(Re)creative violence

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Abstract: This contribution builds on my current research (Furtado 2022) in exploring alternative ways of understanding the phenomenon of violence, traditionally conceived of as either a destructive force or a system of injustice (Bufacchi 2005). By exploring my personal position navigating between the borders of different versions of Europe (the Swedish border and the walls of gated communities in Brazil) the contribution explains how, in the modern colonial world, violence adopts a (re)creative or (re)creational aspect, fundamentally tying it to a whole economy of playfulness and pleasure. This economy is neither destructive nor necessarily unjust, in the sense that it complicates the liberal duality of inclusion/exclusion, structuring the pursuance of the easy life (a mode of living that maximises convenience) in different levels of (post)colonial racialised "enclaves". The reflection ends with an invitation to take the concept of (re)creative violence seriously and to rethink the specific role of death and insecurity in the making of the international order.

I am sitting in the car at the Danish-Swedish border. I am with my wife, my one-year-old son, and his grandad. We are waiting on the officer who requested to check my papers and left us to get a special confirmation from his supervisor. Despite the fact we are both English speakers, the officer does not really address me directly. He speaks of me to my European family (including the baby), but never really to me. I am very tired, not only because this is the second check I must undergo in a row – I have already got the green lights from the customs at Kastrup airport, in Copenhagen – not because this happens every b----- time we travel so my son can play with his *mormor* and *morfar,*[1] but also because of the inevitable, extra layer of emotional labour that such situation imposes on me. Everyone in the car is made visibly uncomfortable by the border checks. Everyone but my son, who does not fully grasp the ritual at play and, in all fairness, is more interested in the streetlights. I now must say that all is well, there is nothing to worry about, it is just standard procedure. What I do not say is that I am tired of travelling to this racist country. But I want my wife to visit her hometown and friends and I want my son to play with my in-laws, whom I very much love. We all need to get out of the UK, where life and our caring responsibilities are so suffocatingly intense. I want to rest.

The entire experience makes my mind go places. It always does. I am taken to one place in particular: São Paulo (or, as I like to call it, the unashamed realisation of the post-apocalyptic urban face of capitalism). It was in this wonderfully monstrous metropolis that I spent a good deal of my leisure time, during the Brazilian equivalent of the midterms. I have very fond memories of São Paulo, of the fun and unpretentious time spent with my aunt, uncle, and cousins whom I love and whom soon enough my son will finally get to meet. But it is not these joyful memories I am reminded of. What hits me are the several procedures that regulate the entry and exit of bodies in the spaces of leisure, rest and play we continuously navigated: the skyrises, the private clubs, and gated communities of the *Paulistana*[2] upper-middle class. Not unlike my adult experience at the Danish-Swedish border, my leisure time as a child (and that of others in my vicinity) was thoroughly conditioned by a series of mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that constituted the material and symbolic foundations of what I only experienced as play. I come from a white, middle class and Europeanised family so I often faced these mechanisms, the multiple borders I frequented, from the inverted position of that which I find myself in at the Swedish border. No one ever needed to check anything but the tone of my skin or the Nike logo on my t-shirt. My belonging – my right of way and enjoyment – was never truly doubted; my work, emotional or otherwise, never truly requested. I was there to rest and play,

[1] Swedish for grandma and grandpa, respectively.

[2] The denomination of those born in the city of São Paulo.

loosen my seat belts, sit back, and enjoy, as the cared-for customer-citizen I was growing up to become, requesting his rightful spot at the sun in advance. I was no foreigner, but a recognisable member of a class born to be served, never to serve. The border checks, the animosity, the passive-aggressive tone, the sometimes overt aggressions, the objectifying gaze, the constant paranoid surveillance, in order words, the stuff that gated communities are made off, never really touched me. Despite the confusion purposefully created by white liberal sensitivities, there is an abyss between finding experiences of suffering touching and being really touched by them. These techniques were reserved for the nannies, porters, private security guards, cooks, and cleaners, that is, the servants without whom none of us could ever have rested or played or enjoyed our rightful spot at the sun. This remained the case at least until I was old enough to grow a beard, long hair, and left-wing views. Then, some checks started.

Thinking back at it, maybe I should have told the Swedish officer a different story, explaining that my entire life was built on white privilege, that we were not so different after all. Maybe that would have sped up the insufferable, repetitive border ritual, for better or worse. But precisely for that reason – the fact that my life is so interwoven with white privilege – I kept my mouth shut. As a white Latin American living in Europe, I have learned to rationalise my tribulations with the customs in two ways: karma (something I deserve) or schooling (a revolutionary duty lite, a formative experience to learn what it means to be on the other side of the gates). Commiseration, Dussel (2011) would call it: the act of sharing in on the misery of the oppressed.

