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The greatest concern that always seems to have occupied western political thinking is the relationship between individuals and the establishment. In its sunniest and darkest times, the 20th century has increased this need. The first generations of sociologists and political philosophers made this a recurring issue. Herbert Spencer, a radical individualist, criticised the state’s interference in people’s lives. Max Weber argued that the state’s authority was based on the threat of violence and that only the state had the right to use it. Georg Simmel upheld that the state was responsible for managing (inevitable) social conflicts. But this was the same question that influenced much of the work of thinkers like Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Franz Fanon, Hannah Arendt or Zigmunt Bauman, among others.
One of the central aspects of this issue is violence between individual freedoms and power structures, which is perfectly understandable as they are often irreconcilable.

Violence in society and, what really interests me, the artistic representation of violence have always been the subject of vigorous debates. There was however, a decisive moment at which the paradigm changed, the Second World War. On learning of the atrocities perpetrated, after disbelief and perplexity, the representation of violence began to use technology as a death machine, to understand the possibility of the sudden apocalyptic destruction of mankind by human hand, to discuss the legitimacy of violence and, in short, to understand the reach, banality and ubiquity of violence.

British drama in this period proved to be particularly interested and skilful in addressing the issue. This applied particularly to realist drama, not because it was easier to portray the post-war ruins, but because this horror challenged the conventions of realism. «It is not poetry that is impossible after Auschwitz, but rather prose. Realistic prose fails, where the poetic evocation of the unbearable atmosphere of a camp succeeds», Slavoj Žižek stated, correcting Theodor Adorno (Žižek, 2008: 3). Nonetheless, in their troublesome attempts to portray this world, realist playwrights undertook to show the world a merciless view, confronting it directly and trying not to go round or universalise the subjects, thereby showing their purpose of regenerating and transforming the world and politics.

British realist drama after the Second World War tests the rhetoric of ineffability of the horror and violence and tried to understand a terribly new world. The representation of violence was regarded as a moral and ethical imperative in reaction to the progressive trivialisation of evil in which drama was an act of positive consequence.

We can call this type of playwriting synecdoche dramaturgy, i.e. one that offers a part of the world but aims at intervening in all of it, transforming it, denouncing its iniquities and, in some
cases, suggesting ways of correcting and improving it. It was a

dramaturgy that started from clearly political motivations but

showed confused political thinking based mainly on

idiosyncratic visions of the world. Its main traits included: a

superlative manifestation of the cult of honesty, leading to a
tendency to make confessions in which the leading characters

were often regarded as their playwrights’ alter-egos; an

appreciation of real emotion and the expression of this
emotion; nostalgia for the past, often mystified times;
personal opposition between those who have ideas or intentions and
those who actually do something; a taste for the freedom
offered by manual work; attention to real historical events;
the disturbing presence of babies, often regarded as a sign of
death; domestic escapes unaware of the problems of the
world; dialectic hesitation between a pacifistic or combative
attitude, manifestation of a sometimes unclear feeling of
rebellion and, of course, the representation of violence.

These are plays by a generation of British playwrights

from the First Wave of social realism, generically known as
the «angry young men» and the so-called Second Wave of
playwrights from the 1960s. In their own way, each of them
responded to the profound changes in political, civic, social
and artistic geometry caused by the Second World War.

They are also plays that share a «kitchen sink sensitivity»
reflected in empathy for the hard life of the working class
designed to paint a sufficiently worthy, objective portrait of
their daily lives for the audience to draw the conclusions
necessary to change the world.

The representation of violence is one of the most
expressive features of works from this period. And it can be
classified in different types. The plays often represent bodily
violence, violence of war or verbal violence. However, the
most distinctive type of the representation of violence in this
period is the systemic violence: perpetrated on individuals
and certain social, occupational or age classes by the powers-
that-be, the dominant social forces, historical circumstances
or other factors that do not involve direct acts of aggression. The representation of systemic violence would include issues such as marginalisation based on gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, class or geographical origins. It is easy to understand that there is nothing spectacular about these manifestations. On the contrary, they reflect ordinary, institutionalised behaviour that are so normal that they do not come across as a threat or an invasion.

In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Slavoj Žižek refers to three types of violence. Firstly, there is subjective violence, «just the most visible portion of a triumvirate» (Žižek, 2008: 1). Then there are two types of objective violence: symbolic, which is «embodied in language and its forms» and systemic «or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems» (*ibidem*).

