

VIOLENCE AS A FORM OF REACTION OF THE CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY

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Abstract: This paper (part of the dissertation with the same title, defended at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters, Department of Cultural Studies, June 2022) will be dedicated to the pivotal theories of civil violence, in order to question its applicability in the context of contemporary Western societies, focusing on protest as a form of manifestation. Thus, we will use rationalist theories, which point to the rational decision of subjects to take part in collective movements, respectively to the possibility of monitoring their evolution through a mathematical calculation. We will continue with the irrationalist perspective of social contamination, whose development in the 20th century attributes a positive, socially progressive significance to collective movements. Subsequently, the possibility of a political consciousness as the driving force behind social movements will be questioned. In this regard, the views of Hannah Arendt and Charles Tilly are to be considered, which will be challenged through the Marxist perspective on the role of ideology in social movements, whose relevance today will be analysed through the Black Lives Matter movement. The motivation behind the Black Lives Matter protests is explained by the individualistic desire to belong to the community created (of which the subjects are unaware), which is in contrast to the stated aims of the movement, that reclaim a change in the lives of African-American people.

Keywords: *Protest; Violence; Community; Black Lives Matter; Ideology*

Individual vs. Common. Rationalist Theory and the Class Struggle Model

Beyond the fundamental distinction between rational choice theory and the class struggle model (as proposed by K. Marx), the one that proceeds from the antithesis between the common goal of a group and the individual interests of group members, a pertinent reason why the two theories are worth discussing in parallel is their derivation from the field of Economics. Rational choice theory

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arises, according to John Scott, under the effect of a widespread belief in the supremacy of economics among the social sciences, due to the individual's drive to make profit. This leads to the development of often predictable behavioural patterns.¹ Using concepts drawn from Economics, rationalist theories aim to elucidate complex social phenomena by analysing the behaviour and subjective motivations of the individuals involved.

One of the seminal works for this theory is Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action*. It is an approach that analyses groups and organisations, regardless of their nature, questioning the individual's motivation to belong to a group/community. According to M. Olson, behind the common goal that any group embraces, there are a number of individual goals that may be essentially different from the primordial-common motivation. It is obvious that this is the case, for example, when we think of the series of individual interests that lead people to join a political party, which do not correspond to the objective or ideology of the party in question.

However, M. Olson's central argument is different, and his explanation becomes really exciting when it is compared with the Marxist model of class struggle, by attempting to challenge the widespread belief in the rationality of Marxist theory that the proletarian class acts voluntarily and consciously to overcome its condition.² According to the author, the futility of this assumption can be proved by observing the behaviour of workers belonging to American trade unions who, contrary to their desire to belong, showed a clear lack of interest in actually getting involved in the activities in question. Their reasons are related to the failure of a single actor to contribute significantly to the overall goal of the group to which s/he belongs. Being aware of this incapacity, a non-negative term, the worker focuses on his or her individual interests, which depend solely on his/her own actions, without actively trying to achieve a common aim. M. Olson's argument is also addressed in the case of states which, without any form of coercion to pay taxes, cannot, even by means of nationalist propaganda, persuade their citizens to pay out of a sense of contributing to a common goal.³ The plea therefore calls for a distinct approach to K. Marx's theory, according to which its failure is not imputed to a naive belief in the ability of a class to act rationally on behalf of a common interest. On the contrary, it confirms that it is more rational for each individual to act in his own interest and not in the name of an entire class.

M. Olson likewise discusses Lenin's contribution to the Marxist theory, which changes the fundamentally theoretical perspective into a practical approach to the question, thus recognising the impossible task of the proletarian class to organise a triumphant revolutionary movement by its own efforts.⁴ In Lenin's

¹ John Scott, "Rational choice theory", in Gary Browning, Abigail Halcli, Frank Webster, *Understanding Contemporary Society*, Sage Publications Ltd, London, 2000, p. 126.

² Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 104-105.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁴ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *What is to be done*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm>, accessed on 05.01.2022.

view, the masses must play a secondary role, being encouraged to participate in the revolutionary event by the propaganda of a small group of genuine revolutionaries who will devote their whole lives to the revolution.⁵

However, M. Olson's argument is misplaced in relation to the novelty Lenin brought to the theory. For Lenin, the reason why the proletarian class cannot organise a genuine revolution is not related to a lack of interest in a common goal, which would take second place to individual interests. Lenin's argument continues the Marxist line of thought through the historical perspective of the Hegelian tradition. Thus, he states that there can be no genuine socialist consciousness among the workers. Through their own efforts they can only develop a trade union consciousness. Membership becomes sufficient to act against employers and to pressure governments to pass labour legislation, but not to act on behalf of a socialist revolution. At that point the socialist theory was completely foreign to them.

Therefore, in Lenin's perspective the proletarian class is the captive subject of a historical determinism, in whose case M. Olson's rationalist argument cannot be applied. On the contrary, the state of collective unrest to which the masses of workers are to be brought by means of propaganda rather crosses over with the irrationalist theories of collective behaviour.

The arguments against Olson's theory are manifold, and some of them are even put forward by theorists who propose a different approach to the rationalist perspective of individual behaviour. One reference is James DeNardo, who applies a mathematical model to explain the behaviour of individuals in a group. Unlike M. Olson, whose analysis focuses too little on violence *per se*, J. DeNardo's work centres on forms of rebellion and protest, as suggested by the subtitle: *Power in Numbers. The Political Strategy of Protest and Rebellion*. The term strategy becomes a key element in J. DeNardo's theory, as the approach underpins the rationality of collective action.

The free-rider problem that M. Olson points out as inevitable, when some members of a group understand that they can enjoy the benefits that membership offers them, even without actively contributing to the group, is for J. DeNardo an argument that can be dismantled by the actual engagement of citizens, regardless of time or space, in protests and forms of rebellion. If they perceived the individual involvement as irrational, with all the consequences and costs it entails, this approach would not consider the political preferences of the individuals involved, according to J. DeNardo.⁶

What really distinguishes M. Olson's theory, and confirms its reductionist character, is his refusal to consider personal beliefs (political or religious), unfairly labelled as irrational, as a reasonable justification for collective action.⁷ J. DeNardo's

⁵ *Idem*, *Urgent tasks of our movement*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1900/nov/tasks.htm>, accessed on 05.01.2022.

⁶ James DeNardo, *Power in Numbers. The Political Strategy of Protest and Rebellion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985, p. 54.

⁷ Mancur Olson, *quoted work*, p. 14.

arguments against this assumption proceed from the idea that any involvement in collective action by individuals is wrongly judged to be irrational. However, action in the name of abstract ideas can be categorised as rational by means of a series of elements that J. DeNardo analyses, such as the structure and strategy of the movements in question.

He measures the level of involvement of those acting out of abstract convictions by the ideological splits that emerged after K. Marx in the Communist Party.⁸ The famous dispute between revolutionaries and reformists (revisionists) led to the articulation of different strategies that had as a common goal the implementation of the communist system, but by different routes. Eduard Bernstein's vision, which distanced itself from the revolutionary model proposed by K. Marx, by envisaging a series of progressive reforms to improve the situation of the workers in such a way that a violent revolution would no longer be useful, is rejected by those who remain faithful to the revolution. At issue are figures such as Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, who argued for the need for a radical break, designed to wrest power from the bourgeois class, which would not willingly surrender it.

The model proposed by J. DeNardo is therefore supported by a calculation based on the way in which forms of rebellion evolve towards the final objective, hence the rationality of movements whose evolution can be predicted logically and mathematically. The question of the accuracy of such a model is of little interest to the present study, since the debate about how a revolution *per se* evolves (what percentage of it can be attributed to a long-calculated strategy – the 'Lenin model' – and how much of it is the subject of a spontaneous evolution of crowd behaviour – the 'French Revolution model') does not explore the willingness of individuals to participate in the process itself. M. Olson's focus on the individual and his/her aspirations is not present in J. DeNardo's theory, which is centred on the exploration of emblematic-revolutionary figures, those who propose complex models of action and revolutionary strategies.

