

## **Interpretive categories, implicit representations and resistance against violence in relationships. A male-oriented gender interpretation**

*Stefano Ciccone\**

**ABSTRACT.** – Confrontation with violence in intimate relationships requires interpretive categories and approaches that can be measured against the complexity of the phenomenon and the pervasiveness of the culture that it stems from. A critical reflection on the social construct of masculinity can prevent the neutralization of violence or its naturalization: two aspects of the more general tendency to remove it from our ‘normality’. An analysis of the public discourse on violence shows that even institutional interventions of contrast and media narratives, while condemning abusive and violent behavior, reproduce and convey stereotypical representations that are the substrate on which they grow. In this context, there is a need for reflection on the social responsibility of psychoanalytic thinking as ‘expert knowledge’, which society turns to in order to interpret conflicts and contradictions whose vulgate often proposes models based on complementarity between functions attributed to the two sexes, stiffening experiences, conflicts and perceptions of change.

*Key words:* social construct of masculinity; violence in intimate relationships; naturalization; norm.

I am going to try to discuss male violence against women from a situated point of view: that of the heterosexual white male, which corresponds to the norm and to a position of material and symbolic privilege. Donna Haraway (1995), speaking of situated knowledge, invites us to declare our point of view, our experience and partiality from which we start, rather than succumb to the temptation of seeking a neutral authority that is abstract, disembodied and that is therefore based on having nothing at stake. My reflection as a man therefore starts, first and foremost, from acknowledging how much gender-based violence invites me to participate in this conversation.

---

\*Università di Roma “Tor Vergata” - Associazione Maschile Plurale, Roma, Italia.  
E-mail: ciccone@uniroma2.it

Public discourse on the phenomenon of gender-based violence often wrongly conflicts radicality and complexity, as if explaining the complexity of the dynamics that produce violence could reduce the radicality of our condemnation.

Indignation towards violence and the urgent need to condemn it, often run the risk of falling into the trap of simplifications that, when viewed more carefully, are contradictory and paradoxically complicit in the culture that justifies, marginalizes or even nourishes violence.

The description of the perpetrators of violence as monsters, the invocation of increasingly severe punishments, the stigmatization of violence as something incompatible with love, while trying to express an understandable and acceptable social condemnation, end up removing the contiguity of violence with the forms of shared relationships, they represent it as a mere result of deviance to be removed from a society and a culture that has nothing to do with it. The representation of violence as an emergency feeds public alarm, but does not promote a new awareness and assumption of social responsibility: on the contrary, it strengthens the illusory representation of the phenomenon as a disease that is foreign to our normality, and it feeds the delegation to the instruments of repression or management of deviance.

In this meeting, we chose to put the relationship at the center and chose to (also) seek an explanation for violence. Putting the relationship at the center may appear to be a gesture that avoids the sharpness of a conviction, almost assuming that the two subjects share the responsibility for fueling the relational dynamics that generated the violence. Incorporating violence into the dynamics of that particular relationship can be a way of not questioning our own relationships.

It is a slippery slope, especially if it is a man who is traversing it: how can I deal with violence in relationships by recognizing the asymmetry of responsibility without reducing women to victims by removing their subjectivity? And how can we avoid removing the more comprehensive social responsibility? Recognizing that violence is part of our relations must lead us not to 'normalize' violence but, on the contrary, to calling into question the norm that structures models and roles in relationships.

Tamar Pitch, a law theorist with a feminist approach, openly addresses this issue by observing how the emphasis on public alarm associated with violence and its securitarian use reduces women to victims, who are passive and innocent, reducing the complexity of the relationship. Starting with the criticism from women's associations to a ruling of the Supreme Court of Appeal that did not recognize the aggravating circumstances in the conviction of a woman raped by two men after she had been drinking, because the alcohol had been taken voluntarily, Pitch notes:

The lengthy debate on the change in the law against sexual violence (1979-2006) had highlighted the difficulty, indeed the impossibility, of producing legislations that reflect women's life experiences and inner experiences without compromising guarantees for the defendants. Moreover, she also highlighted the risks of *reducing women (all women) to weak vulnerable victims* (the woman in the contested sentence, for example, are we sure she didn't drink a little too much of her own volition? To deny it is to deny her every subjectivity, not to accuse her of deserving the subsequent rape!) (Pitch, 2018).

All the public discourse on violence is focused on women who are victims, and it gives us, even if just iconographically, the image of weak women, incapable of defending themselves in need of protection. This confirms an imaginary of female minority that is not neutral and without consequences.

