

3 The Normative Force of Suffered Violence

Pascal Delhom

Some experiences can hardly be described in strictly objective terms, as though our interest in them were purely cognitive.¹ Suffered violence² is one such experience, and not only because of the affective charge it mostly involves. At a deeper level, I would argue, a normative dimension belongs constitutively to the very meaning of suffered violence as such, such that any understanding or phenomenological description of violence *as something that is suffered* must include it. Constituting neither an evaluative judgement nor a legal or ethical regulation of violent actions, both of which are external to the actions or experiences that they seek to judge or regulate, the normative dimension of suffered violence belongs, I would argue, to the phenomenon itself. Put simply: Violence wouldn't be experienced *as suffered violence* if it weren't experienced as something that should not happen or exist, in a sense that must be specified. Such rejection of or insurgency against the lived experience of suffered violence is a constitutive part of this very experience.

This normativity arises at two distinct but correlative levels. The first is that of suffered injury in a very broad sense, including what is usually called physical, psychical, and moral injury in the sense of the external disturbance or destruction of fundamental dimensions of life against the will of the injured person, as certain examples in the chapter will show. Such an injury can be experienced from different perspectives (that of a victim or an involved party, that of an eyewitness, or that which is given through the witness of others) and in very different ways (as immediate pain, anxiety, or a feeling of powerlessness, or as a damaging of our relationship to the world, to ourselves, and to others). Mainly, however, suffered injury is experienced as something that should not exist or happen. A moment of rejection is thus a constitutive part of that experience.

As not all injuries are experienced *as suffered violence*, however, we need a second level of normativity to understand this phenomenon. This second level corresponds to a broadly accepted and practiced (even if not always explicitly formulated) regulation of social life, that is, of the relationships between persons, and between persons and groups, within any given society. Such a regulation finds its expression in the social

norms regulating society members' belonging, integrity, and existential empowerment.

The experience of suffered violence presupposes and combines these two levels of normativity. Thus, something is experienced *as* suffered violence when it is experienced as an injury (as something that should not exist) and when that injury, in turn, is experienced as a violation of at least one of these fundamental social norms.

But the twofold normative dimension of suffered violence is not only a constitutive aspect of suffered violence, one that any adequate description of the phenomenon must take into consideration. The thesis of a *normative force* of suffered violence assumes that this normative dimension not only *presupposes* the social normativity that defines what, in a given society, will be considered and experienced as violence but also *shapes and develops* this social normativity. In so doing, it shapes and develops in return the experience of violence itself.

A political phenomenology that addresses the question of suffered violence must therefore begin with an understanding of what it means to be injured and, more specifically, what it means to be injured in the sense of suffered violence. It must then address how such experiences not only are conditioned by social norms but also shape them.

1. Questions of Methods

Methodologically, a phenomenology of suffered violence faces two main difficulties. The first of these concerns how the phenomenological subjects gain access to the phenomena of suffered violence. For the experience of suffered violence differs sharply from the perception of an object that stands in front of a subject, always at a certain distance, and can therefore be accessed through an intentional act. In contrast, suffered violence is also experienced subjectively as an affection of the subject herself. As with Merleau-Ponty's description of the permanence of one's own body in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, the experience of suffered violence happens "on the side" of the subject and not in front of it (see Merleau-Ponty 2012, 93). Suffered violence, therefore, never belongs completely to the realm of objects.

Yet neither is it suffered as a bare pathos that, like birth, death, or falling asleep, withdraws from the sphere of experience. Indeed, there are injuries that are suffered without being perceived. This happens for instance over and over again to people caught in the heat of the moment. An injury that affects them might only later come to their consciousness, when they are not captivated any more by their activity. There are even forms of injuries or traumas that stay hidden for years or for a whole life – although they might affect the perception and the behavior of the injured persons. But as long as they are not perceived as such, such injuries are obviously not experienced as violence.

Suffered violence is not reducible to the subjective feelings of pain, helplessness, anxiety, or exposedness in which it can be given to consciousness. For not every pain or exposedness is suffered *as violence*. As we will see, a certain relationship to the world and to others seems to belong constitutively to the experience of suffered violence. But insofar as it is *suffered*, violence remains nevertheless outside of the realm of phenomenality, “on the side” of the subject. In this sense, suffered violence is a phenomenon taking place at the limit of phenomenality. It withdraws from the phenomena in which it appears and that refer only marginally, like a shadow, to the suffering of the subject.

Furthermore, a suffered injury might as well affect and damage the very ability of the suffering subject to perceive objects in the world and, hence, to objectively see her or his own injury. For an injured eye for instance or an injured hand do not only hurt – if they hurt – but they transform and impede as well our relationship to the visible or tangible world. Hence, in accordance with the level of such a damage or hinderance, the injury sustained by the subject appears to the latter not directly as a phenomenon, but only indirectly, as a modification of the subject’s ability to perceive. A phenomenology of suffered violence will have to follow these indirect paths and try to locate in them the specific phenomenality of violence, as well as the normative force that arises from it.