However, what is of interest in J. DeNardo's theory is the problem of repression, addressed in the proposed potential-mathematical analysis. According to it, the effects of repression are only accepted if the potential benefits of protests outweigh them. The question raised is how to measure these benefits, which are subjectively assessed. The distinction made between purists, those who act in the name of ideology, and pragmatists, as two aspects that in our view are not mutually exclusive, exposes the shortcomings of the theory.⁹ Those who act in the name of an ideology are also those who can accept extreme forms of repression, even to the point of self-sacrifice. But in this case, can we still discuss the potential benefits of their actions? The most eloquent example of this is the case of the Russian terrorist groups, analysed at length in J. DeNardo's work, in which the young Narodniks chose the path of Siberia, without being certain of the purpose for which they were so eager to sacrifice their own lives. The ultimate goal, the murder of Tsar Alexander II, did not foresee any tangible radical change, a fact

⁸ James DeNardo, *quoted work*, pp. 140-143.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

that is now historically validated. What followed this monumental victory was the establishment of a much more conservative and authoritarian regime, designed to brutally suppress any form of rebellion, under Tsar Alexander III. Their goal was not linked to any revolutionary programme towards social restructuring, and their attempts to incite the peasants to revolt against their own conditions failed miserably. But these impediments, as well as the brutality of the forms of repression, did not stop them from acting.¹⁰

We might infer that the potential benefits were satisfying enough for these young people to go so far as self-sacrifice. It is tempting to equate these benefits with the project of a new Russia, but it is hard to believe that killing the Tsar would have led to a state of unrest that would have allowed a mass movement of rebellion. Was the Russian Empire ready at that time for a radical change of regime? History has provided a negative answer, but the motivation of those who were executed for Tsaricide remains a paradox in itself. It would be futile to ascribe their sacrifice to a purist view that inevitably associates the benefits of action with an ideal to be achieved, as J. DeNardo insists. The complexity of the motivations behind these actions has been discussed at length, and a stage conclusion, useful to the present work, is to acknowledge and accept the existence of a paradox that cannot be overcome. This occurs when the ultimate goal of collective action goes beyond mathematical calculation, to the extent that the motivation behind it does not coincide with what they apparently want to achieve. The objective, the potential benefits, to put it in J. DeNardo's terms, are not really the driving force of the movement, and this will be explained by reference to the *Black Lives Matter* movement.

The link between action and objective, simplistic in its essence, but addressed by both M. Olson and J. DeNardo, is rejected by Mark Granovetter, another proponent of rationalism, in his attempt to explain the participation of individuals in collective movements. The author proposes a threshold model to overcome the paradox that arises when the outcome of collective action does not correspond to the individual interests of the participants. The central idea of the model proposed by M. Granovetter is that the motivation of individuals to join a collective action is correlated with the actual participation of other people. Thus, each individual has a certain threshold, which is equivalent to the required number of people taking part in the revolt so that individual would join as well. M. Granovetter also points out that there are individuals who have a below zero threshold, who are not conditioned by the participation of other people, but are the ones who start the movements.¹¹ The theory thus aims to individualise those involved, but it is flawed by the absence of an analysis of the actual motivation of people to join the revolt, as James B. Rule points out in *Theories of Collective Violence*.¹² Beyond the social contagion effect, despite the mathematical model

¹⁰ Avraham Yarmolinsky, *Road to Revolution*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1986, pp. 189-196.

¹¹ Mark Granovetter, "Threshold Models of Collective Behaviour", in *American Journal of Sociology*, 1978, vol. 83, No. 6, p. 1422, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/226707>, accessed on 05.01.2022.

¹² James B. Rule, *Theories of Civil Violence*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1988, p. 44.

of analysing the likelihood of an individual joining a collective movement, M. Granovetter does not take into account ideological motivations or the social and political significance of the movements..

To understand the role of such movements requires an overview of social change in a particular time and space, to which the subjects in question are also fundamentally linked. The difference in perspective is marked, in the theories of violence, by the terms macro (theories that focus on the structure of society and the state) and micro (theories that look for the causes of conflict in human nature).¹³ Because of its individualistic approach, the rational choice theory belongs in the micro sphere, while the class struggle theory, with its complex perspective on social change in a specific time and space, offers a macro view of the problem.

I stated at the beginning of this paper the common – economic – origin of the two theories, the first adopting the economic model as a model of analysis and the second explaining class conflict through an economic justification of the relationship between the forces of production and the means of production. The Marxist theory of class struggle is emblematic of the theories of violence, which are often grouped together under the umbrella term of non-Marxist theories to distinguish them from the model proposed by K. Marx. Its influence persists even today, in a context of social classes that no longer find the landmarks of a stable identity.