This representation is also supported by a public use of psychoanalytic knowledge which, by simplifying and shifting from the psychic to the social context, produces an ideological operation of naturalization of gender roles and attitudes. The female relegated to the pole of affectivity, corporeality and the male holder of the norm able to regulate these dimensions and to access subjectivity by emancipating themselves from the fusionality associated with these. The reference to expert knowledge serves as an appeal to a 'scientific' and objective point of view that gives authority to interpretations of the conflicts experienced by society. It is significant in this regard that we generally refer to 'Psychoanalysis' and not to a specific approach and interpretative perspective that is part of a plural and conflicting context in the field of psychoanalytic knowledge. The expert, the psychoanalyst, presents himself as the authority able to put order to the confused change in relationships and identities, and to offer a reassuring response to a society without certainty in the re-elaboration of gender roles.

'The intervention of the father on the scene of maternal love [is] a fracturing intervention intended to produce a suspension of the mutual cannibalism of child and mother, to break the continuity of their bodies and to invoke a vital horizon beyond their mutual abandonment.

If the first period of Oedipus is the time of incestuous undifferentiation, the second period is the time of the traumatic appearance of the father's word. This word is traumatic in a beneficial sense because it awakens the child-mother couple from incestuous sleep.

The father's word intervenes with two distinct warnings. The first addressed to the mother: you cannot devour your fruit!

The second addressed to the child: you cannot go back to where you came from!' (Recalcati, 2011, pg. 69)

The reference to *functions*, to archetypal roles, shows its non-neutral connotation with regard to power relations and the hierarchical order between the sexes, even in many interesting and stimulating reflections:

‘Unlike the mother, who gives birth to the child in an obvious way, the male, in order to understand that he too participated in the generation, and thus become a father, first needed a certain capacity for reasoning [...] not only did culture give us the father, but perhaps the appearance of the father (certainly together with other developments, for example technological innovations) gave us culture: the definitive exit from the primordial state, from the animal condition.[...]

The Father – the institution of a paternity – intervenes infinitely later in the life of humanity. It implies a glare of reflection and a principle of civilization. Perhaps – and we will talk about this – this is the principle of civilization’ (Zoja, 2000, pp. 21-27).

Claudio Risé makes the possible ideological outcome of this perspective clearer:

‘The Father teaches, testifies, that life is not only fulfillment, confirmation, reassurance, but also loss, lacking, fatigue. The deepest experiences, starting with love, originate and form from that loss. In the life of man, the Father transmits the teaching of the wound because his first psychological and symbolic function is to organize, give a purpose, to the matter in which the child remained immersed during the primary relationship with the mother, and which in itself would simply tend toward the continuation of the existing being. For this reason, the father inflicts the first emotional and psychological wound, interrupting the symbiosis with the mother (in which the child remains until the paternal intervention becomes of vital necessity), and proposes, from that moment on a *télos*, a purpose’ (Risè, 2004, p.12).

The psychological dimension is thus transposed to the social and symbolic level, showing the risk of a regressive outcome of this perspective. The transposition of an interpretative apparatus specific to the field of individual evolution to the wider social context through reference to culturally constructed archetypes emerges as a mechanism for the naturalization of family models and parental roles, and of the complementarity of the attitudes attributed to the two genders themselves from a specific culture. The paternal function is not only a model proposed to men but is part of a system that structures the representation of the sexes: the maternal instinct and the social role of the father, the social construction of paternity and the male identity. The function of the father needs to represent the maternal as an emasculating welcome, and the female as a biological function at the same time carrying an annihilating potential of subjectivity. In this case, it is evident that the use of a theory justifying the complementarity between male and female attitudes and functions has a specific value of ‘naturalization’ of a socially constructed habitus.

The removal of feminine subjectivity and desire refers to a maternal dimension as founded on oblativity, unconditional welcome, a cure and a service function that is implemented toward the infant, but also toward man and that structures female sexuality as a ‘service sexuality’ and not as an expression of subjectivity.

This confuse historical construction with a reality that does not depend on time or on different cultural forms: anthropology has taught us that systems of the symbolic construction of parenthood and processes of identification belong to specific and historically determined social constructs.

The reference to an archetypal reality based on complementarity, moreover, stiffens differences in an identity form by reducing them to marked destinies, it prevents the invention of new relationships and prevents the recognition and meaning of the many novelties that emerge in male practices in parenthood. It is therefore necessary to be aware of the theoretical implications of a reference to the value of male regulating ability, to the symbolic paternal or to the model of virility as 'resources' in the fight against male violence.