The second difficulty is that it is impossible for the phenomenologist to personally suffer all of the kinds of violence she intends to describe. This is especially true for extreme or selective forms of violence such as torture, enslavement, racism, sexism, or structural poverty. Nor, at a more general level, can the phenomenologist provoke the violence she intends to suffer merely in order to describe it, as in this case her very intention would profoundly modify the experience of that violence, making it into a voluntary rather than a suffered (and hence involuntary) experience. If the phenomena of suffered violence are to be accessible to and describable by phenomenologists, therefore, they must be accessed in ways other than those afforded by direct experience. Two of these indirect access routes are quite common: The fact of being the eyewitness to violent events, and that of hearing, seeing, or reading the accounts of other persons who have themselves experienced or witnessed violence (see, among others, Ricœur 2004, Part II, Chap. 1.III). The latter means of access is for most people – and also for the phenomenologist – the most common one. We tend to talk and write about experiences of violence that we have heard of and that we have neither experienced nor witnessed first-hand.

Nevertheless, these forms of access to the phenomena of suffered violence require a critical reflection on the part of both witnesses and those who rely on their accounts. Hence, to properly understand it, the witness to a violent event must reflect on his own involvement in what he perceives and how it affects him. Likewise, insofar as we refer to what others have witnessed, we must first establish their reliability as witnesses,

and then critically examine the framework in which these accounts of suffered violence are given – frameworks that affect not only the form, but also, through the modification of their form, the content of these accounts (see Vismann 2000). Indeed, accounts of suffered violence differ profoundly in accordance with the framework in which they are given, be this a criminal procedure, a psychological cure, a political discussion, a historical report, a sociological research project, a support group, a literary narrative, or some other form. Such frameworks and the specific conditions of utterance that they allow must therefore be taken into account when establishing the truth (and the kind of truth) of a testimony.

The pages following do not explicitly address these difficulties. Rather, they refer mainly to experiences of suffered violence among those who have experienced it, without addressing how the phenomenologist gained access to these experiences. Because such distinctions shape the background of these experiences, however, they should be systematically addressed in any comprehensive phenomenology of suffered violence.

2. The Experience of Suffered Violence

As mentioned previously, there are different ways of experiencing suffered violence and different dimensions of such experiences. I would like to identify five such possible dimensions of the experience of suffered violence which correspond to the different modes of givenness of the violence experienced by the subject and to the different domains of experience that they affect and transform. The first is the immediate, non-intentional givenness of an injury that manifests as feelings of pain, helplessness, anxiety, and exposedness; the next three are modes of givenness that consist in the modification of a person's relationship to the world, herself, and others; and the last is the experience of suffered violence as a violation of social norms. Several possible combinations of these modes of givenness constitute the experience of suffered violence, albeit with a different emphasis in each particular case.³ And all of them are shaped by a specific form of rejection of this suffering as something that should not exist or should not happen. This is what I call their basic normative dimension.

2.1. First Dimension of Experience of Suffered Violence

One of the most common ways of talking about suffered violence is to equate it with the pain it causes. But pain is only one aspect of and one form of awareness of the injuries we sustain, and it is not even a necessary one. Indeed, some injuries are received in the total absence of felt pain, and they are not always the less severe ones! Hence, pain should not be equated with injury but rather taken seriously as what it is: an immediate, pre-reflexive form of self-givenness of the subject affected by

an injury. In the same way, an injury can be experienced by the subject immediately as feelings of helplessness, anxiety, or exposedness. All of these feelings are experienced without being the objects of an intentional cognitive act, nor are they necessarily connected to the experience of any object in the world, even if they can be manifested in the way the world shows up for one.⁴ And their evidence is absolutely subjective: Although beyond question for the subjects who endure them, they cannot be constituted intersubjectively as an object in a common world.

In a certain sense, such feelings tend to isolate their subjects from the world and reduce them to a state of affective self-awareness. They are lived as a movement of withdrawal from the world yet simultaneously felt as an affectedness by and exposure to the world and other people. They are experienced and suffered as passivity. And even if this passivity can only retrospectively be constituted as the effect of an activity in the world, it is lived from the start as an exposedness to the world and to others that cannot be reduced to experiences of self-affection (regarding the experience of pain, see Grüny 2004, 31). In this sense, persons who feel themselves to be affected by the violence suffered are not the active subjects of their own experience. They are only subjects in the sense that they are subjected to that experience and aware of their subjection.

This form of self-awareness, which is felt as pain, anxiety, or helplessness is, itself, repulsive and sometimes even unbearable (even if such feelings can be modified and valorized in certain situations and under certain conditions, such as those arising within the framework of therapies or sexual practices). Combined with the feelings of affectedness and of exposedness to the world and to others, it is an experience that those subjected to it reject, even if they continue to fundamentally affirm life. Moreover, the subject's withdrawal from the world of intentional objects makes it difficult to make sense of this experience. Thus, it is lived as something that should not be (see Grüny 2004, 33). According to Levinas, this is even truer of pain suffered by others, insofar it is presented to us in their face. For even if we can retrospectively give meaning to what we ourselves have suffered, we cannot offer such justification for the suffering of others (see Levinas 1998). This fundamental rejection of suffered violence as manifested in immediate feelings of pain, anxiety, helplessness, or exposedness is the first occurrence of a negative normativity that is intrinsic to that experience.