In Marx's view, social violence conceals an antagonism between distinct classes which, throughout history, have been in a continuous struggle, at times visible and at times hidden, marking a permanent conflict between the oppressors and the oppressed.¹⁴ Bourgeois society has not been able to break up this conflict; on the contrary, the success of the bourgeois class has been to seize power from the aristocratic class, becoming itself the new oppressor class. The revolutionary character of the bourgeoisie consisted in dismantling idyllic relations, removing a veil of religious and political beliefs designed to conceal exploitation, which now became "open, shameless, direct and brutal".¹⁵ The development of the world market and industry led to the disappearance of the middle classes, the so-called petty bourgeois who, compared to the big industrial owners, had to give up their own aspirations and join the ever-expanding proletarian class.

While class conflict has been present throughout several eras, what made it particular in the 19th century was the level of exploitation of the proletarian class. The bourgeoisie was unable to provide the minimum living for the proletariat, forcing it to progressively decline under the conditions of its own class. Poverty and the alienating condition of the worker marked the decline of the bourgeoisie, the coming of a moment perceived as a historical necessity, when they will be overthrown by a violent revolution organised by the proletarian class.¹⁶ Emancipation is about awareness of one's own condition through the

¹³ Earl Conteh Morgan, *Collective Political Violence*, Routledge, New York, 2004, pp. 12-13.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, "Manifestul Partidului Comunist", in *Opere. Volumul IV*, Editura Politica Publishing House, Bucharest, 1958, p. 466.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 469.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, "On Revolution", in Saul K. Padover, *The Karl Marx Library. Volume I*, McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, p. 23.

development of the so-called class consciousness. In this manner, the proletarian class could see behind the ideological veil that held it captive in this stalemate of its own evolution.

Beyond the historical necessity of the communist revolution, which took place in a space without the dominance of the declining bourgeoisie, what emerges from the Marxist model and was further developed by Louis Althusser is the concept of ideology. According to K. Marx, the ideas of the ruling class are the dominant ones in any era, the economically powerful class being also the intellectually dominant one.¹⁷

L. Althusser defines ideology as a ruling force that manages to keep the relations of production in place. The reproduction of labour-power, unlike the reproduction of the means of production, takes place outside the production enterprise in multiple forms. One obvious means is the wage; another is the guarantee of perpetuation of the labour power needed for production. Education prepares children to take part in production in the future, and through education the necessary skills are passed on to train them to play their part in the production scenario; the system is reproduced through ideology.¹⁸ This instils a certain perspective, a vision of reality, necessary to legitimise the system, making opposition, the refusal to take part in the system of production in the future unlikely, whether it concerns the dominated class or the ruling class.

The ideological state apparatus, whose unity is given by the ideology of the ruling class, thus becomes responsible for the reproduction of the relations of production. In the Middle Ages, the main ideological apparatus was the Church.¹⁹ Following the seizure of power by the bourgeois class from the aristocracy (the French example), or the cooperation of the two ruling classes (the English case), the prevailing ideological state apparatus changed from political to educational. The school-family relationship replaces the dominant relationship of the Middle Ages, church-family. During the educational process, pupils will move in a particular direction which will indicate their place in the system of production. Thus, the ideology that will be imposed on them will be the one specific to the role they occupy in the production system. This can be summed up by the clear distinction between the dominated and the dominant. Therefore, in L. Althusser's view, the role of the ideological state apparatus is to reproduce the relations of production, the capitalist relations of exploitation.

Beyond a natural questioning of the validity of the model today, in the context of the fluidisation of classes in developed societies, which gives individuals freedom of movement from one class to another, Marxist theory continues to arouse interest. The concept of ideology accentuates the complexity of this theory, yet it links in an often-unfavourable way the materialisation of conflict, generated by the antagonism between classes, to a way out of ideology. Violence is understood as an overcoming of the illusory veil that always hides a relationship of domination.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, "The German Ideology", in David McLellan, *Karl Marx. Selected Writings*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 192.

