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Disquieting tendencies towards the pulverization of social reality-The Venezuelan case

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The new structural tendencies inherent in the process of globalizing modernity and based on the market and instrumental rationality are generating implosive socialization, loss of culture, a subjectivity model leading to regressive individualism, and the downfall of traditional socio-cultural and identity producing structures. Its ultimate consequence is the emergence of a phenomenon causing the “pulverization of all social behavior,” understood as the matrix that provides signification to the interaction fabric of any given society, and the appearance of an instrumental ethic in its stead. The impact of this civilizing process in South America as a whole has been devastating and particularly so in Venezuela where social violence has increased beyond reasonable bounds in the last decades.

Key words: Social violence, globalizing modernity, pulverization of social behavior, loss of culture, imploding socialization.

INTRODUCTION

Despite having been trivialized both by social sciences and common sense, the broader meaning of social reality leads us to the production of significations and actions oriented towards the “other” from a language and power subjectivity determined by this very same “other.” In this sense, everything connected with relations, interactions, interpersonal influences, etc. will be located in the motley and complex field of social behavior.

Delving further into the definition of this concept, we may well understand social behavior as stemming from the symbolic infrastructure underlying any action oriented towards constructing togetherness as based on symbolically interacting relations either of cooperative or conflictive nature. These are the significations and relations that make up the complex pattern of social life.

Thus, the social behavior matrix crystallizes around a founding “chain of bonds” that underlies any social behavior as a concrete output.

The codification of concrete socio-human reality is ancillary to the “systems of producing and totalizing

signification.” These are syntax systems of social reality, that is to say, areas from which this reality is stated.

It is impossible to approach social behavior from the rigor of science only. We also have to rely on our intuition, senses, and pathos, as well as on our emotions, affections, and passions: in a word, the pathos to fully comprehend rather than understand the significations, the representations, the imaginativeness, the actions and the whole gamut of tinsel that make up the infinite and cosmic dance known as life in a meaningful relation.

Throughout its history, however, the “social dance” of the human species has never excelled in harmony, let alone rhythm. On the contrary, but for a few exceptions, life has been rather hectic, contentious, a constant struggle to ward off nature, the gods, the dissimilar “other,” and all manner of power and subjugation structures. It has meant fighting for the upper hand, respect, hegemony, for both material and existential survival, and the leading forces have been passions, imaginativeness, needs, conflicts, in short, tragedy.

In this sense, social reality has always underlain all social output, such as actions, relations, and significations, as a founding chain of bonds. The codification of human social reality runs parallel to the existence of "signification totalizing systems" that turn into processes of providing sense or, better said, syntax to the polyphony of the various physical and verbal manifestations that generally occur in any situation involving human beings.

Cosmogonies, myths, symbolic imaginativeness, representation systems etc. are here to tell us that it was impossible for social life to have taken place without structuring and totalizing interactions.

However, the process which is currently leading to the adoption of a globalizing civilization is also pointing towards a path characterized by a strong tendency to dissolve social behavior as a set of relations dependent on symbolic referencing bonds and to put in its stead a concept of social behavior that is little else than the residual effect left in the wake of instrumental rationality and, therefore, a mere sham artifact. Even we can announce the death of social in the same sense in which we have analyzed it here like a metaphor which intended to prove the loss of the meaning in the way of life.