The inferiorization and infantilization of women, resulting from this representation, presuppose that women are placed under protection and guidance. A male guardianship that can be paternal guidance, defended and supported by the husband or the State. But this protection, this safeguarding, easily becomes control and often justifies the exercise of male violence as a 'pedagogical' tool in relations between the sexes, or as an exercise of legitimate authority.

I often remember, in meetings on this subject, how our family code before the 1975 reform, that is, the legislation governing family relationships and roles, provided for the exercise by the husband of *the Ius corrigendi* [the law that confirmed a right to correction], also through the use of *vis modica* [moderate force] on children, but also towards the wife. Wife and children placed under the guardianship, authority and control of *the pater familias* [father of the family]. It is precisely this model that legitimized the use of male violence in the face of female excess or female incapacity for self-control and returns to the imagination of men who justify their violent behavior by the need to respond to women who are 'exaggerated', irrational, exasperating and unable to stay in their place. If we were to read a 'clinical diary' in a female asylum in the early 1900s we would have read about 'symptoms' of women interned such as: petulant, gossipy, flirtatious, nymphomaniac, chatty, irreverent, talkative, insolent, excited, capricious...

It is precisely the psychoanalytic reflection, however, that appears to be a knowledge crossed by conflicts and epistemological perspectives that are different and not homogeneous, that seem very articulated with regard to the role of the mother and father figure in the processes of identification. Manuela Fraire proposes psychoanalytic readings that instead see the mother as herself the carrier of a 'wound' in the symbiotic correspondence in which the child would be immersed imposing limits, interpretations and meaning on the experience of subjectification of the infant: a rupture produced precisely by the sexuation of the mother and her unconscious inhab-

ited by sexual desire (Fraire, 2011). The ‘maternal pole’ does not remain characterized by an oblativ fagocitating tension and incapable of ‘order’, but is recognized, by authors such as Laplanche, as the instigator of a strong action of traumatic interpretation of the unexpressed needs of the infant and thus an agent not at all reducible to silent satisfaction.

The radicality we need, therefore, is not the removal of complexity but, on the contrary, the ability to go to the root and recognize how much our representations share the universe in which violence arises, such as the idea of protection just mentioned. It is not a question of referring to relationality by looking at the dynamics of that single relationship between two subjects, but to the social context that determines the forms of relations between the sexes: roles, expectations and power dynamics. Lea Melandri (2011) highlights precisely the link between sexual dualism, the myth of complementarity in the couple, and violence in her book with the significant title of ‘Love and violence’ and in her previous text ‘How the dream of love is born’. Even Oria Gargano, President of an important association committed to the fight against male violence towards women, focuses on the love relationship not to ‘justify’ the violence that is produced in it but, on the contrary, to question our imagination associated with love:

‘If we really want to talk about violence against women, we must not do so with the terms and images used by most, and not by chance adopted by the right to crystallize the phenomenon in a scenario of female misery and male cruelty, in a constant echoing of rhetorical questions – Why? How come? What can we do? –, skillfully used to not really go into things, and to reduce the subject to an exception, an unforeseen epiphany of male folly and female submissiveness, as if the whole context in which we are all immersed was not yet based on the power of men and the subordination of women, cornerstones of a social construct that still acts as a reference structuring relationships within only apparently updated power relations. [...]

‘This book proposes to profoundly analyse the concept of love, considering it a powerful concept that attracts, actualizes and perpetuates archaic content by fragmenting its value into a series of signifiers and effects – including male oppression behaviors and the female attitude to suffer and endure these. Can we dare say that violence is inscribed in romantic relationships, that the relationship of couples, as it has come to be structured, makes it systemic for the simple fact that it is right there that it manifests itself, within the couple?’ (Gargano, 2013, pp. 7,8).

If violence challenges us, we must rethink about family, ‘romantic relationships’, love attitudes attributed to the two sexes. Rather than a relationship that ‘explains’ violence on the basis of internal dynamics, it is violence that questions our idea of relationship.

Male violence in relationships is, of course, not just the violence that has been perpetrated for years to assert, as we have seen, control over one’s partner. Violence is exercised to defend one’s honor (often based on the behavior of ‘one’s own’ women), it takes place in the competitive relation-

ship with other men, it arises when we cannot back down from a challenge or an affront. Violence takes place in the 'game between the parties', between the sexes, based on male conquest and female dissimulation, which does not mean that no really is an expression of unwillingness.