¹⁸ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in Slavoj Žižek, *Mapping Ideology*, Verso, London, 1994, pp. 103-104.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

Hence the positive perspective attributed to the revolutionary movement, the significance of which is obviously not analysed with the objectivity that the theorists of violence will do in later centuries. Until then, the nineteenth century remains an open field of debate on the relevance of social movements.

*From Contagion to Social Disruption.
The Irrationalist Theory of Collective Behaviour*

The irrationalist doctrine developed in the 19th century under the influence of the widespread social movements triggered by the European nationalist wave. There were thus voices of the intellectual elite warning of the imminent threat that the whole of European civilisation was in danger of self-destruction under its own emancipatory efforts.²⁰ An almost apocalyptic fear is reflected in the works of those who developed this doctrine: Gabriel Tarde, Scipio Sighele and Gustave Le Bon.

In *Psychologie des foules*, G. Le Bon defines the psychology of the crowd as the expression of a collective mind of the crowd, whose characteristics do not consider the particularities of individuals taken separately. On the contrary, the collective mind of the crowd is the expression of what individuals have in common, namely the elements that are specific to the unconscious. Hence the conclusion that G. Le Bon draws decisively from the very first pages of his work: "The decisions affecting matters of general interest come to by an assembly of men of distinction, but specialists in different walks of life, are not sensibly superior to the decisions that would be adopted by a gathering of imbeciles."²¹

For G. Le Bon, the concern with the psychology/of the masses takes the form of an attempt to illustrate certain essential features of this distinct entity, often capable of abominable acts such as murder, but also of excessive dedication, ready to reach the point of self-sacrifice. It is unnecessary to mention the derogatory view that emerges from G. Le Bon's entire analysis. The action of the masses is portrayed as the result of a social contagion, often driven by illusory impulses and beliefs, which have nothing of the significance with which Marx prefigured the communist revolution.

Although radical and reductionist in its profoundly elitist character, the irrationalist doctrine succeeded in being the inspiration for the future American school that would develop in the first decades of the 20th century, the so-called theory of collective behaviour. From the very name given to the theory, one can infer that a change of perspective is being operated, this time through a detached analysis of what is objectively called collective behaviour, and not mass, crowd, a term designed to homogenise the subjects in question. Robert E. Park is the leading exponent of this American school of thought and, although inspired by the irrationalist doctrine, he distinguishes himself from the classical theorists through a positive perspective on collective behaviour, which, in his view, can be seen as a transitional element.²²

²⁰ James B. Rule, *quoted work*, pp. 91-92.

²¹ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, The Macmillan Co., New York, 1896, p. 10.

²² James B. Rule, *quoted work*, p. 97.

To define the concept of crowd, R. E. Park proceeds from what he finds common to all classical theorists of the irrationalist doctrine, namely that the crowd is not defined by spatial characteristics, but by psychological ones.²³ In other words, an assemblage of people becomes a crowd if it meets certain psychological conditions.

The author compares the behaviour of animals that learn mainly by imitation, passing on traditions from one generation to the next in a similar way to humans. But it would be simplistic to reduce the process of imitation to this mechanism alone. It should also be noted how individuals influence each other when they belong to a group through a series of reflexes and sensory-motor cues.²⁴ By repetition, these become part of the individual character and become a means by which the group can exert coercion on its members.

Objects in the external world have a double meaning, the first is related to the senses and the second to ideas. Unlike animals, to whom the external world is shown through senses, for the individual the sensory world is seconded by the world of ideas. The inference here is an interesting one, because for R. E. Park, the realm of ideas is the same for each person, whereas perception is a matter of subjective factors. The distinction between his vision and what G. Le Bon proposes as a means of merging individuals, the elements of the unconscious which are revealed by joining the group, is obvious. Hence, R. E. Park makes the distinction between the collective behaviour of humans and that of animals. In the case of animals, they respond similarly to the same stimuli, and this kind of reciprocal interaction also occurs among humans, through the ceremonial aspects that are present in everyday life and are inherited. However, due to the motivation of individuals to act for their own benefit, towards a particular singular goal, humans can obey group customs and still achieve their particular goals.