The text of this paper is divided into several parts which bear a logical sequence. The first part attempts to define the status of the social concept based on the notion of meaning as a parent category. In this sense, we speak of "social" in a strict sense rather than as it's commonly understood in this concept. The second one discussed the possibility of defining the social today as becoming merely a residual effect of civilization according to the logic of instrumental rationality as hegemonic logic in contemporary society. The third one emphasizes the emergence of the phenomenon which we call De-socialization as the product of implementation in a hegemonic rationality own civilizing process of global capitalist system. The fourth part discussed the presence of the phenomenon of the dissolution of the social. The nature of social contract that underlies the historical subject of modernity implodes. In its place emerges a kind of subjectivity we call "autistic individualism." In essence, it is the dissolution of the symbolic and normative social mediations. The fifth one raises the question of how a society which is based on the paradigm of subject-individual as foundation of Modernity, becomes a kind of society that produces a process of collectivization massifying induced by the media. The sixth one discussed the phenomenon of globalization as the great contemporary civilization process that sweeps away the traditional socio-cultural structures, inducing some anomie in universe of the society in general. Finally, the last part takes an approach to the case of Venezuela in the context of socio-structural distress generated by the globalization process of civilization. This discomfort is mainly characterized by the emergence of a social implosion process.

METHODOLOGY

Regarding the methodology used, we speak of socio-hermeneutical method. This procedure applied to the analysis of socio-historical trends (structural and cyclical trends). Characteristic of contemporary civilization allows us to raise the issue of pulverization of the social reality. This is a type of qualitative methodology that operates using the search post-facto analysis of society as a text as a whole.

Social behavior as the condensation point of signification

Self conscience, acting as the identity awareness of the ego, is the outstanding feature that enables us to differentiate man from the other animals that partake of the same zoological scale as the Homo sapiens. This trait turned man into the only animal able to elaborate bonds and to believe in these bonds, although, he well knew that they had been prompted by the workings of wishful thinking. Nevertheless, this logic of interpreting wishes as needs, which is what bonds are about, is considered to be the symbolic production matrix that underlies all social behavior.

The production of signification, grasped as a process that provides purpose, course, and justification to action, thought, and speech, is related to the creation of bonds that do not exist as unconnected facts but as chains, bonding chains as it were. There appear metaphors and metonymies measured out according to the type of society matrix we refer to. Therefore, social reality, as referring to relations endowed with signification and hence inherent in man, rests on this process.

In this regard, Blumer argues that human action is always directed to objects on the basis of the meanings they have for them (Blumer, 1969). In the same vein, Weber (1977) argues that social action is one that is always facing the other. It is the sense subjective mind, thus the analysis of social action is focused on the reproduction of the connections implied meaning in it.

Naturally, these bonds will never follow a single pattern. They will be varied and complex, that is to say, overburdened with signification, and sometimes even contradictory. The greater the systemic differentiation of a society the more complex its bonds will prove to be. Thus, contrary to the materialistic vision of history, social reality in signification rich networks does not ultimately depend on physical production structures but on such symbolic fictional constructs as the bonds. We may therefore further state that these imaginary constructs per se are well able to generate the most real of all human edifices, that is social behavior which is little less than networks of inter-subjectivities made and shaped by language, acting as an imaginativeness matrix.

This is what the whole crisis of the still deeply rooted

episteme of “modernity,” amounts to. It is not so much the fact that this school of thought proved unable to continue solving problems and grew dysfunctional but rather that the concrete subject of everyday life stopped believing that this was the only means to store up his thoughts and actions.

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL BEHAVIOR AS A RESIDUAL EFFECT OF THE CURRENT CIVILIZATION CRISIS

“Modernity” meant defining social behavior from the point of view of the emerging contract character acquired by social relations. This was made possible by man’s ability to apply reason in order to associate in such ways as would enable him to live in harmony.

Happiness and freedom, both civilizing promises made by “modernity,” could now at long last be reached by dint of reason. A whole manner of thinking, feeling, and acting, that is to say, a whole civilizing model supported the hopes of attaining the final redemption of mankind in the “promised land” vouched for by formal rationality.

However, the status of social behavior accepted as a pact between man and the gods had already been a bonding matrix in non-modern societies. The alliance between Jehovah and the Hebrew people was a pact that permitted the construction of a theocratic civilizing model that is still relevant today.

Myths, cosmogonies, and philosophic systems in general, stress the matrix character of all pacts, alliances, contracts, and togetherness systems that speak of language dependent, social integrations and symbolic imaginativeness structures, which are but the personal manifestations of man as holder of the faculty of speech, and hence, the ability to establish signification rich relations with the “other”.