'The ideology of obstacle and deferral considers the *précieuse* as a feminine ideal because it says no, not the *coquette*, who always says yes. Now, the rules of dissimulation presuppose that no is turned into yes via the strategy of behaviors in which it is assumed that sexual difference must be matched by an asymmetry of functions so that, in the end, *the précieuse* must still 'yield' but not turn into a *coquette*. From this point of view, the abuser is the one who discovers the 'cards of the game', in the sense of demystifying the dissimulatory *ars* [art] desecrating the rituality of appearance, that is, considering the exercise of ambivalence that exists in the 'normal' relationship between *Ego* and *Alter* as superfluous and irrelevant [...]. No violence is given that the woman does not want and, on the other hand, that sort of arche that, in the reification of the female body, sees a principle of pleasure for the woman, independent of subjective and intentional determinations, as a result of the inevitable destiny of her physiological passivity' (Ventimiglia, 1989, pg. 25).

In this construction, there is the social removal of female subjectivity that brings with it the removal of female desire: two images mother (madonna) and prostitute. Two very different women, but united by their vocation for oblativity, two women who live according to the needs or desires of the other and who sacrifice themselves in order to respond to the other. Two women who, from my male point of view, will never say no.

'To give in exchange for another's sexual act not only one's own sexual act, but an additional gift, implies not recognizing the same urgency, necessity and autonomy to the sexuality of the other. This relationship model is linked to a relationship of dominance that not only denies the autonomy of female sexuality but brings with it a representation of male sexuality. [Sexuality] is configured as an asymmetric exchange. Men are asking for sexual intercourse that women do not want to concede. Not equal exchanges' (Tabet, 2004, pg.157 et seq.).

But, paradoxically, this construct, which represents women as 'silent bodies', flips into the male perception of the ghost of a female power. If I am the only person entitled to express a need and a desire and if this does not involve reciprocity, I find myself squeezed into the pole of need and this gives the woman power over me. The power of maternal care and the power of female seduction, which infringe on my imagination of self-sufficiency, of a self-governing subject, who is self-motivated and freely responsible for one's own choices and future. It brings out my vulnerability. Thus, the mother, and more generally female care, that as Lea Melandri (2011) observes, prolongs into adult life even though it has been removed and is not recognized, becomes the ghost of suffocating fusionality that prevents them from becoming adult and self-sufficient individuals. So, desire

becomes the instrument used by seduction at the service of the manipulative female opportunism that exerts a power over us. How often is male violence a violence against this inconceivable and unbearable female power over us?

We could continue with a long list of different forms of violence related to a dominant gender model. One particularly important form, for what it tells us but also for the destructive and self-destructive charge that it unleashes, is that which emerges in the face of the inability of many men to accept the end of a relationship.

The violence that explodes in the face of separation does not depend only on the pain of abandonment, which applies to both sexes, but because it questions my self-representation and the imagination I seek to become a man, based on the removal of my vulnerability and dependence. When I discover the facade of that construct, that model that is based on being enough for myself, being the master of myself, not needing anyone, that has been a pillar of my identity structure, an injunction that, since childhood, has guided my construct of myself, goes into crisis. Cristina Oddone (2020) observes how violence can be understood by the author as a tool to restore one's correspondence to a model of hegemonic masculinity:

‘As with other forms of male violence, *intimate partner violence* also proves to be an effective strategy to create gender and masculinity, in this case in the family sphere, in the closest relational environment – the couple, in the relationship with a Woman – exemplary otherness of the male subject considered neutral and universal. These particular male assaults seem to be aimed not only at women, but also in favor of an idealized self-image. [...] Even in intimate relationships, violence shows its full strength, not so much or not only to dominate women, but to verify one's masculinity against hegemonic models and to make oneself recognizable as adult and heterosexual males, in one's own eyes and in front of other men. [...] If we look at the transformations of masculinity, the choice to abandon violence in order to adopt alternative behaviors may in some cases lead to the active role of «heroes» replacing and contrasting with the passive role of «martyrs» – dominated by their own violence and victims of their partner: protagonists, dynamic, shrewd, committed with zeal and good faith to the performance of masculinity thought of as «non-violent» and «renewed». From passive to active, the metamorphosis from martyrs to heroes makes it possible to replace violence with other features, positively connotated, of hegemonic masculinity: agency, the ability to act and resolve, the exercise of control over one's life. Traits which, moreover, can be more fruitful than violence itself, in terms of patriarchal dividend’ (Oddone, 2020, pp. 127-129).

We must therefore consider violence as a mirror that speaks of us and overcomes certain temptations that lead us to alienate it from ourselves. The temptation to naturalize it, to regard it as being inherent to our human condition, which we can try to civilize, but which, as inevitable and constitutive as the human experience, does not require being questioned but, if anything, channeled and governed. This push comes, as we have seen, to read the experience of birth also as an act of a subject that ‘tears’ the body of the



mother in order to be born. In reality, it is an experience that exposes the total defenselessness of those who are born and the subjectivity of those who give birth.