According to R. E. Park, the crowd is distinct from other human-specific forms of collective behaviour because it is welcomed and acknowledged as a form of transition. Relevance is attributed to the way in which it succeeds other groups out of a desire to create something distinct, separating itself from previous forms. The crowd is distinct from other groups, not due to the existence of a general will, as this also exists within a society, but rather because the collective will is not yet the norm, only a preliminary stage. The crowd has no self-awareness, defining itself only through mutual interaction.²⁵

We can compare his perspective with Walter Benjamin's attempt to describe a singular event designed to disrupt the existing order, without promising anything in return, by the concept of divine violence. The uncertainty of such a moment, which seems to go beyond the singular wills of the individuals concerned, is suggested by the adjective 'divine', being attributed to a higher force the will of which is unknown.²⁶

²³ Robert E. Park, *The Crowd and The Public*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1972, p. 22.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 79-80.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", in Peter Demetz, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Schocken Books, New York, 1978, pp. 277-300.

Thus, the crowd, as understood by R. E. Park, is endowed with a beneficial, transitory character. It is not guided by a norm, but is a creator of norms, acquiring the character of a social movement, which was rejected by the theorists of the irrationalist doctrine. However, through these defining elements, an almost idealistic vision is attributed to the concept of the crowd, without considering the real crowds of people who do not act with the aim of shaping new norms. They become the expression of an ideology of which they are unaware, but for whose sake they act, without a precise objective.

Another theory that derives from the irrationalist doctrine, in the interest it attributes to collective behaviour, is the one proposed by Neil J. Smelser. The author's intention is to challenge the belief in mass psychology, which is defined by its promiscuity and unpredictability, by proposing a complex model for analysing collective action. Neil J. Smelser develops the so-called value-added theory, discussing a series of essential elements of a social movement, to highlight five distinct forms of its manifestation: the panic, the craze, the hostile outburst, the norm-oriented movement and the value-oriented movement.²⁷ The author identifies certain stages that reveal the evolution of social movements, from the environment favourable to the development of a tension (strain) to the growth and spread of a generalised belief, which leads to general mobilisation and the operation itself when precipitating factors appear.

The key concept of Neil J. Smelser's theory is that of strain, which can take various forms, in a desire to cover the widest possible range of reasons, causes, which can generate collective movements.²⁸ By considering the characteristics of the movements, we can deduce the type of tensions in question. For example, in the case of a movement oriented towards norms, the tension may be linked to the discontent generated by the enactment of a particular law, which entails the disappointment generated by the corruption of the ruling class. Hence, precipitating factors may consist of single events, degenerating into a scandal/crisis, designed to reiterate and provoke mobilisation and, ultimately, collective action.

The complexity of the theory, which distinguishes between collective behaviour whose causes and manifestations are based on unconscious impulses and reactions (the panic) and behaviours that take the form of social movements (motivated by certain values), becomes obvious. However, it is difficult to integrate collective actions into a narrow template, since the causes that can give rise to them may be more complex or lacking in precise identification data. If the perspective that associates the French Revolution with a value-oriented movement still persists, for Hannah Arendt, the deprivation of the masses of a decent living was the real motivation and the driving force of the whole revolution. For K. Marx, it was the product of the bourgeois class's desire to gain power from the aristocratic class. Transcending the analysis of the successive stages in the development of social movements, the real motivation for their outbreak requires a broader analysis.

²⁷ Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior*, The Free Press, New York, 1965, p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 47-48.

Violence and Political Action

In *The Changing Place of Collective Violence*, Charles Tilly marks the fundamental change in social movements that came with modernity, citing 19th-century France as a point of reference. If up to that point collective movements had been deprived of their political character, modernity brings this new perspective, in which subjects are given a political consciousness as a form and formula for action.

The rupture occurs when collective movements are no longer the expression of a dissatisfaction generated by a shortage, a void that needs to be filled by expressing a general desire, but a disapproval of power and the way it rules. On this theoretical basis, Ch. Tilly brings up the food riots in France, which continued until the mid-nineteenth century, despite the increase in supply at the turn of the century. But those people did not revolt because of shortages, because "starvation is silent".²⁹ What gradually changed was the motivation behind the riots, as people were unhappy that local authorities could not meet their duty to ensure a supply of food at fair prices, and were disillusioned with a regime that let such things happen.