A whole structural tendency that constitutes the “hard core” of this globalizing capitalist civilization is rapidly, not smoothly, taking over the central and peripheral command of the civilizing processes in our present world. This tendency bases its social integration proposal on the systemic imperatives of a strategy adaptive paradigm that dispenses both with organic bonding structures and the rules of reason, as useless. It progressively fills the spaces that were once occupied by discursive “modernity” logic and the visions of the cosmos held by traditional society.

Through the “rhetoric of the image” displayed by the monstrous broadcasting apparatus of the media, we are marching towards the implantation of a subjective device that acts by applying the logic of conditioned reflexes rather than that of reason.

Signs and signals rather than symbols are the instrumental strategy resources that partake in installing this “subjectivity device” which has partially achieved its goal of generally eliminating all ethical, symbolic and social

interactions that made up the substratum of life in a relation. We are witnessing how socio-subjective ecology is becoming an instrument in its stead. The fact of turning subjectivity and social life into an instrument is ultimately leading to changing both the individual and the collective subconscious into a tool too that will replace repressed representations, excluded symbols, and impulses by a program of compulsive adaptation to the market structures and to instrumental rationality in general (Habermas, 1989).

The “subjectivity device” or the “subconscious device” follows the rationality of the “death impulse” which according to Freud (1978) is orientated towards reducing organic life to something inorganic and lifeless.

COMPULSIVE IMPLOSIVE SOCIALIZATION AND LOSS OF CULTURE: TWO DIMENSIONS OF THE SAME PROCESS.

When talking of implosive socialization and loss of culture, we do not refer to a total lack of social and cultural elements, for this has never been the case in any society, not even at their darkest time when they were deprived of their culture, their identity or their values. Even at such times, we find some social structuring, socializing constructs, rules, values and culture in general.

Total vacuum does not exist, whether in nature or society for both of them abhor vacuum. Nevertheless, it is quite acceptable to speak of social periods during which the civilizing processes have such devastating effects as to deeply erode the foundations of any given society-culture with regard to the conditions surrounding the structural feasibility of symbolic interchange.

Symbolic, ethic standardizing, cognitive, and institutional interactions, in short the whole infrastructure of functionality as such, act as the basic understanding substratum in any human assembly or society that partakes in a process of entropy, not only as a concrete civilizing proposal but also as the symbolic functions, the formal structures, and the cultural codes belonging to the species. According to Durkheim (2008), in the evolution of society in general is passed an order determined by the mechanical solidarity or one characterized by organic solidarity. However, this transition may cause social disruption processes that are expressed as a state of severe disturbance of standards known as anomie and involve the presence of negative solidarity.

In this respect, we may well state that we are approaching a gateway to great socio-phylogeny mutations. The type of material and symbolic power relation context from which all this infrastructure is built at a specific historical moment is of paramount importance. We wish, however, to particularly stress the fact that it is the very nature of this process and the resulting “coefficient of excess power” that are engulfing the whole architecture of a society-culture which stood for an efficient way to socio-

biologically produce and reproduce life.

The process of incorporating Venezuelan society to the capitalist system of the global market society has been closely related to the machinery that tore apart all traditional ways of living containing togetherness proposals founded on self-centered basic agreements, such as the "ideology of honor" or the family structure, on the one hand, and to the repressive obsolescence of a certain kind of "modernity" which, despite being atypical and overdone, drew some rallying power from its contract-awarding ideology, on the other hand.

Hegemonic tendencies are beginning to establish themselves in a compulsive way, pulverizing anything that so far stood for social behavior comprehended as a "set of bonds" underlying all togetherness networks.

Both primary, pre-modern, and precariously modern togetherness patterns that basically responded to a structuring matrix strongly defined by a sporting-aesthetic substratum, and the means dependent on communicative rationality to produce social transactions and to resolve inter-group and interpersonal conflicts, are diluted in the "bubbling magma" of these tendencies which like the "black holes in space" engulf any form of organic social life.