Another temptation is to neutralize it, not to recognize its historical or cultural connotations: a kind of original 'energy' inherent in the desired drive, the engine of movement toward the other.

When we encounter stories of violence, we are confronted with the need to distinguish between conflict, assertiveness, desire and violence. Between desire drive, aggression and violence, there is a qualitative divide that implies a hierarchical relationship of domination, control, subordination or fear. Moreover, the image of desire as an invasive and threatening drive for the freedom and subjectivity of the other is built on a negative anthropology, employed by liberal thought, whereby the report is always a threat to the borders of the other and the freedom of each person is guaranteed by the limits placed on the freedom of others.

To obscure the cultural dimension of the forms of desire, of the images of freedom and autonomy, of the models of assertiveness, is to produce a facade that crystallizes these forms, preventing a dynamic and critical reading.

The need to avoid the temptation to neutralize violence, this specific form of violence, is well reflected in the warnings of the Council of Europe Convention (2011), which specifically speaks of 'gender-based violence', both to indicate violence that has its roots in social family models, the relationship between the sexes and the attribution of attitudes and roles to the two sexes, and in order to detect that this violence aims to perpetuate this order and to maintain hierarchical relations between the sexes. (*It recognizes the structural nature of violence against women, as it is gender-based, and also recognizes that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared to men*).

We must therefore recognize the structural nature of this violence, which, starting from a socially and historically constructed order, reproduces this order.

Why is it important to take this aspect into account? Sometimes people say, 'but there is also female violence', 'there is also violence between men', as if they want to point out, in a misunderstood search for 'complexity', that violence is not a monopoly of one gender and so the condition of 'victim' is also not ascribed to just one gender. But when we talk about gender-based violence, we do not generically refer to violence by one person belonging to one gender on one person belonging to another gender, but we highlight, make visible and therefore make object of reflection, the violence generated by an order that builds, on the basis of gender, relations of power and dominance.

This includes the dynamics of female inferiorization but also forms of

male socialization. Bullying between males, for example, is a form of enacted same-sex violence, but it is part of processes of reproduction of dominant forms of masculinity, of inclusion in a model of masculinity, hegemonic stigmatizing homosexuality, that is produced by differently from ‘femininity’ and is based on competition, performance and the discipline of emotions.

The apparent radicality of condemning ‘all forms of violence, without stopping to distinguish their forms and causes, becomes in many male positions of resistance to change, the trigger to deny taking responsibility and then arriving at an explicitly misogynistic and chauvinistic posture, as in this passage from that which is called *manosphere*: (Ciccone, 2019)

I am radically and secularly antiviolent, and I am proud of it; I remain so even if my neighbor manhandles his wife. I distance myself from anyone who persecutes, humiliates or mistreats any person, regardless. It is not a masculine interpretation (masculine, another insult, a disgraceful slander opposed to a feminist, which is instead elevated to the Sign of the Righteous), the *principle is the same whether the victim of violence is a man or woman, southern or northern, young or old, Italian or foreign. I am not interested in any classification of gender, religion, age, sexual orientation or anything else, they are a person. And as a person, bearer of sacred rights.*

However, my motives are incompatible with the common feeling: I am indignant because the victim is a person, not because it is a woman. Instead, *it seems I should be more indignant precisely because she is a woman, just as I should feel guilty because she is a woman.* One-way guilt, of course.

Because the male-we know-is violent by nature, while the phenomenon of inverted roles does not exist. Pink indignation imposed *urbi et orbi* [on everyone], the right to dissent is not contemplated, like autonomous thought, like the right to freedom to inform oneself in order to educate oneself.

By neutralizing violence, through a posture of general condemnation of all violence, I am carrying out an operation that removes the need for me to take responsibility. This way I do not see, I scotomize the cause of that violence and I can get out of it: of course, I am a male, but that is not why male violence against women is my concern. A speech by the lawyer Taormina, appeared in social networks in 2021, clarifies the ideological sense and the outcome of this operation.

‘I am against violence in the same way, whether it is used against man or against woman. I consider murder to be a life sentence offense both when committed against man and woman. I therefore find it incomprehensible that there are laws which punish these crimes more seriously depending on whether they concern a man or a woman.

The Italian criminal code is becoming intolerably contrary to the constitutional principle of equality between men and women, and the management of the trial has become an unacceptable form of violence against men because prosecutors and judges have invented a system of evidence for which women are right regardless and man is wrong regardless. The word of a woman is enough to sentence the man, even in the face of indisputable realities. In addition, women are

assisted by organizations and committees that are under the substantial dependence of prosecutors and gather evidence at their leisure by preparing packages that become unbeatable in trials.