But this is not about me. My personal experience might well be the least interesting part of the story. If I am retelling it all here it is only for the purpose of introducing and situating part of my recent efforts to provide a different framework for making sense of Global Politics; to (re)locate the problem of the international squarely within the domain of the modes of living and forms of subjectivity we find inside the walls of gated communities (Furtado 2022). My response to the issue's call for exploring the category of "play" goes in a similar direction. We cannot begin to discuss play without first outlining its conditions of possibility, anchoring leisurely life in a whole underlying economy (in the sense of the dual material and symbolic processes of extraction, circulation, exchange, and attribution of value/meaning). We must address the economy that sustains spaces of recreation: the leisure spaces individuals use to reinvigorate themselves, but which are also spaces where the international order is re-created anew. If we do this, the common-sense view of play in an innocent manner disappears mid-air. In its place, we find the interconnection between what we call the act of play, rest, or enjoyment – in a Lacanian register, as the impossible fulfilment of our formative desires/lack – and the violent reproduction of the borders of contemporary/colonial enclaves (broadly conceived as the gated communities, walled neighbourhoods, compounds, security parks, luxury hotels, Nordic countries, etc). Leisure becomes an entry point, perhaps the best entry point, to an exploration of the intricacies of what I have called elsewhere (*re)creative or (re)creational violence*: the overt and tacit forms of suffering that are required by the reproduction of the hierarchies sustaining the contemporary international system but that are never acknowledged as violence per se. Very real forms of global suffering are not easily reducible to common understandings of violence, including Liberal, Marxian and even post-colonial accounts of structural and symbolic violence, necropolitics, or psychologically inspired ideas about cruelty (Wieviorka 2009, Balibar 2002, Galtung 1969, Fanon 1963, Mbembe 2019, Frazer, E., and Hutchings 2020, Butler 2021). If we were to take heed of important lessons from decolonial feminists, Rita Segato (2010, 2018) and Françoise Vergès (2022) in particular, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, we could say that social conceptions of violence are, just like the Freudian unconscious, structured like a language. They are defined by a remanent (a certain surplus) that resists its inscriptions in a given chain of signification.

The suffering that conditions play remains for the most part hidden, enabling us to conceive of it as an innocent act, in part because it is hard to translate it as violence; its complexity defies the language we speak, the profoundly entrenched, western cultural assumptions we hold about the nature of what we consider violent. Vittorio Bufacchi (2005, 2009) traces traditional scholarly conceptualisations of violence to the Latin terms *violentia* (the resort to an uncontrollable force) or *violare* (the violation of a pre-existing moral or legal code). Albeit not exhaustive, his work is useful to help us identify a certain illiteracy on the part of contemporary commentators – in fact of the very international liberal order – that blinds us all (from the

realist to the decolonial scholar, though in different ways and degrees) to the myriad forms of suffering that constitute the international as interconnect enclosed spaces of leisurely life. The suffering that cements an economic model defined by the pursuance of *vida mansa* (easy life) cannot be completely tamed (translated into legible violence) even by our radical and critical vocabularies. The concept of apartheid, for example, is not suitable enough to describe a world that relies on the daily encounters, forced as they may be, between the servants and patrons they serve. The notion of death as a function of disposability (the constitution of certain bodies as akin to waste) seems equally inappropriate when we consider the unquestionably necessary role of those "disposable" bodies in the global economy of leisurely life (play would be impossible without their presence). More than an alternative definition, the term *(re)creative violence* stands for a reminder of this unfixable surplus meaning, in relation to forms of suffering co-constitutive of global enclaves of leisurely life.

I would like to end this reflection with a call of my own. Critical IR scholars have long been preoccupied with the expansion of the categories of (in)security and militarism and they have recently begun to question the specific role of death in the making of the international order (Wilcox 2015, Heath-Kelly 2017, Debrix 2017, Alphin and Debrix 2020, Auchter 2021). These reflections are invaluable, and they move our critiques of the role of violence in the international forward. But there is also a risk. As responses to the mainstream they must inevitable engage with the traditional grammar of western liberal societies (the *violentia/violare* double) and this engagement is always at risk of becoming disorienting, of co-opting our gaze and forcing us into a specific frame that limits our horizons of imagination. Not all suffering can be translated as de-struction or injustice, and we must resist the blackmail to do so lest we lose sight of that surplus meaning so important to the problematic of (re)creation. What if death and dying have nothing to do with security (understood as the preservation of life processes)? What if they are not the consequences of genocidal projects and necropolitical regimes but an effect of the unequal global distribution of leisurely life? What if what we call "disposability" is in fact a fantastic performance that relocates rest at the inaccessible limits of a restless servile existence? Many issues we've traditionally located under the concept of (in)security might be better grasped in a different light, as the drawing of a line between those who can rest and those who must only rest in peace.

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