Thus, a society which in a stammering and most precarious way was nearing the imaginativeness of nationality, that is to say, of being and feeling "nationalistic" or becoming nationalistically minded, was impacted by the crushing factual forces of social reality backed by the signal codes of rationality used as a totalitarian instrument.

Having grown both dysfunctional and anachronistic, a whole series of social, standardizing, and symbolic interactions disappeared, such as symbolic rituals, standardizing and valorizing regulators, knowledge systems and symbolic representations.

These structures are being displaced by codes, signal systems, and behavior commands, totally unrelated to any socio-cultural context, which only acquire a definite shape in the diffuse ideology of materialist-utilitarian pragmatism and lawless egocentric individualism.

FROM THE TRANSCENDENTAL SUBJECT TO THE AUTISTIC INDIVIDUAL

The notion of social compromise or contract underlies the associative universe of modernity. Social intercourse as such is only possible as the product of a rational choice made by a historically compromised individual able to relate to others by dint of organic solidarity with a view to forming groups and weaving the fabric of social relations in general.

Within the micro-social scope, the family unit does appear as the primary group par excellence. Acting as a primary mediating social structure between the individual and society general, the family draws its *raison d'être*

from two basic paradigms: the Christian and the juridical. A sexuality exclusively oriented towards procreation as a means of ensuring descendants destined to become later citizens suited to the construction and reproduction of a society historically set on progress, presupposes a "pastoral of the flesh", that is a disciplinary model and a pathologically sound type of pattern. Founded on a true discourse that took into consideration the above sources of inspiration, that is Christian asceticism and a disciplinary model of the pathologically sound kind, the Victorian family pattern is perhaps one of the most striking examples of "domestic libido-political economy".

We currently observe a state of dissolution of the old family structures as they shift from an alliance type of paradigm to an essentially strategic one. Power and knowledge devices fill the empty spaces left behind by the old structures, and there ensues an amorphous congregate of individuals, interests, strategic interactions, and, foremost, force relations competing for power and supremacy. This is the all-pervading cannibalistic order into which society as a whole has presently turned.

This cannibalistic order represents the most visible aspect of the type of market order free from mediations and universally functional that was hailed as society's one and only structuring and operative paradigm. If one perceives the others as little more than a means of obtaining some benefit, or competitors, potential or real, or simply active or passive factors of power, then all social intercourse as a pact, a compromise, a dialogue or an interrelation between the self and the rest, becomes impossible not just as a fact but for structural reasons.

Under these conditions, social intercourse, taken literally as a network or semiotic reticule of symbolic interchange, tends to disappear and to generate in its stead a network of information and response devices in an environment that turns into a universal market structure.

This is, strictly speaking, a process of regressive socialization and de-culture brought about by the kind of possessive hyper-individualization of man's ego found in post-industrialization civilization (Lipovetsky, 2006). Due to the pulverization of the social relation plot, the self, understood as a relational instance, suffers atomization and turns into a mere monad strategically clashing against others.

Current social intercourse is no longer a relational fact but a chain of interactions occurring between subjectivities acting like artefacts essentially oriented towards adaptation. Social intercourse ends up being an artefact too in this game of action and reaction principles where subjectivity has lost its transcendental contents, such as ideology, metaphysics, purpose, and so forth. These have become mere residual effects left behind by a production and consumption apparatus constituted not only by material products and services, but also primarily by signs and subjectivities.

On the plane of everyday relations between truth and

subjectivity, this phenomenon has led to the emergence of a process that individualizes truth to subjective levels. At all events, this frame of mind or position accepted as that of the individual will always be a product of the mass media apparatus, whose function as a subjectivity producing structure is strategic to this phase of post-capitalist development.