It occurs mainly in sexual assault crimes where evidence is prepackaged and often fabricated through evidentiary hearings that cry for revenge and that result in the certain conviction in a trial where the judges never bother to check these dirty tricks'.

The condemnation of violence, whether against a man or a woman, is an opportunity for a 'revolt' against laws that would blame men, and against a dominated culture that tends to undermine the social value of paternity.

The removal of the social causes of violence thus leads, not to a deeper understanding of it, we might say, 'more radical', but rather to an opposing ideological operation.

Recognizing the root of gender is not a way to push violence away from me by placing it in a category: gender is my concern, it belongs to me it calls me into question, it has shaped my way of being. It is not a question of 'anthropology', understood in the colonial sense that it belongs to cultures that I observe from the outside as a phenomenon from which I am outside of: to call into question the gender nature of violence is to declare how I am engaged by it.

It is, therefore, necessary to overcome the idea that in order to combat male violence, we must restore order. On the contrary, gender-based violence is the result of order and reproduces it. This applies both socially and in the individual dimension in which man acts with violence to restore a threatened identity and masculinity.

This interpretation, according to which violence is the result of the loss of the ability to control drives, the loss of that ability to discipline, the ethical reference represented by the paternal norm, often stems from a reference to the psychoanalytic culture in order to lead to the diagnosis of the social crisis, as in this case of an article on the supplement 'D' of 'La Repubblica' in July 2018.

Gastaldi warns that the feeling of virility, which is in itself a good value, should not be reduced to one of its parts, that of power and effectiveness. Gastaldi cites femicide, which almost always occurs at the same time as a couple's separation, as an inability of losing, thus as a lack of virility. And he reminds us of those rites of loss that once marked the male transition from childhood to adolescence. He concludes: «I hope for an awakening of fathers: to teach pain and impotence, otherwise the risk is the loss of the male, it is the aggressiveness of fragility» (Ciccone, 2019).

This narrative involves three elements: the first is that there exists a male polarity, owner of ethics, disciplining bodies and drives, and a female pole of corporeality and emotion. Polarization also implies a hierarchy between these poles.

The second is that there is a naturalness of violence, its pulsational nature and that culture contains it, the levees, the governments and therefore the nostalgia for the loss of an order capable of regulating male bodies and their impulses, but in the name of a more general function of discipline that concerned the corporeality and therefore the female body.

The limit we need is the ban imposed by the paternal norm, the limit set in a world inhabited by silent female bodies available to our needs, and our desires whose 'consumption', bulimic or infantile with losing effects, is prohibited by the limit represented by paternal ethics? Why not think of the limit as an opportunity, recognition of a bias, recognition of the fact that the world is inhabited by another desire and another subjectivity, that that particular care does not come from a mother without desire and subjectivity, and that that particular woman does not live according to my desire but is the bearer of an autonomous desire? This allows me to expand my relationship opportunities, to enrich my sexuality, to have a different experience of my own body. It is possible to conceive the limit not (only) as a frustrating interdiction, giving up following a bulimic drive, but as a new experience of the world and a new space for relationships. To be (also) the object of a gaze, to be a territory.

Michel Foucault recalls how the foundation of Western subjectivity is based on an idea of self-domination as a condition of domination over the other:

The system of the Athenian city is for Foucault, the first place in which one invents a subjectivation: a line of forces that passes through the rivalry of free men. A man must dominate himself in order to rule over free men (Deleuze, 1989).

Dominating oneself, not in relation to one's own body, but by basing one's authority on the ability to dominate it and, by dominating it, dominates the woman reduced to a body.

We should, then, try to think of different ideas of subjectivity in which the body is in relation to the foundation of subjectivity. Not a subjectivity that is assumed to be fully rational and transparent to itself in which desire is a linear projection of oneself to the outside, but subjectivity rooted in the body and which is not built by emancipating from it and which is founded in the relationship and cannot be separated from the relationship.

We therefore need to produce an idea of subjectivity that does not remove our vulnerability and porosity. Recognizing that we are constitutionally the fruit of the relationship built by the care and gaze of the other. Accepting Butler's solicitation, thinking of an opaque subject in itself cannot rationally 'account' for the selves. A constitutionally relational being against the destructive and self-destructive illusion of self-sufficiency, and an idea of constitutional subjectivity in relation to the body beyond the illusion, which also has a violent and alienating outcome of emancipating me

from it until it becomes foreign. At the same time, we need to recognize that our desire is not the place of our authenticity, of our self-founded subjectivity, but always remains opaque to ourselves in its reasons and its roots.

