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THE GENERATIONAL ROOTS OF VIOLENCE IN YOUTH

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More and more frequently we are witnessing outbreaks of violence in Western societies, especially in young people, and, in particular, in adolescents. Episodes of bullying as early on as in latency and sometimes even earlier, violent behaviour in groups or at school, vandalism, or, on the contrary, damage to one's own person, such as scarification, piercing and the like, or violent games on the internet, are just some of the occurrences that require adequate understanding. They do not appear to be merely an expression of the mechanisms used up until now in order to explain them, often with reference to a lack of direct drive satisfaction or identification with the aggressor. These mechanisms seem to be significantly more complex. There also appears to be widespread confusion regarding these phenomena. In my opinion, it is necessary to distinguish between aggression and violence and between violence and sadism. Many adults, and, in particular, many parents, complain about their adolescent children's violent behaviour and often, even in the first consultation, we realize that they are only talking about the aggressive aspects that are used by adolescents to try to break away. They do this by acting out a developmental mourning or things that adolescents use to define their identity and to "subjectivate". Parents who are strongly ambivalent

about their children's separation, live these separating dynamics as being aggressive, and at times they really are very aggressive. Regarding these issues, adolescents need a response from their parents that is similar to the one described by Winnicott in, "The Use of the Object," facing a child's aggressive threat: "I will kill you," the parent could answer, "Here I am, I am dying," and a minute later, "Here I am, I am living." With this kind of response the parent reassures the adolescent about the natural existence of his aggression, but disappoints him on his destructive omnipotence, so, as Winnicott says, the sense of reality, something an adolescent painfully needs. Here, we are in the area of healthy aggression which, in my opinion, along with sexuality, is one of the organising instances of adolescence (Nicolò, 2006). Even if the distinction between violence and sadism seems evident from the start, in some situations these phenomena overlap. I think that the major difference lies in the pleasure which is derived from sadistic situations, it is related to the need for power over another person and for causing suffering. A pleasure that can be eroticized and that is not normally present in a violent situation, although at times we see pathologies on the border of violent and sadistic functioning or where violence contains sadistic aspects. In other cases, the later development of violent personalities in the direction of sadism depends not only on personality organization, but also on casual factors that may end up structuring personality, such as traumatic meetings.

Like many other authors, Glasser distinguished between self-preserved violence and sadism or malicious violence (1985) (Meloy, 1992, also distinguished predatory violence from affective violence). The latter is found in psychopathological personalities and is planned, cold violence, while the former represents the reaction to a real or imagined threat. I am going to discuss this latter aspect of self-preserved violence and affective violence, because in my opinion, this is the kind of violence that is typical of today's youth, both at an individual level and in gangs.

Due to the physiologically traumatic nature of adolescent development processes, such as the integration of a sexual body and narcissistic object rearrangement, normal aggression, as mentioned above, that is one of the organizing instances in this period of life, may have a triggering effect if it collides with previous traumatic functioning which in its own time may have characterized the subject's family.

Therefore, we can see the precipitation of a double trauma. The violent adolescent tries to rid himself of the traumatic process that he cannot elaborate, by attacking an enemy or whoever provides him with an opportunity to do so, as he has projected his shameful or rejected parts of his own Self onto this person (Nicolò, 2005; 2006). This process provides temporary relief and acts as a dam against breakdown (Nicolò, 2005; 2006) and, most of all, it provides negative identity that is built on omnipotence, the denial of dependence and self-sufficiency. During this period of life, violence has the unconscious aim of defining identity and it becomes a big effort when differentiating and defining, even against the other or against reality. It also provides a sense of strength and power, when, for both personal reasons and for typical adolescent dynamics, the adolescent feels threatened and is also afraid of passivity. Violent acts thus contrast depressive experiences or identity anxieties that these adolescents cannot integrate or elaborate, and, in one single act, they soothe tension and internal and external conflicts, and manage to avoid the feared danger of elaboration that neither adolescent children nor parents are able to complete.

Understanding family functioning

Among the many factors that contribute to the genesis of violent behaviour in adolescents, family functioning is certainly one of the most important. But what happens in families where an adolescent is violent? In the family that is seen as an emotional and affective learning context, from very early on, adolescents learn from transpersonal and interpersonal defence mechanisms, how to defend themselves from anxiety and mental pain. In these families, acting out, concretization, inability to conceive time, difficulties in containing tension and in controlling impulses, but most of all, difficulties in thinking, are some of the most frequent and most well-known features. This specific quality of family life humiliates and confuses the phase-specific needs of adolescents and may create a situation where a violent identity becomes the only possible survival strategy. We are all well aware of some of the mechanisms that induce the repetition of violent patterns in these families. We know for sure, that, often, abusing parents have been abused as children. Identification with the aggressor, dissociation and denial are well described mechanisms in cases of abuse and violence. Dissociation is frequently



kept alive by the need to keep violence and abuse secret. Then, we can see an apparent and real identity in families and family members who are contradictory. In this situation, a child learns special functioning modes and does not see it as a subject who has the rights of an individual. A huge gap is created between the child that is imagined in the parents' mind, and the real child in front of them. Moreover, and for various reasons, the abused child becomes invisible for the abusing father and the non-protective mother, while the abused child's needs are not recognized by them at all. All this will lead in turn to an adult who abuses and harasses without even being fully aware of the meaning of his actions. This invisibility, this misrecognition is one of the most pathological aspects of this functioning (Nicolò, 2005; 2006).