Ch. Tilly's perspective is designed to counter two trends he considers to be dominant in the understanding of violence and social change. The first links structural changes, such as the massive migration that takes place in modernity from rural to urban areas, to a form of alienation that facilitates the outbreak of violent rebellion. The second concerns the growth of the mass media, which propagate ideologies and generate aspirations to which government systems are not prepared to respond.³⁰

But the obvious question, following this sharp separation, is why is it not possible for all these three causes to be found in the corpus of a social movement? The alienation generated by such phenomena as uprooting can lead to a form of general dissatisfaction with the new living conditions, which is backed up by the spread of ideas designed to reveal certain shortcomings of the system of which the subjects were not previously aware. The two reasons, which can easily coexist, cause people to question the system of government and engage in collective mobilisation. The rationality that Ch. Tilly associates with political action excludes, in a reductionist manner, the whole series of determining factors that need to be considered when analysing a social movement.

The idealisation of collective action, through a justification of violence in favour of the beneficial changes it can bring about, is a Marxist legacy. As we have analysed in the previous theories, the only one that attributes a political role to subjects is the class struggle theory. Yet what K. Marx did not overlook was the role of ideology in shaping mass consciousness.

Ideology as a decisive factor in collective action becomes the key point of the theory of relative deprivation, as proposed by Ted R. Gurr. He defines relative

²⁹ Charles Tilly, "The Changing Place of Collective Violence", in Melvin Richter, *Essays in Theory and History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1970, p. 149.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

deprivation as “actors’ perception of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities”.³¹ Value expectations refer to the goods and conditions of life that subjects believe they are entitled to have, and value capabilities refer to the goods and conditions of life that they believe they are able to obtain and maintain. In other words, the moment they become aware that they are deprived of certain benefits that they feel entitled to possess and obtain, collective mobilisation and action takes place, and this imbalance can take three distinct forms. The first relates to a decline in people’s living conditions while their expectations remain the same, the second involves an increase in aspirations under the presence of external factors that determine it, and the third form represents both an increase in aspirations and a decrease in living conditions. While the first may correspond to periods of famine, in which the population perceives a discrepancy between the former and the present standard of living, the second is exemplified by T. R. Gurr by reference to the situation in which one group notices the benefits enjoyed by another. The discrepancies created by the Industrial Revolution, between groups who benefited from this economic growth and groups for whom the standard of living remained the same, may be a possible example.³² Finally, the third form of imbalance corresponds to periods of progressive growth, followed by a decline, which is out of step with people’s expectations, which continue to rise.

The focus of this theory is, as can be seen from the above, the subjects’ perception of external conditions, and not the assessment of conditions in their objective form. It is therefore not enough for a population to be starving for it to rise up against the ruling class, if there are ideological mechanisms that keep intact the relationship that develops between power and its subjects.

Political consciousness *per se*, which Ch. Tilly promotes, whereby individuals appear to be committed to a collective project, to which they consciously and assumedly bend, is the nostalgic ideal of modern democracy, long outdated in postmodernity. As Robert Dahl observes, democracy understood as the unanimous participation of individuals in a state is no longer an ideal in a world in which governing has become a complex science, for which most people do not have the time and resources.³³ But certain collective actions, erroneously understood as political movements, continue to arouse the fascination of people who, inspired by a revolutionary tradition, continue to embrace a misunderstood political role.

In her attempt to outline the revolutionary tradition specific to European civilisation, Hannah Arendt regards the Hegelian conception of history as a crucial factor in the way this tradition is understood and put into practice.³⁴ She describes the French Revolution as an expression of the Hegelian theory that the actors of a revolution take a secondary role to the historical forces that predetermine the evolution and outcome of the movement. They lose their role as agents and become spectators who passively watch the drama of history. This assumed

³¹ Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1970, p. 24.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 52.

³³ Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, Yale University Press, Yale, 1989, pp. 62-63.

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Penguin Books, London, 1990, p. 52.

political consciousness, which can be deduced from Ch. Tilly also appears in Hannah Arendt, as the ideal of a genuine revolution, the motivation behind being value-related.

