Doing (bad) things with words. The discursive amplification of violence[1]

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Abstract This paper explores the relationship between violence and its representations, showing how, in some situations, the two can be closely intertwined, to the point of blurring the boundaries between narrative and reality. To support this idea, we will refer to some classic notions used in the study of the discourse-violence nexus. One is that of "moral panic", as it emerged in English cultural studies and particularly in the work of Stanley Cohen (1972). The other is that of a "culture of terror", introduced by Michael Taussig (1984) in relation to the history of colonial violence in the Putumayo region. We will also refer to anthropological studies of violence that compare terrorism or political violence and witchcraft in terms of how they rely on a sense of hidden threat that suggests and justifies a violent response. Yet terror, even in its most centralised forms, corresponds not only to top-down manipulation but also to a "gamble" on discursive micro-interactions over which one can never have total control: the elusive, informal, culturally intimate circulation of stories, rumours, gossip within a given social context.

0. Introduction

The theme of this essay is how words can both describe violence and be part of the process from which violence emerges. In some situations, we do not have "real" violence first and then its representations: the two dimensions are closely intertwined, with the effect of blurring the boundary between narrative and reality.

To support this idea, we will refer to studies in the anthropology of violence that identify a link between terrorism or political violence on the one hand and witchcraft on the other. These two phenomena, though different, have in common the active role of

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[1] Conceived and discussed together by the two authors, the article was written by Federico Scarpelli for section 1, and by Fabio Dei for section 2. Section 3 was written together.

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words circulating in informal, culturally intimate, almost elusive ways. Words that, moreover, have the peculiar characteristic of being simultaneously revealing and concealing.

We will also refer to some classic notions used in the study of the discourse-violence relationship. One is the notion of "culture of terror", discussed by Michael Taussig in relation to colonial brutality in Putumayo, the other is that of "moral panic", which emerged in British cultural studies and especially in Stanley Cohen's work on "folk devils" and indeed "moral panic". It is with the latter notion that our argument will begin.

1. The Perfect Storm

It has been more than half a century since Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panic* (1972) showed, among other things, that some narratives of violent events must be interpreted not as mere representation, but as part of the process that brings about these events. In this case, the violence is relatively moderate, particularly with respect to what will be discussed later. Nothing more than the fights and vandalism associated with the rivalry between the two youth subcultures of Mods and Rockers in some English seaside resorts of the 1960s. At the time, however, these events seemed serious enough to warrant catastrophic comparisons: the towns of Clacton, Margate, Bournemouth, Brighton, and Hastings are described by journalists as if reduced to rubble by natural disaster. Cohen not only rejects this exaggerated metaphor, he turns it on its head. In the case of natural disasters, the lack of warning signs, or their underestimation, multiplies the damage; in this case, however, the warnings are part of the problem. Since we are in the realm of social facts, not natural ones, this kind of self-fulfilling prophecy not only exacerbates the effects but goes so far as to produce the very threat to which it refers:

> This type of warning is equivalent to inhabitants of a flood area being told to evacuate when sirens sound, but while their evacuation would reduce the effects of the disaster, the Brighton inhabitants, sensitized to report signs of a "little Clacton" would, in fact, create deviance in something like the original sense suggested in the transactional approach. This is the paradox intrinsic in moral panics (Cohen 1972: 165).

Since *Folk Devils*, as is well known, the category of moral panic has become ubiquitous in discussions of the societal response to deviance phenomena. As in such cases, the term is often used for its suggestive power and almost independently of its theoretical assumptions. For its part, Cohen's most famous text appears interesting in the way it remains poised, perhaps not entirely resolved, between an interactionist perspective and one of social critique. Two points seem especially noteworthy: the first point has to do with the identities of the "folk devils", that is, the relationship between social structures and subcultural identifications, the second point with the alternative between a "strategic" interpretation of moral panic and one that describes it as an open and unpredictable process.