2.2. Second Dimension of Experience of Suffered Violence

The three next modes of givenness of suffered injury are indirect ones. The first of these (and the second altogether) consists of a modification of the relationship between an injured person and the world of objects around her. In normal perception, the disposition and orientation of the objects inside the subject's field of perception tell her where she stands

and the point from which her perception of those objects is occurring, thereby indirectly allowing her to become aware of her position at the center and starting point of her perception (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 143). Similarly, changes in our capacity to perceive objects, or to move and act in the world (as compared to what we could do at an earlier point in time, or as compared to what others can do) make us aware of the injuries that affect us and are behind these changes. We perceive our injured hand, for example, not only in terms of any pain we might feel but also as the inability to grasp an object. In the same way, we perceive an injured leg as a modified perception of distances that we now have a hard time or even fail to cover, and injured eyes as the invisibility of formerly visible things. In this sense, an injury modifies all the qualities of the objects that the injured limb usually enables us to perceive, move toward, or act upon. Furthermore, this modification is not perceived by us as a mere *change* in our perception. It is also suffered as a *hinderance*, as the *inhibition* of something that we habitually experience(d) as possible. This inhibition is particularly perceivable in the form of a tension between different fields of perception. Thus, certain objects that we can see – an apple, for example – usually present themselves as things that we can grasp with our hands, or smell, or taste; others (such as stairs) present themselves as accessible to our feet, or (for example, in the movements of a speaking mouth) as audible, etcetera. When this no longer occurs, the whole phenomenal and temporal structure of our perception, with its variety of aspects and depth of expectations, is disturbed. In that case, we experience our injuries indirectly, as the impoverishment and distortion of our experience of the world.

This impaired perception and inhibition of our movements find their counterpart in our increased exposure to events and actions that may affect us. Having been impaired, our perception is less able to warn us of possible dangers, and we ourselves then feel less able to cope with, escape from, or tackle these dangers. As a consequence, we perceive the world as increasingly threatening and ourselves as increasingly vulnerable. This perceptive stance not only modifies our relationship to the world of objects that are perceivable by us, or that can affect us; it also affects another kind of relationship between us and the world we live in: that of habitation (see Levinas 1969, 152ff.). This is because we not only face that world as the horizon of possible objects of perception and action, but also, through a process of reciprocal adaptation, habitually integrate certain of its places and objects into our living bodies. Those places and objects become part of the position we take in the world as bodily subjects – the position from where we can access objects through an intentional act. Within this “habitation” relationship, a part of the world – normally our home or some private place, our furniture and certain tools, and sometimes other places and objects that have become very familiar to us – serves to enlarge and protect our body in support of

our movements (Scarry 1985, 38f.), and belongs to what is “on our side” in our everyday perceptions and actions. Some kinds of suffered violence, like burglary, solitary confinement (Guenther 2013), torture, or exile, obviously (and in very different ways) damage or even destroy the capacity for habitation of the persons subjected to it. But many other injuries also impair our habitual relationship to objects or places within the space we inhabit, and hence destroy the felt security of that habitation.

All of these forms of indirect awareness of injuries not only modify our relationship to the world – whether by impoverishing and impairing our field of perception and action, by increasing our feeling of being vulnerable and under threat, or by rendering a place less habitable – but also are experienced by us as a loss, or at least (in the case of continuous or structural forms of suffered violence) as a deficit. In any case, each injury in this mode of givenness is also experienced as something that should not have occurred or should not exist.

2.3. Third Dimension of Experience of Suffered Violence

A third mode of givenness of injuries consists of a modification of the affected subject’s relationship to herself. At stake here is not the subject’s pre-reflexive self-awareness of pain, helplessness, anxiety, or exposedness but rather the bodily subject’s ability to integrate an objectively perceived injury into her own (bodily, social, or even narrative) identity. In this third mode, the subject either fully or partially fails to achieve that integration. One very well-known example of this at the level of sensation is the phenomenon of the phantom limb. Here, the bodily subject knows objectively that her arm or leg is absent but nevertheless feels pain or paralysis in the missing limb, or tries to move it to avoid an obstacle (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 78f.). Similarly, a person with a facial deformation not constantly within her sight may be newly surprised – even repulsed – each time she sees herself in a mirror. In this case, the subject knows that the image she sees is her own but fails to recognize herself in it (Goffman 1986, 9). At a much lower level of self-estrangement, injured persons might need a certain amount of time and many failed experiences before they can learn to avoid spontaneous movements or attitudes incompatible with their injuries. Some may also tend to adopt an attitude of objectifying distance toward their injured limbs, as if those limbs were not a part of themselves and as if they (the subjects) themselves had not been injured in their integrity as living subjects.