This ever denied or unrecognized need for being seen in one's own identity is amplified and becomes explosive in adolescence because it is amplified by the phase-specific needs of this age.

a) Regressive and indifferentiating functioning

There is however another aspect that I think is crucial in this context: the fact that violent behaviour is the expression of individual and family regression to a more primitive mental and organizational level. In one of the most impressive films that describes violence in adolescent groups, "Lord of the Flies," we see the progressive deterioration of functioning and relations in a group of adolescents who are stranded on a desert island. In a very short period of time we witness the emergence of group functioning that follows the basic assumptions of messianic dependence from a leader and fight and flight, with a serious paranoid regression. More reasonable people are marginalized and even killed. The fear of solitude, of feeling helpless in the face of difficulties and the need to define oneself defensively with a strong identity generates thoughtless adhesion to group functioning. As Amati Sas, drawing it from Bleger's theory, calls it, there emerges "a defensive regression to a state of ambiguity," born from violence, and generating violence.

A further discussion of this point seems useful in order to explain what takes place in situations where adolescents repeat some of the complex attitudes and functioning that characterized their family of



origin with their peer group. Bleger's suggestion, as assumed by Amati Sas, concerns the existence of an ambiguous core that is deposited in the environment and becomes the bearer of the most undifferentiated aspects of the Self. A residue of the primary undifferentiation will always remain in adults, writes Amati. When there are sudden changes, both due to sudden motions in the context and to changes in the subject (emigration, or mourning, for example) the mobilization of ambiguity to be deposited may be experienced as uncertainty or anxiety in varying tones. Violence and traumas determine defensive regression at the "intersubjective" level. According to Amati Sas, conformism and the inability to criticize are related to the existence of this ambiguity that is used by the Ego for its mimetic quality, with numbing and indifference used as shields to protect the structure. This regression causes great alterations in human relations and introduces misunderstanding (misinterpretation, paradox, ambiguity). This misunderstanding, in addition to the malleability and penetrability induced by violence, sabotages the effort at identification level (Aulagnier) and also the moral and ethic dimension.

Using more familiar terminology, I would say that in these families and in the links between these families and violent adolescents, we can see a regression to a primitive, lightly differentiated level that is always present but inactive in the functioning of any family. Since violence is a threat to the sense of safety of the Self, both the need for belonging and sharing with others and the fear of isolation increase defensively and cause regression to primitive forms of functioning of both the subject and the family group. In this situation the "subjectivation" of family members, in particular of adolescent children, becomes a threat. Since violence by one or both parents and their lack of recognition and their misunderstanding of the real needs of their children create an atmosphere of insecurity, misunderstanding (as suggested by Bleger and Amati Sas), lies and confusion (in Meltzer's terms) prevail as a mode of functioning and identification. Cynicism towards the truth will intoxicate the ethics of family relations and will destroy any earnest wish to learn.

This kind of functioning makes the relationship of these adolescents with their peer group problematic as they also tend to repeat the misrecognition, aggression-flight, submission-prevarication dynamics, that is subtly typical of their families, with their peers. Since misunderstandings, lies and ambiguities have attacked their identity,

they have to show it and impose it in order to demonstrate that they possess it, while, at the same time, they have no true internalized tools to think, differentiate and "subjectivate". This will then facilitate their passive adhesion to peer groups who are organized as gangs. In this climate there is no difference and therefore no-one is a culprit or a victim, but everyone shares the same functioning, where the violation of limits and boundaries permits everything and there is no mourning but only omnipotence and the rejection of the Oedipus. This kind of functioning and identification is pre-Oedipal, archaic and a-specific. A 17 year old boy, who I treated in family sessions because at school he bullied younger children in addition to showing behavioural problems at home, brought a dream to a session after 8 months of treatment. He was in an unknown house, not his own. They called him for lunch, but to his surprise he realized that this family had unrecognizable faces. They seemed to be hidden behind stockings, which made them all look the same. This seemed to scare him. Stimulated by his younger sister, he associated the stockings to exciting episodes seen on TV or narrated by other people concerning hold ups and various other crimes. The parents seemed to undervalue the content of the dream, just as they undervalued their son's problems. They cannot escape the idea that, in reality, the sessions are only an opportunity for showing their anger and disappointment for a son that does not obey them.