The media portrayal of the first riots, that occurred in Clacton in the spring of 1964, seems to Cohen not only exaggerated but biased. Shoplifting and brawling are not new in this (not particularly posh) seaside resort, and almost all of the twenty young men arrested have minor records of comparable offences. Hailing from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds and yet eager to partake in consumer society, these young individuals are the perfect target for the hostility of right-wing people and the media.

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Resistance Through Rituals, a collective work devoted to youth subcultures by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (Hall, Jefferson 1976; see also Hebdige 1979), will insist that the social alarm, which sometimes takes the form of moral panic, is typically focused on lower-class youth: from the Teddy Boys of the 1950s, with their caricatured imitation of aristocratic elegance, to the Skinheads of the 1970s, with their aggressive and manneristic vindication of the working-class ethos. For the Birmingham group, these working-class subcultures should be distinguished from the so called counterculture, such as the famous "hippies", which should instead be considered a student and middle-class phenomenon.

Cohen seems uncertain about the solidity of these class boundaries. He, too, frequently invokes social stratification to point out how deviance-related alarm usually focused on lower-class youth. At the same time, he adds that «the Mods and Rockers appeared to be less class bound» (Cohen 1972: 222). The style of the Mods is characterized precisely by the mixture of middle-class and working-class symbols. In Cohen's account, what reshuffles categories, including perhaps the most structural ones, is above all the dynamism of the situation.

Although Mods and Rockers were fashionable styles among the youth, at the time of the Clacton Riots it was difficult to find structured groups or actual gangs in the turbulent crowd of teenagers. Soon, however, many who initially were not fitting neatly into any subcultural identity began to present themselves within the "Mods vs. Rockers" frame, established as a result of the alarm, and ended up «posing for photos, chanting slogans, making warlike gestures, fantasizing about super-gangs, wearing distinctive insignia» (Cohen 1972: 186).

This was soon accompanied by ritualised clashes, similar in some respects to football hooliganism: no goal to be achieved through violent action, other than the staging of one's own identity through hostility to others, namely that of the rival subculture or supporters, and that of the police. Such identifications appear quite porous on a social level: those arrested in later clashes did not fit the usual profile of suspects, and class affiliation itself had many exceptions. The symbolic interactions that emerge in a particular set of circumstances thus seem to count as much as the structural factors (Dal Lago 1990).

This brings us to the second point to emphasize, which concerns moral panic as a dense and articulate symbolic construction. Cohen's text focuses primarily on the role of the media, the public authorities and so, called *moral entrepreneurs*, subjects or groups devoted to redefining and promoting a moral norm (Becker 1963), in a process of "labelling" deviants that is essentially top-down, from subjects endowed with power to others more or less lacking it. However, Cohen's work also suggests a less linear and predictable game of mirrors: the young people are not just objects of observation, but also subjects who observe, even themselves and their peers, directly or through press reports, sometimes lending themselves to interviews or putting themselves on stage in public, while knowing that this scene may be portrayed in a certain way and provoke certain reactions. A loop of mutual expectations that functions as a trigger for ritualized violence, at least for some time.

Again, a certain difference with the positions later expressed by the Birmingham School, especially in *Policing the Crisis* (Hall 1978), must be noted. The line promoted by the scholars associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) recognises the importance of Cohen's work but argues for the need to go beyond the ethnographic gaze and the interactionist approach to focus on the structural and historical background of the phenomena. The idea that the most fruitful part of *Folk Devils* is the one that analyzes social alarm as strategically functional to the defence of the interests of the hegemonic classes is shared by many, despite the fact that Cohen has

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repeatedly questioned it. It is also found in a recent Italian forum in the journal *Studi Culturali* (Caroselli, Schiano 2023), especially in the interventions of Iain Chambers and Miguel Mellino.

In the introduction of the 2002 edition of *Folk Devils,* Cohen clearly points out that his definition of moral panic cannot be applied to deliberate criminalization campaigns, such as those orchestrated by the right-wing press against immigrants. In his view, moral panic emerges in relation to certain conditions of power, but not as a deterministic or controllable process. In other words, even though it is framed within specific social and power systems, moral panic cannot be an instrument of governance. It is more akin to a "perfect storm" that thickens and dissipates in ways that not even the media, public authorities, or moral entrepreneurs can fully control.