In all these cases, the injured subject experiences a disjunction between the self-awareness she possesses as a living, feeling being and the observable, intentionally accessible aspects of her body and life. Such a disjunction is possible because the unification of these two sides of the self is not innate. Rather, in each of us, this unification developed through a long process of habituation, during which we learned to recognize ourselves in

the parts of our bodies that we can observe “from the outside” – a process through which we also learned to locate our felt pain or pleasure, for instance, in our visible body. The phenomena of chiasmatic perception between the touched and touching hands described by Merleau-Ponty (1968, chap. IV) reveal the ambiguity of this unity of the self. Suffered injuries tend create a disjunction, or at least a manifold tension, precisely in the affected subject’s relationship to herself.

The emergence of such a tension or disjunction not only happens in the relationship between the felt and the perceived body. In a similar way, injured people, for example, face the impossibility of integrating certain of their experiences into their lived identities. Jan Philipp Reemtsma writes of such an experience in his account of his kidnapping: “But it seemed helpful to me to present myself in the following pages in the third person singular. Embarrassing things could be said more easily in this way; this figure of speech suits also the fact that there is no I-continuity from my writing desk to the basement about which I will have to write” (Reemtsma 1997, 46, my translation). Even in the very moment of the suffered aggression, the identity of the victims and their identification with themselves can break down. Several victims of rape, for instance, report having had the impression of leaving their body and observing what happened from outside while the rape was taking place, as if they were not involved. (Herman 1997, 43) In these and similar cases, in which the disjunction might be lived as a protection from unbearable pain, it is also itself, nevertheless, part of the suffered injury.

The more or less severe disturbances in the living subject’s relationship to herself brought on by suffered violence – the subject’s felt alienation of a part of herself that she cannot integrate into her lived experience and identity – cannot be explained merely through reference to the constitutive selectivity of our perception and of our memory. For the people who suffered them, this alienation expresses an existential rejection of certain experiences, ones that are lived as occurrences that should not happen or have happened. They are experienced as alien to oneself, because they are (or have been) lived, experienced, and suffered as something to which one should not have been subjected. Like the experience of pain or an impoverished experience of the world, albeit in a very different way, these experiences express the negative normativity of an experience that should not happen or exist.

2.4. Fourth Dimension of Experience of Suffered Violence

The fourth mode of givenness of injuries consists in a modification of our relationships to the others. This is by far the most complex one, for at least two reasons. First, it gives a new quality to all possible injuries that can affect us, ensuring that they might be experienced *as violence* in a genuine sense. Such is the case when injuries, rather than being the product

of accident or natural events, are perceived as having been caused by others, or at least as not having been prevented by others even when this would have been possible.⁵ For the experience of the destructive force of nature can be traumatic. But unless we attribute a kind of intentional performativity to nature, we usually don't perceive it as violent. Or to put it differently: There is a qualitative difference between the experience of an injury for which no one is responsible – or at least for which no one can be made responsible – and that which, either through causation or lack of prevention, can be attributed to an agent, be it a human being, God, or a personalized Nature. Only in the second case do we normally perceive an injury as a kind of injustice, and not merely as a misfortune (see Shklar 1990). And even if the dividing line between these two domains of experience is not as clear as it would seem to be, as Shklar also stresses, the distinction between them seems decisive with respect to what is and is not perceived as violence. Later in this chapter, I will suggest that this distinction has to do with the fact that suffered violence is experienced not only as an injury but also as a violation of social norms, and that such a violation cannot be attributed to nature or bad luck.

Second, the experience of suffered violence as a modification of our relationship to others is complex because this relationship is itself complex. Not only does it differ dramatically from our intentional experience of objects in the world, but it also profoundly affects how we relate to the world and to ourselves. This is the case when our relationship to others changes due to suffered violence.

Let us begin with a short account of the specificity of our relationship to others, and how it differs from that between ourselves and the objects we perceive or that we act upon in the world. The fundamental difference between them is the experience of a complete inversion of the direction of intentionality in interpersonal relationships. In our relationship to the others, we are not only the origin of an intentional movement toward them but also are – and perceive ourselves to be – the object or the destination of *their* intentional movements toward *us*. This direction of this relationship between ourselves and others seems even to be more fundamental and originary than the other one. Before we are able to perceive objects in the world, we are brought into it through our mothers, welcomed into it, held, carried and educated by our parents and close relatives, given a name as well as love and attention, and much more. Throughout our lives, we have the experience of being seen and approached by others, to be the addressee of their words and gestures, and to depend on them in order to be what we are and do what we do – that is, in order to be recognized in our existence or be able to participate in social and linguistic interactions.

As I already underlined, the specificity of these relationships between ourselves and other people is that in this kind of relationship we experience ourselves not only as the origin but also as the addressee of

intentional movements; we depend on others much more than we constitute them as objects of our perception or of our actions. This dependency, however, is not a form of violence. On the contrary, it empowers us to do what we do and to be who we are. It is always bound to a call for activity on our part and to the creation of the conditions under which we can answer that call. According to Levinas, our dependency on the other who welcomes us at home is even the very condition that enables us to adopt a position of separation from the world and from the other – a position of habitation from which we can intentionally, as subjects of perception and actions, have or gain access to all possible objects in the world (Levinas 1969, 152–174). Here again, our dependence is not perceived as violent (Levinas 1969, 204)⁶ but as a condition of our position as a subject or – alternatively – as a call that generates our responsibility toward others. Our relationship to others and our dependency on them are only perceived sources of suffered violence when this social order of dependency is disturbed. This happens in three different ways.