The concept of subjectivity viewed as an individual device of the kind found among passive TV consumers implies as a structural condition the dissolution of all identity, whether individual or collective, and rests on a communication situation ruled by an inter-reaction, not an interrelation order (Canclini, 1995). This is but the adaptive response to stimuli signals no longer processed according to subjective memories linked to a bulk of ethnic and cultural traditions from which experience can be construed, but to mass media tailored programmes and to functional devices that stand for what subjectivity, whether individual or collective, has become degraded into.

Within the context of these interaction structures, communication turns into a process of juxtaposing different individualities, each of them most egocentrically and narcissistically orientated towards an increasingly primary and elementary self. According to Morin (1998), this ego-centred man reaches subjectivity as a desiring mechanism forever facing his own mirror image in the "other" but incapable of critically recognizing himself in the dominance and power seeking acts of the latter.

The mechanical construct into which social relations have evolved implies whether by cause or effect the death of subjectivity viewed as the condensation space of social relations, and consequently the end of all social intercourse. These socially and culturally negative tendencies of the ego and of subjectivity in general are producing a regressive and egocentric sociality.

FROM INDIVIDUALISTIC SUBJECT TO MASS-FOSTERING REGRESSIVE COLLECTIVISM

The concept of mass society alludes to the anonymous and impersonal character of large bodies of people that draw their organic nature from the communication models created by the mass media for the first time ever. Nevertheless, these large bodies of people galvanized into life by the mass media could revert to their ordinary communication structures once this process was completed.

The mass media communication model currently penetrates all interstices of the social fabric down to the deepest strata of the subconscious whence it generates a new subjectivity (Guattari, 1991).

The mass media apparatus installed as a device of the subconscious rules over the purpose, producing logic of a community that turns into a permanent mass on accepting its "terms of living". This process includes the gutting of

traditional collective memories and their use in market rationality as references to folklore.

On the strictly sociological plane, the whole network of relation structures mutates into an amorphous, statistically defined whole amounting to magnitudes or numbers. The opinion poll researches point to means of achieving average values, such as average taste, average knowledge, average attitude, average behaviour, and the like.

Social interchange as built on symbolic foundations and understood within its ethic-normative context as a matter of compromise, pact or social contract, gives way to a phenomenon that emerges as the residual effect of running mass media communication apparatuses and devices. This is little beyond a structural epiphenomenon effect brought about by the morass of mass media networks, which will eventually lead to the pulverization of both social interchange and subjectivity.

Thus, the entire fabric of our present society tends to become a community with a very primal orientation as far as its socio-cognitive constitution and its affective-emotion formation are concerned. Communication with reality and therefore, the manner of knowing and thinking as a whole, is resolved in terms of "first order signal system" as used in reflexology.

On the affective-emotional plane, the socio-cognitive formation of the automatic Pavlovian stimulus-response type corresponds to a rational prototype based on the simplification as well as trivialization of feelings and emotions.

From a tragic sense of life formerly ruled by great passions, we have moved on to a situation of affective neutralism due to the recent process of trivialization of the "pathos" as handed down by the Greek. Passions have become useless altogether and may even put obstacles in the way of one's wishes when what is required is but the rational selection of means suitable to the achievement of a definite, equally rational goal.

Partaking in the constellation of the above phenomena, we also observe a process of reverting to a primal affective universe running parallel to yet another process, namely that of universal subjectivity collectivization. This recourse to the possibility of primitive and egocentric regression, both narcissistic and related to the primal processes of the ego, is a response to the vanishing tragic sense of life and to the refusal of confronting it with a heroic attitude. At this point, we could speak of a journey back to a world exclusively determined by pulsations, but lastly governed by the principles of reason.

In this sense, there need not necessarily be a clash between pulsations and reason, for the archetype of a most primitive, elementary, and spoken-message-heeding individual, liable to build a universe of impulsive consumer buyers, is functional to mass media rationality. Such an individual has no identity, no memory, collective memory references, or capacity to elaborate affective

processes, and is totally at the mercy of his pulsations.