Once again, then, the dynamism of the situation, or its "volatility", is emphasized. This, according to Cohen, eludes directly political interpretations, thereby causing concern among the more radical theorists. In Cohen's view, it would be a contradiction to think of moral panic as stable or permanent (Cohen 1972: 37). In addition to media or institutional processes, one must take into account a "microphysics of outrage" made up of unpredictable bottom-up dynamics, and rumours in informal contexts.

In such ambiguous situations, rumours should be viewed not as forms of distorted or pathological communication: «they make sociological sense as co-operative improvisations, attempts to reach a meaningful collective interpretation of what happened by pooling available resources». (Cohen 1972: 175)

In Cohen's conception, the level of "cooperative improvisation" is crucial in the transformation of some (and only some) media alarms into authentic moral panic. It is equally crucial in the sudden extinction of the phenomenon, leaving the onlookers at the various beach resorts waiting in vain for a new tussle between Rockers and Mods. The elusive dynamic of the rumours is influenced by collective imagination, which is forged also by the media. Nonetheless, it also reverberates on the media, like a mysterious halo of facts, as if there were always something difficult to grasp, or as if something were secretly in the making.

2. Terrorism

Let us now turn, with only an apparent leap, to the issue of terrorism. Historical, political and social studies have largely emphasized its "discursive" aspects: the acts of violence are surrounded by discursive, narrative, iconic, imaginative, ritual, and performative expressions, on the side of the perpetrators and their potential supporters or sympathizers, as well as on the side of actual or potential targets and "spectators". This communicative aspect is not merely a representation of violent practices but a constitutive part of them. In other words, one could speak of a discursive and imaginative amplification, without which terrorism would lose much of its meaning and effectiveness. This is highlighted by the more conventional studies as well as by those that describe themselves as *critical* (Dei 2016), for whom terrorist and state violence must be understood in a close relationship with each other. For the former, terrorism is an attack on democracy and civil coexistence, with a communicative strategy that exploits precisely the characteristics of the system it wants to target: it thus bends the fundamental tenets of democracies, such as the intrinsic value of human life and the autonomy of the media, to serve its own interests.

> The goal of the bombers is to create an overall situation of anxiety, insecurity and moral panic. They seek to impress with their ruthlessness and cruelty, with excessively destructive actions, with the element of surprise [...]. To this end,

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> terrorists cleverly exploit the values that guide media transmission of news in countries where there is no censorship, with the offer of free publicity for acts of violence filled with drama and conflict (Schmid 2011: 82).

This goal, for example, has been pursued with utmost and systematic deliberation by ISIS, employing a comprehensive mass-media production infrastructure, solely focused on the imaginative exaggeration of atrocities and fear. Perhaps this also elucidates the ostentatious nature of the atrocities committed during the 7 October 2023 Palestinian attacks on Israel. The symbols associated with these attacks, such as Kalashnikovs and hang gliders, have been prominently featured in propaganda efforts by the pro-Palestinian factions - an aspect that makes such violence qualitatively different from the actions taken by Israel in retaliation, which, if anything, aim to obscure the more reprehensible aspects.

«Critical» studies, for their part, also insist on the socially and «discursively mediated» character of terrorism (Fitzgerald 2016: 120). The mediation that they are interested in highlighting is that of state propaganda: the hidden, uncertain, informal nature of the terrorist threat would be the raw material for creating a climate of widespread and irrational fear, which in turn justifies repressive measures and restrictions on personal freedoms. Joseba Zulaika, a Basque scholar renowned for this ethnographic work on ETA (Zulaika 2000), observes, for example, that terrorism inherently relies on bluff, on hinting at threats and on sowing suspicion in ways that appear incoherent. Of course, it is true that the efficacy of the bluff is bolstered by the very real terrorist actions themselves. However, the events and the explicit or implicit threats acquire coherence and are transformed into a narrative structured through specific dramatic and rhetorical procedures. One could say that there is a very wide space between the fact itself and the attribution of meaning, which is what makes it possible to turn facts into television news stories, political statements, and so on.