In this example, the second skin, that is metaphorically shown in the dream as the stockings covering the relatives' faces, is a tool for making people homogeneous, and this effacement of identity is also the cancellation of the sense of responsibility. It is not possible to identify who does what. In addition to both the sense of regressive undifferentiation that is typical of these families, and to the misrecognition-misunderstanding of identity, other mechanisms are both active and related to these.

b) Functioning according to the law of the strongest

Most sessions in the first year of therapy were organized by Fabio, 20, on the discovery and mockery of my mistakes or incompetence. His repetitive pattern consisted in trying to make me fall into his traps and beat me with his dialectics. In a family session I learn that this tendency is very strong in his father, who humiliates the rest of the family with his ability of rhetoric and vast erudition, but his mother

too, who is a college professor, subtly colludes with it in a sort of sadistic entertainment that humiliates the other participants. The effect of this consolidated attitude leads both children to refuse to talk with either father or mother. Father, a legal expert is always ready to have the last word on good and evil, on what anyone should or should not do. Later on, I learn of his history as a womanizer, that is frequently very humiliating for his wife. For example, right after the birth of their first son, he was away pretending to be working, while he was in fact spending time with his lover.

These two clinical vignettes show how these families are dominated by patterns of obedience to and humiliation by the strongest member. The rule is either suffer or cause suffering. In extreme situations, where families become gangs, there is no differentiation between parents or between parents and children at the level of limits and ability to contain. A person in this mental condition – writes Meltzer – cannot think, but is very apt at exploiting the thoughts of others for aims that are not those that are conceived with originality. Thinking thus deteriorates and is used as a power tool. The father function is powerful and patronizing, and due to the corruption of the fatherly instance, one has the feeling that there is no justice. One of my adolescent patients was very proud of attacking the police, moving his rebellion against his father outside the family, and he stated that true justice consisted in attacking a corrupt power. He saw no difference in stealing and in being robbed and used the word "to take" for this, but, however, taking or being taken happened just by chance and he considered it an irrelevant event.

In the case of this young man (and of others like him), his typical provocation and anger and fits of violence (his friends used to call him the Tirade because he was often angry and would make endless tirades towards his friends) were aimed at discussing this split in a specific breaking point and also at stimulating his environment to do the same. At times these actings may be considered as communications of aspects of a parent that the adolescent carries along without elaboration. In other cases we can see the repetition of real traumatic scenarios that, in a Winnicottian perspective, are used to force the original environment to provide responses that are different from those given on earlier occasions. We can even sometimes see the fantasy of the existence of an idealized, pure dimension and, when acting outs start to decline, we notice the effort

at repairing the damage done and at trying to restore a pure aspect. An example of this is in the case of a boy who always held me in stalemate and is now working as a volunteer with homeless people. As Winnicott (1984) said, acting for these patients is an alternative to despair. Quite often, the patient feels hopeless and lives in a state of depression or dissociation, thus masking the state of chaos that is always impending. I think that violence and antisocial acting must be evaluated with caution, but, at the same time, they are a form of communication.

A mass killing that ended with the death of its protagonists took place at the Columbine High School in Colorado.

On April 20, 1999 two students, Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17, entered the school in West Denver, Colorado, with handguns and bombs and committed suicide after having killed 12 school mates. Their story has been told in two films: *Bowling at Columbine* by Michael Moore (2002) and *Elephant* by Gus Van Sant (2003). Like suicide bombers, for these two students too, death was the price paid for the killing. From their notes, later published on the internet by the Denver police, it appears that they prepared the killing in advance and let their intention leak out at school.

They were both isolated and friendless. From a certain date on in their diaries, we can see slogans and symbols of Nazi propaganda, admiration for the well known serial killer Charles Manson and drawings of mutilated or wounded people.

Harris writes that he wanted to kill all his friends, sparing only those who were isolated like himself.

"I want to destroy as much as possible", he writes, "and I must not be distracted by sympathy, pity or prayers. The most beautiful thing is hating" (from *Il Corriere della Sera*, July 9, 2006).

Nowhere in the journal is suicide mentioned, on the contrary, it seems that they had prepared a flight plan to run away to some foreign country. A possible alternative was to highjack an airplane and make it crash over New York. But after the killing, the two boys killed themselves in order not to get caught.

In this story the victims are a group of hated persons. The difference between these two students and suicide bombers is that the former get excited at killing, love blood and blood shedding. It is the wish to kill that dominates their mind and drives them to shoot. For this reason the two students wanted to avenge the mistreatment and offences that they had suffered and had completely identified with in the destructive figures of Nazis and serial killers.

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