When we talk of systemic violence we mean violence that is subtly and invisibly committed on individuals by institutions or historical circumstances, in which there appears to be no visible perpetrator. According to Žižek, this form of objective violence took a new form under capitalism. The systemic violence of capitalism «is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their «evil» intentions, but is purely «objective», systemic, anonymous» (*ibidem*, 11). These reasons are even more pressing if we understand that, after the war, the «capitalist way» became much more aggressive in dominating the western way of life in a debate with particularly fracturing effects on the Anglo-Saxon left wings – the ideology of almost all the playwrights in question.

Because of the subterranean nature of this type of violence, we might say that it could be present in any writings. But British realist drama leaves an impressive trail of violence. The most unfailing characteristic of *Saint’s Day* by John Whiting, a play that involves fatal shootings, hangings and fires, is the unnamed violence that permeates the whole script. Whiting works violence with particular care and in harmony with his time. The inability to explain the nature of
or reason for deaths caused by soldiers or especially the change in the behaviour of Robert Procathren, a pacifist intellectual who turns into a bloodthirsty, lunatic gang leader, helps to underscore the «absurdity» of society as a whole. In spite of all the explicit violence and although Saint’s Day is one of the plays that most clearly portrays the climate immediately after the war, the unnamed endemic violence is the most threatening. It has to do essentially with post-war traumas, the climate of the Cold War and the workings of a capitalist consumer society.

In Saint’s Day, the action centres on a family of artists who drop out of society and serves as a pretext for exploring a very daunting idea. What happens if (violent) habits acquired during the war continue in peace time? What can prevent violence that is considered normal, acceptable and legitimate in wartime from coming back in times of peace? Rather than a play that is alienated from post-war issues and hidden in its own referential labyrinth, Saint’s Day is haunted by them. It is haunted by the fear of imminent destruction, gratuitous violence and particularly a feeling of the uselessness of the arts, as symbolised in the isolation of the Southman family.

This idea underlies many works besides Saint’s Day. It is structural in Saved by Edward Bond, where, although the characters get involved in the most heinous acts of violence (there is an often-quoted scene in which a baby is stoned), the most expressive violence in the play is that which is not even mentioned. None of the characters are able to explain why they live the way they do. Or rather, the author does not allow them to say why, thereby more pungently underscoring the economic and social, and also ontological and systemic crisis that they were all experiencing. The indifference that all the characters show to the violence around them, to the rift in the most elementary ties of brotherhood and solidarity, to the dissolution of bonds of affection in exchanges of interests, all this was much more violent than even the most explicit scenes of violence. This was the way to denounce the
oppression that the voracious consumer society of the 1950s imposed and point out the «schizophrenia» between affluence and austerity, ostentation and ruins that characterised British society after the Second World War.

The same logic seems to inhabit *Afore Night Come* by David Rudkin. Violence emerges suddenly and disproportionately, as if the characters can no longer stand the pressure on them. The title expresses this tension: «Six hundred bloody boxes to fill afore night come» (Rudkin, 2001: 29), accuses Spens. Pear picking work exerts constant pressure on the characters. The level of violence used in Rudkin’s play arises inadvertently. It is no surprise that the workers are violent against Roche, a sensitive student. What is surprising is the degree of violence that they use, pushing Roche’s murder in the cloudy realms of ritual and making it more symbolic than real.

As in Whiting, the violence is innocently sadistic. While the murder is the play’s most shocking scene (he is drawn and quartered), the true violence is that hidden behind everyday behaviour regarded as acceptable and ordinary. The play is full of homophobic, racist and xenophobic references. There is constant tension between the community of pear pickers and the newcomers that is not only reflected in violent acts, but also in words and behaviours that seem innocuous but perpetuate the cycle of violence. What Rudkin seems to be saying is that without the collective ritualisation of violence in an act of sacrifice, it will continue to increase to intolerable levels. On the other hand, he also implies that in order to prevent violence we must find its roots and change systemic behaviours before they cause explosions, which are harder to control.

The same theory seems to permeate Brendan Behan’s play, *The Quare Fellow*. All the inmates seem to demand a normal life in prison. The crimes that put them there do not seem important enough to be a structural part of the narrative. They are inmates because at one time or other they were unable to respond normally to systemic violence and
used uncontrollable violence. But they are also in prison because this is the way that Behan found to construct a metaphor to address the post-war world. It was a world in which everyone was an inmate, subject to the arbitrariness of institutions, be they police or government, or less visible ones, such as a strict, conservative moral code that had to be followed and that clashes with the experiences of the majority of the population.