2.4a: Exclusion

The first of these involves *excluding* someone from the space of her bodily and social existence. This happens whenever the presence of others in a place fails to convey to the arriving person a feeling of being welcomed, thereby precluding any habitation or dwelling on her part. It also happens when the gaze of others is not one of recognition but rather of alienation and objectivization, as described by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1993, 340–400) – when it is a gaze that makes the seen person hypervisible to others as a (racial or sexual) object while also simultaneously producing her invisibility as a subject (see Petherbridge 2017). This happens when others' words and gestures do not call for an answer (see Waldenfels 2002, 149) and so do not place the called person in a position from which she can respond⁷ but, on the contrary, actually destroy the conditions necessary for language. It happens when the structural production of poverty excludes an entire section of the population from the conditions needed for them to participate in social life. All of these forms of violence are experienced by individuals and groups as an exclusion from a social order which offers no place for them as subjects and no ability for them to participate in social interactions.

2.4b: Intrusion

The second kind of disturbance of the social order of dependency that is perceived as violence consists in the *intrusion* of others into one's own space of existence, be this one's own body, a private space, one's own habitation, or even a collective territory (on the distinction between a violence of intrusion and of exclusion, see also Delhom 2014). The

decisive factor governing one's experience of an intrusion as violence is not the presence of the other in one's own space, for the other could as well be a guest, a housemate, a lover, or even an unborn child, and his/her presence naturally would not then be experienced as violent. Nor is it the intrusion itself, for even cutting one's own skin and flesh with a knife is not perceived as suffered violence if it is done, for instance, by a surgeon during an operation. Rather, the decisive factor here is the violation of the border of one's own or private space, that is, the violation of the specific normativity of this border, a normativity that regulates who can enter this space, how they do it, when, for how long, and under which conditions (see Delhom 2009).

Edward T. Hall has shown how animals whose living space has been transgressed by animals of another species tend to react to this provocation by seeking to escape (or, at a shorter distance, attack), while animals whose space has been transgressed by animals of the same species tend to react aggressively. Further, he shows that the repetition of such transgressions – due, among other things, to the overpopulation of a given space – can destroy the social order of the whole population inside of this space. With human beings, the regulation of the distance between individuals is not constant. It depends, first of all, on the sensual fields involved in their relationships and on the coordination between these fields. For certain people and in certain circumstances, being seen by others – for instance in a situation in which being seen is bound with a feeling of shame – may be more disturbing than being touched by them, although in the former case there is more distance between themselves and the others. But the regulation of social distances also depends on socially and culturally acquired modes of perception and behavior. The intimate distance of touch might, for instance, be reserved to a very few close relatives and friends in certain societies, whereas in others it might be much more open and accessible. The acceptable distance between people can also be regulated through specific ways of organizing space. In an architectural context, for example, this distance might be regulated by reducing the fields of vision and audition to allow for a higher level of proximity in a common space, or by using perfume to regulate the olfactive field. Hence, for human beings, the limits of what Hall calls the intimate, personal, and public spheres as designation of different levels of proximity in interpersonal relationships (Hall 1990, 116–124) is not naturally given. Rather, it can differ radically from context to context and is socially shaped. The only thing that can be called “universal” here is the fact that there are limits and that the violation of these limits modifies and profoundly disturbs the interaction between persons in a social group.

In a very similar sense, I would like to argue that the limits described by Hall are relevant to our understanding of what any given society perceives as violence. For the violation of an intimate, personal, or social sphere, in the sense of a forbidden intrusion into any of these spheres, is an essential

aspect of what is perceived and suffered as a “violence of intrusion.” Thus, being injured is only perceived and suffered as a violent intrusion when it involves the violation of such acquired social limits. Something similar is also true for the violence of exclusion: For the external limits of a social group, according to which someone can be considered as not belonging to it, are mostly defined for animals as spatial limits bound to the scale of their senses and hence to the possibility of being seen, heard, or smelled (Hall 1990, 14). For human beings, especially in times of medial communication, those limits are very variable. Nevertheless, they are all similarly conditioned by a person’s ability to see and hear, and to be seen and heard – that is, by her access to the social group to which she belongs. The violence of exclusion involves a violation of this limit.

2.4c: Coercion

Beyond the violence of exclusion and the violence of intrusion, there is a third kind of disturbance of the social order which is perceived as violence: That of being forced to act or to behave in a way contrary to one’s own will or one’s own conception of existence. In other words, it consists in being hindered, as an individual or as a group, from being the subject of one’s own actions or existence. This is a violence of *coercion*.