Zulaika also insists that terrorism and counterterrorism, in some ways, make a system: they both contribute, albeit in different ways, to the construction of a dimension of imagination and social life afflicted by fear, suspicion, threat, and violence: indeed, what we call «terror». In particular, counterterrorism works as a self-fulfilling prophecy by creating its own premises, "imaginary, in his view" (Zulaika 2009). Thus, he compares it to belief systems in witchcraft, drawing from descriptions of the Azande witchcraft provided by E.E Evans Pritchard (1937), and subsequently interpreted by Peter Winch (1964) in terms of cognitive relativism. Zulaika would simply like to demonstrate that the discourse of antiterrorism is illusory and irrational, like that of the "primitives". He however not only completely misunderstands the intentions of both Evans-Pritchard and Winch, who intended on the contrary to show the internal rationality and coherence of those belief systems, but also naively assumes that the threats of terrorism are groundless, invented by the state to justify its repressive policies.

Between witchcraft and terrorism there is, however, an important parallel: both operate within a realm of secrecy - an underground, occult, unpredictable space, where violence manifests itself as personal aggression (or threat), suddenly and uncontrollably, by subjects who are not immediately recognizable as perpetrators. Precisely because of its indefinite and informal nature, this space is constantly elaborated through the workings of discursive and iconic imagery, which are closely connected to the representation of power relations. These four aspects, the occult, violence, discursive-iconic amplification, and power relations, are crucial to understanding the concept of terror. In anthropology, Mary Douglas is credited with linking the fear of witchcraft and the recognition of the "witch" as an internal, occult adversary to notions of purity and impurity and to the symbolic construction of risk and danger (Douglas 1966).

From the 1990s to the present, certain ethnographic studies have emphasised what we might call the new relevance of witchcraft and the occult: categories or forms of the imaginary that in many former colonial societies remain alive as interpretations or reactions to new forms of economic and political power. Among such studies, in addition to the prominent works by Jean and John Comaroff and Peter Geschiere, Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart have notably focused on aspects close to the question of terrorism, and even explicitly proposed a juxtaposition between the two phenomena, emphasizing the connections between witchcraft accusations and forms of communication such as rumours and gossip. They argue «In all societies rumors and gossip tend to form communicative networks in which fears and uncertainties emerge» (Strathern and Stewart 2004: 10-11), linking to existing power structures that can be implicitly challenged or explicitly supported. Rumors and gossip are often the very substrate on which accusations of witchcraft are made, in the context of more or less open social conflicts. The latter, in societies with centralized forms of power, turn into formalized witch-hunting trials: «such trials have the special purpose of identifying the "evil wrongdoers" and not just punishing but purging them from society, in an attempt to remove "evil" or "pollution" and recreate "purity"» (*Ivi*: 11).

Can this situation be juxtaposed with that concerning terrorism? According to the authors, one common point lies in the ideological structure of contemporary Western societies, which accentuate the opposition between internal and external relations. The "Us vs. Them" dichotomy that characterized the Cold War era has been replaced by the *clash of civilizations*, making potential enemies more present, hidden, and difficult to detect within Western society itself than communists once were. Similar to small-scale societies based on clan divisions, the enemy can hide within and strike unexpectedly based on powers that are not directly and empirically discernible. These powers creep into the normality of everyday life and disrupt the reassuring and usual patterns of expectation.

It is here that the crucial feature of what we can call terror, distinguishing it from other forms of political violence, manifests itself, appearing as a rupture of the domesticity of the everyday world. In phenomenological terms, the sudden eruption of violence cracks the obviousness of the natural world and the horizon of trust in life and social relations. Terrorist practices of rupture bring several "aesthetics" into play. On the one hand, there are episodes of spectacular public bloodshed, such as a bomb detonated in the middle of a crowded market. On the other hand, there are covert killings that sow a climate of generalized fear and suspicion, exemplified by the abductions and murders of the Argentinian *desaparecidos* and the state terror of other totalitarian regimes (the paradigmatic "Terror" of the French Revolution combined both these aspects). On this element of rupture is then grafted a discursive and imaginative production, the second fundamental characteristic of "terror" - that can amplify it, elaborate it, link it to symbolic systems and cosmological visions: «Terror involves imagination [...], an aura of ideas, strongly imbued by emotions, quickly surrounds the material acts involved» (*Ivi*: 6-7).