Even the subject is an entity opaque to itself, never fully self-transparent and knowable, [a] subject for which the ultimate meaning and intention of one's own impulses do not become enigmatic only to the child, but to some extent remain so throughout life [...]. Every impulse is besieged by an extraneity, or foreignness (*étrangèreté*), and the 'ego' realizes it is a stranger to itself in its most elementary impulses [...]. It cannot account for how an 'ego' has become capable of narrating itself [...] [thus] desire retains this external and foreign quality even when it becomes the desire of the subject. [But] the idea of a subject who is not self-founded, of a subject, that is, whose emergency conditions can never be totally narrated, undermines the possibility of a responsibility and therefore of the act accounting for the self? The opacity of the subject may originate in its being conceived as a relational being' (Butler, 2005).

The need to rethink the model of subjectivity on which we have built the hierarchy between male and female and which we have taken as a reference for masculinity emerges in the analysis of the destructive dynamics emerging in individual relationships but also, in a continuous link between the individual dimension and the social context in the analysis of the dynamics of frustration and the pathological representations that feed nationalist populism in the face of the crisis of citizenship that assumed that model of citizen as rational, self-sufficient and self-centered as a reference. What does violence tell us in cases of femicide after which, not infrequently, perpetrators commit suicide or surrender themselves to the police? That extreme outcome shows something intolerable, an attack on identity that has to do with the weakness of the symbolic resources available.

The comparison with this phenomenon raises the need to build personal resources and social resources to build a narrative that is different from that dead end.

In this, it can help us to read the 'male crisis' and the related crisis of social ties by not fueling the nostalgia of an order but, on the contrary, by understanding how it reveals the inadequacy of a symbolic and an imaginary in giving meaning to men's lives. This requires critical reflection on the role and social responsibility of psychoanalytic thought and psychology in the face of a social question that seeks in this knowledge an answer to one's own loss, it is a re-interpretation of theoretical statutes and categories based on archetypes and functions that risk crystallizing the reading of change by referring to static functions.

Rethinking the epistemology of one's categories also means problematizing the male gaze given to make it visible, 'denaturalizing it.' For example: The idea that the woman represents otherness. If we dismiss the neutrality of a male gaze, we might say that the relationship with alterity is

instead within the female experience of bringing another life within herself life that is part of herself and that is detached and differentiated from the self. The feminine would be constitutionally related to the otherness and does not correspond to otherness. On the contrary, we could reflect on how much the condition of paternity corresponds to the experience of being the 'third', out of that ancillary relationship, an accessory.

As a "Maschile Plurale", we have always disputed a 'psychologizing' approach to violence because it seemed to us to carry with it the risk of reducing violence to its individual and pathological dimension, removing its cultural roots and thus removing the need for accountability and the need for more general conflict and change.

Perhaps we need to rethink this polarity with the contribution of some authors such as Bourdieu or Butler who highlight the link between domain relations, social productions and the psychic structure of individuals:

'Even when it seems to be based on naked force, that of weapons, or money, the recognition of dominion is the effect of a power, inscribed endlessly in the body of the dominated in the form of patterns of perception and dispositions (to admire, respect, love) that make them sensitive to certain manifestations of power. When the dominated apply to who dominates them patterns that are the product of the domination or, in other words, when their thoughts and perceptions are structured in accordance with the very structures of the domination relationship they undergo, their acts of knowledge are, inevitably, acts of gratitude and of submission. But no matter how close the correspondence is between the realities or processes of the natural world and the principles of vision and division applied to them, there is always room for a cognitive struggle over the meaning of things in the world and in particular sexual realities [...] a possibility of resistance against the effect of symbolic imposition' (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 22).

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence refers to the psychic effect of the domination that Butler mentions and allows us to interpret the complexity and ambivalence of relational dynamics without drawing from this some 'radical' reduction in our contrast to violence but, on the contrary, a more radical reading of the forms of relationship in which it emerges:

'The insistence on the affirmation that a subject is passionately attached to its subordination has been cynically invoked by those who seek to downsize subordinate demands. Beyond this and contrary to this vision, I believe that attachment to subjugation is produced through the actions of power and that the work of power is partly exemplified precisely by this psychic effect, one of the most insidious of its productions' (Butler, 1997).

Recognizing the complexity of the dynamics of gender violence and measuring ourselves with their roots leads us to question the limits of the categories specific to our professionalism. If gender-based violence is a disturbing phenomenon that engages us, one possible temptation is to use our

professionalism, the disciplinary categories available to us, to make it a screen that protects us from confrontation with it. Competences thus become not a tool to meet violence but a white coat that protects us from it, objectifying it, placing it in a test tube: 'you have a problem because you can't get out of an abusive relationship or because you can't control your impulses, and I have the resources to help you resolve it.'