In a narrow sense, this hinderance happens whenever actions and behaviors take place under duress, whether that takes the form of a threat, a painful coercion, or a compelling social pressure. On the one hand, these actions are voluntary – their origin is not external to the acting subjects, as though the latter were mechanically moved by an external cause – and so the acting subjects can be held accountable for, and feel guilty or ashamed of, what they do or have done (see Aristotle 2009, Book III.1). But on the other hand, a subject acting under duress is acting against her will – that is, against her own preferences, convictions, and what she considers to be right both individually and collectively. What is violated in such cases is the subject’s freedom of action or, in the words of Montesquieu, her political freedom. It is not the freedom of choice, opinions, or thought – although in the long term how we are forced to act or behave can affect even our freedom of thought – but the freedom to act in accordance with one’s own will and convictions within the frame of the shared rules of a society. For Montesquieu “political liberty does not consist in an unlimited freedom. In governments, that is, in societies directed by laws, liberty can consist only in the power of doing what we ought to will, and in not being constrained to do what we ought not to will” (Montesquieu 1777, Book XI.3, 196). It is precisely this power to act in accordance with our will, as guaranteed by the laws and the rules of a society, and the freedom to avoid being forced to act against these rules and our will that are violated in situations of duress. This violation is experienced and suffered as a form of violence.

In a broader sense, and more fundamentally, what hinders people from being the subjects of their own actions and their own existence is the impossibility within a given society for them to develop something like a free will in accordance with which they could act. While they certainly learn to act and to behave in certain ways, they never learn to associate this behavior with a decision or project of their own. This happens whenever a society's structure and mode of functioning force individuals or groups not only to play roles that they have not chosen for themselves but also to identify with those roles as though they were intrinsic to them – not only to behave in a way defined by others but also to see this behavior as the only possible way for them to behave, because of who they are – and, ultimately, to understand and evaluate their own existence in accordance with criteria imposed upon (but also assimilated by) those individuals, to the point where they cannot challenge or even question them. In this case, even if such persons do challenge or question the imposed criteria, they feel stuck in the role and the position that society has set out for them.

In a racialized society, for instance, the members of each racialized group internalize the racial projections of the dominant group – which is not always the majority of the population – and behave in accordance with these projections. They are caught in and contribute to the sedimentation of certain forms of bodily behavior and even of “habits of perception or seeing” (Petherbridge 2017, 109). In a certain sense, the dominant group is also caught in these projections. But as far as these are its own projections, this group is not alienated in the way that the dominated groups are. The same kind of sedimentation of behavior and perception also characterizes societies organized and hierarchized according to criteria of gender, naturalized culture, or economic performance.

Another reason why people cannot become the subjects of their own existence as members of particular communities has to do with the politics of homogenization enforced for entire populations. Such a politics of homogenization has been practiced in France, for instance, as a condition for obtaining the French nationality in the colonies since the end of the 19th century and in the metropole during the main part of the 20th century. After a short period between the 80's and the beginning of the 21st century, in which a politics of integration was privileged, it has become dominant again in the political discourse and practice since the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy. It corresponds to a certain understanding of the egalitarian ideal of republicanism that does not tolerate any racial or, later, cultural diversity in the core of national identity. Such an understanding makes the assimilation (not just the integration) of all citizens imperative, rejecting any personal or cultural specificity as irrelevant to the definition of national identity and the organization of public life (see Chemin 2016). More radically, the homogenization of the population has been central

to the organization of most totalitarian states (see Diprose 2017, 34 sq.). In such a context, people act and behave in certain ways and can be held accountable for their actions, but they do not act in ways that they would call their own. As soon as they become aware of it, this imposed deprivation of the possibility to be the subject of one's own existence can be experienced and suffered as violence, even if it is mostly a form of structural violence that is not necessarily connected with events of personal violence.

The three forms of violence I have just distinguished are connected to three kinds of disturbance of the social order: exclusion, intrusion, and coercion. They are all experienced and suffered not only as an absence, or as a certain kind of interpersonal relationship that might be appropriate in certain situations but rather as a deprivation or deficiency in our relationships to others. And this deficiency affects, in turn, our relationships to the world and to ourselves.

Of course, this doesn't mean that, primarily to the experience of violence, there is something like an ideal or intact social order with sound relationships which are themselves free of any violence, and that violence would disturb this intact and sound state of affairs. No social order is completely free from structural and personal violence. But violence is nevertheless suffered as the deprivation of what our relations to the others could and should be in any given society. In the case of *exclusion*, people are deprived of belonging to a common living environment, to a common sphere of language and communication, to a common space outside of which it is impossible to build and develop the social dimension of our existence. In the case of *intrusion*, they are deprived of the protective function of a limited space which we perceive as their own, a space they can inhabit, a space that represents the starting point of their intentional relationship to the world. In the case of *coercion*, they are deprived of the development and the exercise of their own will and their own existence, as these are recognized within a specific social group. Hence, what violence deprives us of in such different ways are not only particular possibilities with respect to human life and existence; they are the very conditions of our existence as human beings in a society. If we are deprived of them, we don't just live differently; we live under the condition of this deprivation, under the condition of exposedness to others and fear of new intrusions, of a lack of social embeddedness and recognition, of alienated forms of actions and existence. Security becomes a fight, as does recognition – at least as far as our will is able to engage in these fights. For even our will might be deprived not only of its own power of action and of self-determination but also of the social resources needed to be able to fight: The will needs recognition and support in order to be able to fight for recognition! This is a fatal experience made by all those who lack this kind of support and recognition, an experience that belongs to the lived experience of suffered violence.