Of course, "imagination" does not imply judgments about the factual truth or falsity of discourses, images and representations surrounding violence:

> It simply indicates that people's thoughts about the world often run far beyond its obvious empirical manifestations, and that the frameworks that are built out of people's thoughts become as important as, or even more important than, their everyday empirical observations, especially where their emotions and their own sets of values are strongly present. (*Ivi*: 9)

Therefore, «in assessing the impact of activities seen as terrorizing or "terrorism" around the world, we have to take into account that their effects are magnified through the workings of the emotions and the imaginative capacities of people» (*Ivi*: 6-7). In the same manner, cultural or imaginative frames are crucial, as noted earlier, in establishing the meaning of terrorism for the perpetrators themselves. This complexity makes these actions difficult to understand and predict for intelligence agencies, which often evaluate them from a primarily strategic-military point of view.

3. Cultures of terror

In summary, terrorism evolves alongside mass media, which serves as an indispensable platform for its messages. However, media coverage is only one aspect, the most superficial, of the discursive amplification of terror. Instead, it consists mainly in the creation of a hidden, opaque imaginative space, diametrically opposed to the transparency of the public sphere that the media pursue (in theory, at least). This is a space of rumours, of suspicions, of widespread anxieties, of the imagination of unmentionable practices.

The relationship between this discursive formation and violence is most evident in an entirely different example of the "amplification" of terror offered by anthropological literature, which directs us back to the colonial context. This is Michael Taussig's study of the exploitation of Amazonian indigenous people in rubber production in the early twentieth century (Taussig 1984, 1987). A consortium company comprising British and Peruvian firms had established itself in the Putumayo River area, relying on the forced labor of the indigenous people. Within a few years, a system of atrocious and systematic violence against the natives emerged, attracting condemnation from numerous travellers and journalists. The severity of the situation led the British Parliament to dispatch a committee of inquiry headed by the British Consul to Brazil, Roger Casement, the same person who had previously exposed a similar case in the Belgian Congo. The accounts of what transpired in the Putumayo depict extreme brutality, atrocities, and the utter indifference of the white settlers to the suffering of the natives. Killings were carried out for amusement or without any reason. Among other harrowing details, a 1907 report by Walter Hardenburg reveals that the natives

> are inhumanly flogged until their bones are visible. Given no medical treatment, they are left to die after torture, eaten by the company's dogs. They are castrated, and their ears, fingers, arms, and legs are cut off. They are also tortured by means of fire, water, and crucifixion tied head-down. The whites cut them to pieces with machetes and dash out the brains of small children by hurling them against trees and walls. The elderly are killed when they can no longer work. To amuse themselves, company officials practice shooting, using Indians as targets, and on special occasions, such as Easter Saturday, Saturday of Glory - shoot them down in groups or, in preference, douse them in kerosene and set them on fire to enjoy their agony (Taussig 1984: 475).

The crucial point highlighted by Taussig is that, despite the undeniable immensity of the violence, a significant proportion of the evidence reaches us through narratives insisting on horrific details, echoing *topoi* that have been widespread in the literature on American colonialism since Las Casas (Todorov 1987: 141). The issue is not only about debating the veracity or partial fictionality of these tales, and their relation with already established dramatic patterns (or myths). Rather, these narratives are themselves part of the process that makes this violence culturally possible: «the narratives are themselves

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evidence of the process by which a culture of terror was created and sustained». (*Ivi* : 482)