The institutional sacrifice, which is the death sentence carried out on the «quare fellow» is merely a substitute for the ritualistic sacrifices of primitive societies. Both sacrifices therefore seem to be the exact measure needed to everything to continue to exist and for the communities in question (rural workers and inmates) to survive. When all is said and done, however, what these plays suggest is that, as violence has become a part of many people’s everyday lives in an almost banal way, we have to find organised social mechanisms to expiate this violence. Otherwise it will be brutal, disorganised and uncontrollable.

The starting point for Sergeant Musgrave’s Dance is precisely this. The violence that appears is so extreme that it redeems all other (systemic) violence. This starting is paradoxical, however. The army, which is used to combat, is conducting a campaign for peace using a radical act of violence (murdering twenty-five villagers to avenge the deaths of five enemy soldiers, who in turn had been killed as a reprisal for the death of another soldier). In order to put an end to this arithmetic of death, they propose a collective sacrifice, responding with extreme violence to the trivialisation of violence, i.e. systemic violence. Arden’s play, an ambiguous manifesto about war, calls out for peace but uses techniques of war, thereby emphasising the brutalisation and dehumanisation of society. But Arden takes care to complicate the equation by setting the drama in a mining village where the miners are on strike. The politicians are quick to support the soldiers thinking that they are there on
a recruitment drive. What seems obvious is that the establishment (here government and army) tend to draw close and become accomplices.

The play that most directly addresses the trauma of war is *Dingo* by Charles Wood. Here the author voices the popular sentiment that war is pointless and is waged out of interests than the public cannot grasp. While this issue is timeless, bringing it up in Britain after the Second World War is wounding the pride of the winners and, even more importantly, of all those who fought and opening up old wounds. But Wood does so to deal with the trauma of war by creating a euphoric dysphoria on real battle conditions. Just like Arden, he stressed the dehumanisation and arbitrariness of military life, i.e. the systemic forces present in military designs (meaning the unspoken interests of the powers-that-be). What Wood does is «consistently destroy the myths of infallible heroism, involving historical figures like Winston Churchill» (Fowler & Lennard, 2006: 346). He presents a burlesque parody of war (Churchill is seen urinating at a military encampment, for example). Wood tests the limits of acceptance of current social standards with scenes that test the limits of realism. The audience hears Chalky White burning to death in an army tank and his charred body is then brought on stage as a ventriloquist’s dummy. Surpassing realism is therefore also surpassing the limits imposed by society and more effectively denounces the fragility of conduct imposed by the powers-that-be (the army in this case).

The playwright who was most radical in railing against the establishment was perhaps Harold Pinter. In his early plays, there are recurring characters responsible for maintaining the establishment. They are terrorists, torturers or executioners who have to abide by the requirements and routines of the powers-that-be. Given that these criteria and requirements are often extremely unreasonable, they frequently have to use violence (the less reasonable the criteria and requirements,
the greater the violence that has to be used). Pinter’s plays seem to be unusually prepared for addressing a world after the Holocaust, genocide and atom bomb, dominated by consumer, individualistic outlooks.

In *The Birthday Party* the torturers and interrogators (Goldberg and McCann) are just the visible face of the oppression of the characters. In Pinter, the institutions are often anonymous, which reinforces the threatening dimension of his plays. The interrogators’ questions and acts of violence cannot compare to the silent (systemic) violence against the daily lives of Petey and Meg, owners of the guesthouse, and Stanley, which pushes them into a discreet existence in a small seaside town far from everywhere.

As in Whiting and Arden, violence appears suddenly and disproportionately in Pinter’s plays. This is due a lot to the fact that the formal foundations of the script are those of realism, based on the principles of necessity, verisimilitude and a logic chain of events. Therefore, when violence appears suddenly, this shows the asymmetry between the systemic forces wielded by the establishment and possibilities of individual reactions, which are always disproportionate. In other words, if we do not look at the systemic reasons for violence, it always seems to appear unexpectedly. But what these plays seem to want to prove is exactly the opposite: that the unexpected would be for there to be no occasional explosions of violence in all areas of life, such as labour, family, sexual relations, etc.