We are dealing with a community inorganically built on a system of signals, the strategy of which is orientated towards the eradication of language as a communication system and therefore as the foundation of all inter-subjectivity processes. There appears in its stead a "contact network" erected on a structure functioning very much like an automatic information model, featuring in- and outputs but devoid of a black box.

GLOBALIZATION AS THE GREAT CONTEMPORANEOUS CIVILIZING PROCESS

Globalization and modernity

Modernity had meant the existence of politically and socially stable areas based on specific categories, such as the sovereignty of the people, the national-republican State, notional sovereignty, the will of the people, and such.

The process of de-modernization (Touraine, 1996) first experienced by the countries at the core of capitalist life, and then by those at its periphery, brought about the disintegration of these politically and socially stable areas once they were permeated by networks of different nature, such as finance, broadcasting, media, communication, information, and so forth. This induced a rupture situation between market and culture, between instrumental reason, that is, science and technique, and the symbolic processes, and between financial interchange and identities, whether collective or individual.

This fact, first implying a separation between culture and society and then on a different plane between society and instrumental rationality, became known as de-socialization after Touraine. Instrumental rationality simply grew autonomous, declared its independence from all social bonds, and moved on to colonize and rule the entire socio-human universe (Habermas, 1989).

Modernity had not always proceeded along these lines, for production processes usually emerged together with social and cultural organization structures, that is to say, with systems of social intercourse. In this sense, we may well speak of social relations of production, division of labour, exploitation, alienation, and so forth.

Nowadays, the production process resembles an autonomous technical device, free from all social representations of man as the main actor in the drama of life, be it as exploiting or exploited, enslaving or enslaved. In this sense, instead of being alienated man simply becomes a synergic participant in the production process, which becomes a mechanical, self-sufficient matter.

Global processes, terms of living, and subjectivity

Techniques, markets, or production processes are not

categories currently linked to any social organization or cultural identity. They are little beyond autonomous structures that stem from the implantation of a new type of subjectivity adjusted to these processes, and tend towards self-reproduction.

The objectified symbol universe of global networks disassembles all collective memories and identities, as well as local and regional terms of living. It pulverizes individual and collective subjectivity and generates a fragmentation process affecting the daily experiencing of the self, the "other", and the world at large (Canclini, 1995).

How does the experiencing of the self occur nowadays? It takes place in a substratum fertilized with mass information, systemic market imperatives, and technology networks, all of which are totally unrelated to any social interaction context.

What actually allowed self-experiencing to enter the stage of traditional and modern society was its emergence within the context of some social interaction system. This presupposed the existence of some operating cultural reference system, some plexus of social interactions, such as norms, interactive action patterns, institutions, and the like, as well as specific ways of structuring subjectivity as related to the social and cultural structures; in short, there had to exist some interaction between the system and the actor.

The cement that held all these structures together was a signification structure that justified and legitimized the system as a social unit. This signification structure, discursive grammar, or sense totalizing system, i.e. mode of producing and recognizing meaning, underlay all personality, society and culture as the substratum for the experiencing of the self.

The globalization process brought about the pulverization of all signification structures, thus far held as epitome of contextual references, according to which the awareness of the self was the founding act of subjectivity, and the awareness of "other" the founding act of all social intercourse.

A tangle of alluvial streams unrelated to any signification substratum and constituted by mass culture signals and information in the form of objectified signs and symbols, are the reference-goals used by the individual to answer for himself, the others and the world at large, in current everyday life.

Market telecommunication networks, such as TV, cable, the Internet, the World Wide Web, and technique processes in general, turn into modes of line producing subjectivities, that is social cloning, efficiently adapted to the object, sign, symbol, and information market.

Integrated world capitalism, referred to as globalization, reproduces by creating material goods rather than by producing signs and symbols known as subjectivity, as Guattari rightly stated.