This "culture of terror" is the product of a social situation characterized by total anomie and a sense of isolation that nurtures within colonialists an imaginary of fears and horrifying tales about the jungle, cannibals, cruelty, and the "unspeakable rites of the savages" (to borrow a famous phrase from *Heart of Darkness*). However extreme, the analysis of situations like the one in Putumayo aids in understanding important aspects of the "moral panic" and discourse on terrorism prevalent today. Specifically, it points to the notion of an occult space of the imaginary, of voices and narratives, of ritualized practices of violence – in other words, the discursive amplification we have tried to analyze. Taussig further states:

> What is essential to understand is the way in which these stories functioned to create, through magical realism, a culture of terror dominating both the whites and the Indians. The importance of this fabulous work extends beyond the epic and grotesque quality of its content. The truly crucial feature lies in creating an uncertain reality out of fiction, a nightmarish reality in which the unstable interplay of truth and illusion becomes a social force of horrendous and phantasmic dimensions (*Ivi:* 492).

Another noteworthy example comes from Neil Whitehead's (2002, 2006) studies among the Patamuna of the Guyana highlands. This case revolves around the *kanaimà* shamans, who are believed to be responsible for murders accompanied by torture and ritual mutilation. Whitehead traces the constant but elusive presence of *kanaimà* in the ethnographic literature on the region, which sometimes treats it as an unverified colonial fantasy, and sometimes reduces it to an indigenous code of justice and revenge, that shapes and set limits to social conflict. According to Whitehead, however, it is in every respect a form of shamanism – among others found in the region – and the violence attributed to it is at least partly real. During Whitehead's research in the area, murders do occur, some of which are attributed to the *kanaimá*, while others involve alleged *kanaimá* as victims.

It's not uncommon for ethnographers who study witchcraft to find themselves entangled in a web of dangerous words. Whitehead experiences it. He begins to notice more and more movements and eerie noises around his house at night. Sometimes, he returns home to find a poisonous snake inside. One day he is the victim of severe intoxication, perhaps an attempted poisoning. However, the ambiguous interpretation of these occurrences is influenced by various rumors, such as that a notorious *kanaimá* known as bishop is coming for him. Talking with local friends, the ethnographer becomes increasingly convinced that he must fear for his life, prompting him to temporarily leave the field.

One aspect of the phenomenon of the *kanaimà* - whose historical and ethnographic complexity cannot be fully explored here – is that the behavior culturally ascribed to these "killing shamans" seems inherently conducive to the proliferation of rumours. Indeed, it is said that *kanaimas* may ritually play with their intended victims for months, sometimes even years, before killing them. Typical methods include lurking around the target's home, introducing poisonous creatures into the house, and performing non-lethal attacks (such as poisoning). Actions in which the perpetrator remains invisible but at the same time manifests himself, becomes the subject of discourses, and generates fear. If Whitehead is right, the powerful and terrorizing effect of ritual also depends on it being *good to suspect* and *good to tell*: «As a result, one is simultaneously dealing with

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convincing case histories, wild rumors, considered attributions of blame, false accusations, ungrounded gossip, and justified suspicion». (Whitehead 2002: 1)

In this form of shamanism, where power is explicitly linked to the ability to create terror and taking the necessary risks, reality acquires a confused, emotionally charged, almost hallucinatory character. It shows similarities to what Taussig (1984) says about the situation of "epistemic murk" in which the whites of the Putumayo spread terror and are at the same time gripped by it. We have seen such a "nightmarish reality" as a crucial trait of witchcraft and, albeit in more complex and articulated ways, in the contexts of moral panic (as conceptualised by Cohen) and of terrorism. It would not be difficult to find in contemporary contexts that same mimetic play of fears toward a violent and uncivilized other, to which we respond with the ritualization of a similar violence and incivility.

Even in its most centralized and orchestrated forms, terror is not solely a top-down manipulation but also a "gamble" on something that, by definition, cannot be fully controlled: its dispersed circulation in the micro-interactions specific to a given social context. The challenge lies in understanding this peculiar social reality, in which the shocking effects of violence and the constant threat of aggression are combined with the narrative and ritual elaboration (only partly formal and official) of a terrifying imaginary, in which the usual boundaries between reality and fiction are constantly redefined.

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