Here again, suffered violence is experienced as something that should not happen or occur. The normative dimension of this existential rejection is a constitutive aspect of this experience.

2.5. Fifth Dimension of Experience of Suffered Violence

I come now to the fifth and last dimension of the experience of suffered violence. Beyond the immediate givenness of suffered injuries in pain, helplessness, anxiety, or exposedness and beyond their experience as a disturbance of our relationships to the world, ourselves, and others, suffered violence is also and always perceived, as I already mentioned, as a violation of the social norms that regulate these relationships. Together with the fact that the cause of the suffered injuries can be attributed to an acting subject, the fact that they are perceived as a violation of such social norms is constitutive for the experience of injuries *as violence*.

3. Suffered Violence and Social Norms

The norms in question – if they can be called norms – are very specific. They are not the kind of norms that regulate *actions* in allowing, forbidding, or prescribing some of them or in providing criteria to evaluate and judge them. For what they regulate is not how people act but the way people can be affected by others or by a functioning social order in a way that injures them.

These norms regulate the social order of a group or of a whole society and the possible disturbances of this order. They are directly related to the three possible kinds of injuries associated with the disturbances of the individual's relationship to others and to the social group, which I have just described. The first group of norms are those of *belonging*, inclusion or integration. They regulate the way members of a given society belong to it, participate in its constitutive activities, are both protected by and obligated by it; hence, they also regulate how those society members experience exclusion from this group as deprivation and injury. The second kind of norms are those of *integrity* (see Delhom 2010). They regulate how personal or private spaces, from one's own body to the (shared) space of one's home or the sphere of one's private life, are protected, how certain distances and limits are set that must be respected in order to ensure this protection, and hence how the violation of these limits can be experienced as a violence of intrusion. I would like to call the third kind of norms norms of *existential empowerment*.⁸ They regulate how society members, as individuals and as members of a social group, can evolve existentially and develop their abilities to acquire knowledge (or "to know") and act. These norms also regulate how being deprived of such possibilities through force, disciplinary measures, or homogenization can be experienced as a deprivation of freedom and even as a loss of one's own existence.

In any given society, all of these norms are the product of a long history of shared experiences, both of social relationships and their possible disturbances. They are a habitual sedimentation of these experiences, the sedimented affirmation of their social regulation and the sedimented rejection of their disturbance and of the injuries they provoke. As a consequence, they are different in different groups and societies that have different histories. They are not necessarily formulated in terms of explicit rules or principles, but they shape – at least subconsciously – certain styles of behavior, certain types of experience that are common to the members of the same society, class (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 476 f.), or group. They are also reflected materially, for instance in the typical distributions of homes and public spaces that regulate what members of specific societies see as an acceptable distance between them, or in the dress codes that regulate their visibility, or in the technical supports that shape and regulate their participation in social life.

What is relevant here is that these social norms of belonging, integrity, and existential empowerment are common to a whole social group. For it means that the perception of a suffered injury *as violence* is not only due to the individual feelings or sensibility of a singular person. It is experienced as a violation of a common norm, one that is bound up with the moral and social expectations of a whole social group (see Strawson 2008). This explains why the violation of certain norms can be experienced as violence in most cases but not when they are committed by small children, for instance, or by foreigners, people with disabilities, or others who have not assimilated these norms and toward whom we don't have the same expectations. We might then still be injured, but we wouldn't consider our injury as suffered violence because it does not involve the violation of a shared norm.

Of course, to the extent that these social norms of belonging, integrity, and existential empowerment are the product of a shared experience and the shared rejection of certain kinds of injuries, they are open to modification by such experiences. Hence, in the experience of violence, there is a tension between the rejection of suffered injuries that has already become sedimented into norms and come to be associated with shared societal expectations, and that which is not (yet) perceived as violating an established social norm but nevertheless tends, in the shared experience of individuals or of certain groups, to be recognized as violating what *should* be a norm and should therefore be perceived as a form of violence. A decisive element of this tension seems to be the sharing of such experiences and hence their introduction in the public space, where they can be discussed and recognized. Their publicity transforms in return what could previously have been considered as a private experience without relevance for social normativity. Recognizing the exclusion of women and minorities from human rights or political participation, for instance, *as a form of violence* supposes such a tension and the possibility

of a corresponding evolution in norms, sometimes in the name of these very norms themselves. Certain methods of education that involve corporal punishment, certain disciplinary practices, or certain forms of hurtful language have undergone similar evolutions. Inversely, it seems that new practices of surveillance within the framework of a threat-centered politics of security, for example, tend to progressively modify and lower the perception of certain forms of surveillance *as violent* in our modern democracies. Here again, the experience of surveillance as a form of intrusive violence depends on society-specific social norms that govern what, in a given society, is perceived as a kind of injury that should not be. Hence, what is perceived and suffered as violence is what is perceived as a violation of these norms.