In the relation between the system and the various life spheres, social integration structures, such as institutions,

language, education, or culture, are no longer a fundamental objective, and subjectivity eventually grows ancillary to systemic imperatives, that is to say, to the ad infinitum self-reproduction of this instrumental rationality ruled system. Adaptation to the environment, not communication rationality or the language world, rules individual and collective subjectivity. This is a matter of mechanical rather than organic solidarity (Durkheim, 2008) since the inherent signification of "social contract" acquired by social matters in modernity makes no longer any sense due to its obvious uselessness to the reproduction of the system.

VENEZUELA IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZING CIVILIZATION PROCESS MALAISE

The eighties: First great crisis of the democratic system and beginning of neo-liberal model implantation

Back in the eighties, the systemic crisis affecting the country's representative democracy two-party model became obvious. However, signs of the implantation of a lifestyle and a culture that, no matter how shocking they may appear, were eventually adopted by the entire population across the vast social landscape of Venezuelan life had also been all too present.

The phenomenon of social violence was emerging. In the late eighties, all elements of the so-called "violence culture", that is to say, robberies, thefts, homicides, suicides, rapes, sexual abuses, and the so forth, were beginning to raise their ugly and repulsive heads on the democratic stage.

As the State proved incapable of solving all fundamental problems, larger cities became rife with poverty, life in the countryside disintegrated bringing down the pristine concept of community, and lastly large urban centres began to grow into the menageries they would eventually become. Social violence, the paradigmatic Horseman of the Apocalypse, rode at leisure into our society, which still bore rural traits well into the fifties.

This by no means implies that Venezuela was foreign to the dreadful presence of violence prior to this stage of its historical life. The country's very existence goes back to the epoch of its conquest and colonization, when it was born into western civilization out of a tidal wave of violence made of assaults, pillages and rapes. This turned later into the violence of its republican life, that can be traced all the way down to the XX century. These two types of violence, however, were political. As opposed to this, the kind of violence in hand has the strict social nature that is characteristic of our historical moment.

We are not dealing with racial, ethnic, religious, or political violence, though their presence may well be felt, but with a type of violence that admits no such classifications since it has no ideological nature. This is

mass violence, of the kind that can be most anonymous, impersonal and indiscriminate, not class violence, although a great amount of social resentment is there too.

For the first time our country faces an anonymous, ubiquitous, and perversely criminal enemy with great power to inflict harm, increasingly cold, and intensely laden with social resentments. Impunity and the fact that the State has no efficient way of fighting this evil, make matters worse.

Poverty, social exclusion, disintegration of both society and, foremost, family, predominance of mass media messages fostering violence, promotion and sale of a lifestyle founded on market values, and crisis of the socio-political model, create the socio-structural framework within which the phenomenon of interpersonal violence flourishes in our society.

This market based lifestyle, which is growing increasingly overt at present, has brought about a devastating social storm in the "quiet waters" of traditional Venezuelan society. It has particularly changed the way Venezuelans were wont to consider their lives, their fellowmen and the world at large.

The traditional value basket, that granted a place of honour to individuals, family and blood ties, respectability and honesty, to brotherhood and kinship, gives way to a value system that holds quite different views on the matter. Money, power, goods, consumption, comfort, material status, hedonism, "having a good time at all costs", and other such values, rank at the top of the pyramid now. The old value standards and their socio-centred focus have shifted towards an ego-centred, hierarchy-prone system.

As nothing but these goals of material value matters now, there ensues a shift away from the now inoperative, old value standards.

The turn of mind generated by the advent of the so called "consumption capitalism" leads to a view of the world that places the individual in a subordinate rather than a central position. Honesty, kinship, family, blood ties or being part of a community, have become disposable values.

Neo-liberalism as ethical foundation of the predominant lifestyle

Neo-liberalism is the ideology according to which the market constitutes societies' sole regulating reference therefore ranking above the State and society itself. People's needs are irrelevant, what matters is supply and demand, in short, the market.