Part of this temptation is the use of standards and protocols that help us contain, give a predictable shape and normalize the complexity of violence. Systematizing that disturbing element by protecting my subjectivity. Referring to a 'cycle of violence' that would repeat itself each time, allowing us to predict or understand the evolution of events, to have author profiles to 'explain them', behavior classifications, to prepare tests and indicators to measure risk...

We must think that we need to add to professional competencies a personal awareness: Why do I do this work? Why did I choose to work with violence? How does it stimulate me and what does it arouse? What is inside me that emerges in this relationship? Not only: are we faced with the need to take on the bias of our point of view and our professional approach, abandoning the idea that each or every one of us as a social worker, therapist or lawyer has the categories to understand and contain the problem and the means to solve it. Everyone plays their part, there are those who decide whether to remove minors, who refers back to a judge, who enforces the rules and decides the penalties, who produces the report as a technical consultant, but all of these figures need to recognize that the problem does not end in its own fragment, and they must be able to meet the challenge of the complexity of a multifactorial phenomenon that requires a multidisciplinary approach.

Gender-based violence, therefore, produces a desire for extraneity, it questions our epistemological and professional categories, asks us to do a job that confers the individual stories we encounter with the social and cultural context that we live in. To do this, we need to innovate our tools and our views.

Women have produced collective knowledge and practices to put women's experience into words and give them new meanings. There is still a vacuum of male thinking, words and practices that needs to be filled, by bringing into play a new awareness and accountability, but also a new desire to change their lives.

## REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, P. (1999). *La domination masculine*, Seuil, Paris, tr. it., *Il dominio maschile*, Feltrinelli, Milano.
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an account of oneself*, trad. it. *Critica della violenza etica*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2006.
- Butler, J. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997. (Tr. It., *La vita psichica del potere*, Meltemi editore Roma, 2005.)
- Ciccone, S. (2019). *Maschi in crisi? Oltre la frustrazione e il rancore*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino.
- Convenzione del Consiglio d'Europa sulla prevenzione e la lotta contro la violenza nei confronti delle donne e la violenza domestica, 2011. <https://rm.coe.int/16806b0686>
- Deleuze, G. (1989). *Che cos'è un dispositivo?*, Cronopio, Napoli.
- Fraire, M. (2011). *L'oblio del padre, Rapsodia, rete di psicoanalisi, arte e vocalità*.
- Gargano, O. (2013). *Seduzioni d'amore, Per una narrazione non convenzionale della violenza contro le donne*, Sapere Solidale, Roma.
- Haraway, D.J. (1995). *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century in Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, tr. it. *Manifesto cyborg. Donne, tecnologie e biopolitiche del corpo*, Feltrinelli, Milano.
- Melandri, L. (2011). *Amore e Violenza. Il fattore molesto della civiltà*, Bollati Boringhieri.
- Oddone, C. (2020). *Uomini normali. Maschilità e violenza nell'intimità*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino.
- Pitch, T. (2018). *Che ha a che fare questo con la libertà delle donne? (e di tutt\*?)*, post pubblicato in *Studi sulla questione criminale* online, consultabile al link <https://studiquestionecriminale.wordpress.com/2018/07/20/che-ha-a-che-fare-questo-con-la-liberta-delle-donne-e-di-tutt-ditamar-pitch/>
- Recalcati, M. (2011) *Cosa resta del padre? La paternità nell'epoca ipermoderna*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano.
- Risè, C. (2004). *Il padre. L'assente inaccettabile*. Ed. San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo.
- Tabet, P. (2004). *La grande beffa. Sessualità delle donne e scambio sesso-economico*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli (CZ).
- Ventimiglia, C. (1988) *La differenza negata. Ricerca sulla violenza sessuale in Italia* Franco Angeli, Milano.
- Zoja, L. (2000). *Il gesto di Ettore. Preistoria, storia, attualità e scomparsa del padre*. Bollati Boringhieri, Torino.

---

Conflict of interests: the author declares no potential conflict of interests.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: not required.

Received: 3 January 2023.

Accepted: 14 March 2023.

Editor's note: all claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, editors and reviewers, or any third party mentioned. Any materials (and their original source) used to support the authors' opinions are not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

©Copyright: the Author(s), 2023

Licensee PAGEPress, Italy

*Ricerca Psicoanalitica* 2023; XXXIV:756

doi:10.4081/rp.2023.756

*This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits any noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.*