It is, however, important to specify that these social norms do not identify with the general acceptance or rejection of violence, even of suffered violence, in a given society. Rather, they define the conditions under which a suffered injury is perceived and suffered as violence. There is perhaps no social order in which certain practices of violence are not accepted, legitimized, valorized, or even glorified. Suffered violence is also accepted within the framework of such practices. For a soldier, for instance, having been exposed to violence and had his or her “baptism by fire,” or even having been injured and having overcome this injury, might be the condition of a full belonging to the combat troop. In many societies, the ability to endure pain and injuries without tears or complaints is a way to show that one is a “real man,” while the acceptance to be hurt can be proof of courage or a scar might be a source of pride. There are numerous examples of such socially anchored forms of acceptance of suffered violence. But even such an acceptance or valorization of violence presupposes that it is experienced *as violence* – that is, as a violation of a specific kind of social norms, those that regulate not practices but the foundation of the social relationships within a given society and any potential threat to that foundation.

Just as courage doesn’t mean the absence of fear but rather the act of overcoming it, the acceptance of certain forms of suffered violence also presupposes that they are experienced as violence, together with the rejection – in all of its dimensions – that accompanies that experience.

Here again, there is a tension, although at a different level than the previous one, between what is recognized as violence in a given society – a violation of the basic social norms governing belonging, integrity, and existential empowerment – and the acceptance of practices of violence or the valorization of being exposed to it within those same societies. In other words, there is a tension between the rejection of what is experienced as the violation of social norms and what nevertheless seems to be a necessary violence in order to guarantee a social order or to perpetuate certain forms of social or cultural identity.

In order to cope with this paradox, most societies have developed strategies of valorization of violence, not only in the sense of a justification

or legitimation of violent acts and practices (see Hirsch 2004) *despite the fact that* those acts and practices are suffered as injuries that should not be, that is, as something that shouldn't happen, but also as a *valorization of sufferance itself*, whether in the name of "male virtues" (defended by Hegel or Nietzsche), which do not only consist in the capacity to win a combat but also to endure sufferance without being visibly affected by it; in the name of a certain understanding of "purity" or "chastity" that justifies and valorizes, mostly for women, the fact of being subjected to sexual mutilations; in reference to the need to adapt to a strict social order with different forms of submission and alienation of individuals or social groups; as the price of reintegration for criminals, who are said to be completely reintegrated if they accept and even approve the punishment they endured; or as the "will of God," even if it cannot be understood by the mortals who endure it, among other reasons.

But this valorization is always confronted with the different forms of negative normativity that is part of the experience of suffered violence itself at all levels: The immediate rejection of pain, helplessness, anxiety, or exposedness; the rejection of the many modifications of our relationships to the world, ourselves, and others, in which we experience injuries as a form of deprivation; the rejection of the violation of social norms that are what enable us to experience suffered injuries *as violence*. This manifold negative normativity, as a constitutive element of the very experience of suffered violence as such, is the primary reason why it is socially and politically necessary to justify or legitimate practices of violence in any society: It would not need to be justified if it were not, in a sense, rejected. But it can also, as the normativity of a shared experience, spark reactions leading to the modification of these practices.

The twofold tension between the subjective and negative experience of suffered violence and its habitual sedimentation in a social normativity, on the one hand, and between this social normativity and the collective attitude toward violence, including a certain acceptance and valorization of at least some kinds of suffered violence, on the other, make up the very complex normative dimension of the phenomenon of suffered violence. Any social or political philosophy that seeks to address the phenomena of violence must understand this tension. More importantly, this tension is at work in every social and political attempt – which are necessarily collective ones – to cope with the problems of violence. This is its genuinely political dimension.

Notes

1. I would like to thank very warmly Laura Cunniff and the Editing Service of the Europa-Universität Flensburg for their precious editorial support. I also would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for her or his very relevant and helpful comments. I owe them what I hope to be an improvement of my text.

2. I chose this expression to translate the German “erlittene Gewalt” or the French “violence subie.”
3. Not all of them are necessary for an experience to count as suffered violence, but I will try to show that some of them are constitutive of such an experience.
4. I thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.
5. This extension of the domain of human accountability beyond the domain of personal or direct violence corresponds to the concept of structural violence developed by Johan Galtung (1969, 170 f).
6. I leave aside here the question of the “good” violence of the Other in *Otherwise than Being* (1991, 43), for although Levinas uses repeatedly the word and the whole semantic field of extreme violence in this book, he obviously and explicitly refers to a different concept of violence (see 1991, 116) than the one I try to address here.
7. I do not agree with Judith Butler when she writes that the injurious address may “produce an unexpected and enabling response” (1997, 2). In most cases, it tends on the contrary to damage the ability to respond, and external resources are needed – supporting and listening people, new resources of language, the help of other witnesses – to enable the victims of hate speech or of violence in general to speak again.
8. In the frame of a neoliberal and individualistic society, these norms are not seldom addressed, in ethical discourses or in discourses on education, as norms of *autonomy* and their violation is considered as a violation of autonomy. (see among others Giesinger 2007) But the very paradigm of autonomy stands in contradiction to the idea defended here of a thoroughly social constitution of human beings as groups and as individuals. No one is free alone and even our individual life rests upon resources which mostly don’t come from ourselves, even when they help us to cultivate our own way of being. I hence prefer a formulation that seems to me more open and more convenient.

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