While Wood and Pinter use dystopia, John Osborne uses cynicism and distrust. In *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy Porter, the central character, regrets that there are not more ideals worth fighting for, in one the play’s most quoted passages:

> There aren’t any good causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won’t be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It’ll just be for the Brave new-nothing-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus. (Osborne, 1996: 83)
Porter considered the Spanish Civil War to be the last true military campaign and last moment in history in which violence was justified because people were fighting for an honourable cause. His generation’s world was a world without ideological, gregarious, motivating causes. It was a world in which the crushing everyday routine prevented noble causes and greater purposes than mere subsistence or the accumulation possessions from arising. This subtraction from life, as the character sees it, occurs in different ways: in the newspapers, universities, family and government. And it operates in all spheres, in public and in private. As an individual is unable to escape from the actions of the establishment, one of his only options is to escape and set up private refuges. Examples of this are the small, unique family consisting of Jimmy, Alison and Cliff, who live together, or the game between Jimmy and Alison in which he is a bear and she is a squirrel and they create a kind of hideout and alternative life to the world around them.

This refusal to face the world appears in many forms in the playwriting of the period. Stanley (in *The Birthday Party*), Paul Southman (in *Saint’s Day*) and Roche (in *Afore Night Come*) are all artists or intellectuals who drop out of society. One of the most disturbing examples is Dave, from *Chicken Soup with Barley* and *I’m Talking about Jerusalem*. He goes from being a revolutionary fighter in the Spanish Civil War to a craftsman who runs away from the city’s factories and the progressive erosion of social ties. For Dave, socialism goes from being a universal cause and the reason for devoting his life to a greater ideal to a private, domestic cause that applies only to his family.

The systemic violence in Arnold Wesker’s trilogy is not only due to Dave’s disillusionment with socialism. As we have seen, this is one of the structural traits of many works, but Wesker’s is much more incisive. His are some of the only plays at the time in which we can see the forces and social movements involved in the broad class struggle. From
antifascist demonstrations in 1936 and the Spanish Civil War to the Second World War and the invasion of Hungary by Soviet troops, his writings accompany the way in which global political geometry moulds life, in its more domestic dimension in the Kahn family.

Everyone manages to resist with different degrees of resilience and evolve over the thirty years of the action in the trilogy. While they all give in to disillusion and weariness, they all keep up the hope of militant optimism and trust in the favourable outcome for the class struggle. In all, with the exception of Harry Kahn, the most discreet (and the least empathetic) character but the one who most clearly shows systemic forces, Harry’s physical and moral decline and fall into addiction and illness reflect people inability to stand up to the establishment.

On the other hand, in *Everything in the Garden*, Giles Cooper finds a way of having his characters confront systemic forces (here, as in Bond, regarded very clearly as the forces of capitalism). Cooper has people circling around middle class moral values. His middle-aged, middle-class couples resort to pimping and prostitution in order to satisfy their need to indulge in voracious consumerism and keep up appearances imposed by the cult of abundance. They are simultaneously victims and agents of systemic violence against all individuals. They act freely for their own reasons, but what they do shows an absence of any solutions for facing the world – full of violence (systemic, as we regard it here). Nonetheless, Cooper provides a kind of redemptive justification for all this. Leonie Pimosz, the «procurer of women» to work as prostitutes is a Polish refugee and Nazi concentration camp survivor. And this makes us reformulate the entire geometry of the play. It is as if the horrors of the Second World War constituted a world where society’s laws and values had ceased to make any kind of sense and obliged people to develop new ones.
The representation of this type of violence is a protest and shows these playwrights’ staunch determination not to take the situations that they portray as final and to address the real causes of violence. In this context, drama was a valid instrument for social transformation.

In *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2003), Terry Eagleton argues that the protagonist in modern tragedy aspires to individual freedom as opposed to all the rest, motivated by an insatiable *Eros*. Nonetheless, in order to guarantee this freedom, man has handed over the reins of his safety to the institutions that govern the extremes of late capitalism. And these institutions perversely associate individual freedom with chaos and mayhem. The modern tragic hero, crushed between his desire for freedom and the need for refuge from a threatening world, fights and suffers the sins of the capitalist world. Contemporary playwriting, from the seminal post-Second World War period, has no alternative but to portray the permanent war between *Eros* and individual liberty and the powers-that-be, a war that produces unspectacular but still no less real suffering. And it is no less violent, either.
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