Individualism is the behaviour model proposed by this ideology as its ethical foundation for the individual and his ability to obtain material benefits are the grounds on which society generates progress and development. In this sense, competition is the means on which the

individual relies in order to achieve his goals. The fact that people may well challenge one another in this competition is beneficial in terms of individual achievements and profit. According to this pattern, the traditional values that formed mankind's most elevated ethical levels, such as solidarity, cooperation, and compassion are replaced by a "cannibalistic order" in which "man is man's wolf" as stated by Hobbes (1978).

Poverty and illness appear as caused by individual failure and their solution as lying in an increase of productivity and competition. Both larger markets and greater competition will trigger off the miracle of putting an end to poverty and wretchedness. Thus, neo-liberalism bears resemblance to some sort of "social Darwinism" where only the fittest survive. The sick, the poor and the wretched are but failures and weaklings not worthy of life, as unsuited to living in a society guided by the success of its strongest members.

Economical and social rights, such as human rights, make no longer any sense in a social regime ruled by these principles. Hence, the issue as to whether to eliminate the so-called "Welfare State" adopted by the nations of central capitalism as their social security model after the triumph of socialism and the two world wars, has been under genuine debate in Europe since the early nineties.

Social security, the major conquest of the labour sectors in these countries, was suddenly at stake due to the turning tide of an epoch marked by market fundamentalism.

In South America, where populist-paternalistic client States stood in lieu of Welfare States, neo-liberalism took on the shape of policies leading to economical and social "structural adjustments", that fundamentally relied on the principles of market overtures to trans-national capitalism.

The syndrome of wealth concentration, that is, regressive income distribution and structural social inequality, that has chronically afflicted our peripheral societies, is growing worse.

The curtailment of public spending fundamentally affects the social budgeting of health and all educational and social programmes, the loosening of the labour market regulations, and the over-exploitation of labour and lack of job security caused by adjusting the employer-employee relations to the demands of the market, stress social inequities, the postponement of all social matters, and therefore poverty.

Conclusion

Today, social violence is the most debated matter of public health both in Venezuela and in a large sectors of the western world not only because of its physical and moral consequences but also because its victims belong to all social strata of the population.

As the national compromise state of the people or paternalist client state proved inadequate to solve the

chronic structural problems of social equity and justice, poverty and marginalization in large urban areas became rampant, country life lost its structure, as did the concept of traditional community too, large cities began slowly to turn into the zoos they would eventually become, while the phenomenon of social violence leisurely took society over as the leaseholder of the compulsive, chaotic and violent urbanizing process which was raging in a kind of society that up to the 50's was still a "community" in the rural sense described by Tönnies (1999, cited by Urrutia).

Venezuelan society had never before faced a problem of such magnitude. In this sense, we may well speak of an epidemic affecting both Venezuela and the rest of the world in general. The fact that we are truly dealing with an epidemic is vouched for by its all-pervading, momentous, and transcendent character.

Nowadays, social violence has a social rather than a political status in Venezuela despite having had an essentially political character in former times. Poverty, social exclusion, dissolution of the social fabric that made up the community without compensation by the rise of some at least partly integrated social structure, loss of structure of the various family life forms, including that of the Venezuelan working-class, substitution of the anonymous and impersonal communication format delivered by the mass media for the face to face interpersonal communication paradigm, are but the basic epidemiological chains that can lead us to understand the context within which this phenomenon is being produced and reproduced.

Social violence, however, is already acquiring the connotations of an endemic structural problem because its emergence actually announces that it is taking root in the functioning rationality of Venezuelan society and thereby becoming an extremely acute chronic disease.

Its all-pervading and omnipresent character can lead us to perceive it as a natural phenomenon and therefore impossible to eradicate without extreme measures entailing ever-increasing doses of violence, that is to say fighting the disease by means of its own logic.

This involves both real and probable threats to certain values that despite not being totally established in our South American societies are nevertheless taken as a cultural reference model of contemporary civilized life, such as human rights, democracy, institutional structures, and the like.

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