023: ch 1).
7. Needless to say, the acritical 'celebration' of violence falls into the very same conundrum.
8. Jonathan L. Austin here is elaborating on – and expanding – Bruno Latour's (2005: 244) plasma.
9. It goes without saying that this approach has no intention to moralise or romanticise violence; 'the problem now is not how to end violence but to understand why it occurs in the ways it does' (Whitehead 2007b: 41).
10. We share these worries. And yet, the strategic attempt to isolate a morally superior space of non-violence can end up being far more dangerous, as it occurs, at the simplest level, with the notorious projection of a city without violence which feeds the logic of urban security (see Pavoni and Tulumello 2023: ch. 4; Tulumello 2021). See for instance Natasha Lennard's (2021) compelling reflection on anti-fascist violence as *counterviolence*.
11. Eventually this is what also Oksala (2014: 532) contends: Foucault's 'most important legacy is not in providing us with a philosophically accurate definition of power and violence but rather in demonstrating how all definition and social objectivities, including the meaning of violence, are constituted in power/knowledge networks and are therefore matters of political contestation and struggle.'

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