Historical necessity, perceived as a form of passivity, whereby individuals become subjects of an automatism of random events, is seconded, in H. Arendt's view, by the recurrent necessity that dominates the whole human life, namely physical needs.³⁵ These two perspectives are intertwined in an organic vision, the result of which was a revolution based on necessity. Poverty is a dehumanising force, in that it shackles man to bodily needs. When the poor stepped onto the historical stage of the French Revolution, they brought with them necessity, which replaced the value of freedom, understood as the imperative of any genuine revolution. The goal of the revolution thus became the happiness of the majority and not the reign of freedom. What should have become common to the majority, the surplus understood as the political will that fulfil the human being is replaced by the necessary requirements of an animal life.

This perspective of necessity is adopted, according to H. Arendt, by K. Marx, who turns poverty into a political rather than a natural phenomenon. Poverty becomes the effect of the exploitation of a ruling class: "For if the condition of misery – which by definition never can produce 'free-minded people' because it is the condition of being bound to necessity – was to generate revolutions instead of sending them to their doom, it was necessary to translate economic conditions into political factors and to explain them in political terms."³⁶

Hence, it is argued that the aim of the revolution is no longer the liberation of man *per se* from the rule of the other, but the overcoming of poverty for the sake of abundance. Mercy, as an engine of action, arises from K. Marx's theory and persists in modernity. The only revolution that H. Arendt considers to be genuine is the American Revolution, whose aim was to achieve freedom and not to overcome the precarious living conditions of the masses.

The ideological motivation that she promotes as the foundation for political movement is today becoming the basis for cultural justifications of collective movements, which are misunderstood as political. While for K. Marx the political dimension was fundamentally linked to the economic sphere, in the desire to overcome the ideological vision that neglects the conditions of people's lives, once this link is lost, the cultural dimension, through its abstract values, becomes the destabilising factor of the political axis.

Protest as a Form of Response to Violence

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, an African-American man, was killed in Minneapolis by police officer Derek Chauvin after he knelt on Floyd's neck for nearly eight minutes, despite Floyd's repeated pleas and the interventions of

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

witnesses who signalled several times that he could not breathe.³⁷ The video, which went viral on social media, sparked a mass mobilisation, whose resonance has gone beyond national borders to become a global phenomenon, a particular case meant to mirror a universal problem. The universality of the event lies in the growing widespread feeling of injustice of a system that acts violently against minorities, disadvantaged by a long tradition of discrimination. A tradition that has become systemic and is characterised by an ongoing linearity that runs counter to the “ideological propaganda” that portrays American society as post-racial (post-racism). This belief lies at the foundation of the Black Lives Matter movement, which has also embraced the event in question, linking it to its own discursive sphere. The Black Lives Matter discourse is fostered both on the streets and on social media.

The beginnings of the movement can be traced, as its founders reiterate, to 2013, when seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, an African-American boy, was shot by police officer George Zimmerman in a neighbourhood in Sanford, Florida. Martin was returning home from a non-stop store on the evening of February 26, while Zimmerman was in charge of supervising the neighbourhood in question. The altercation between the two began as a result of Zimmerman’s concern about Martin, the officer having previously reported Martin’s suspicious behaviour.³⁸ Martin’s death was justified by Zimmerman on the basis of stand-your-ground law, which allows a person to act violently when they feel their life is in danger.³⁹ The officer’s medical report attested to his testimony, and he was diagnosed with multiple injuries the day after the incident. The acquittal sparked a major wave of discontent that would lay the groundwork for the Black Lives Matter movement.

On March 21, the street movement gained momentum with the Million Hoodie March event in New York, highlighting two items that have become symbols of the protest, the hoodie and the bag of Skittles that Martin was carrying at the time of the murder.⁴⁰ The movement spread to cities across the country, but the protest, in its widespread and violent form, erupted around another major event in the evolution of the Black Lives Matter movement: the death of Michael Brown.

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, another eighteen-year-old African-American youth, was shot to death by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, following a suspected robbery, for which Brown along with his friend were found guilty that morning.⁴¹ The confrontation between the two was

³⁷ Yamiche Alcindor, Amna Nawaz, “What we know about George Floyd’s death in Minneapolis police custody”, in *PBS Newshour*, 29 May 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/what-we-know-about-george-floyds-death-in-minneapolis-police-custody>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

³⁸ Vivian Kuo, “Florida’s teen shooting by watchman questioned”, in *CNN US*, 12 March 2012, https://archive.ph/20130119100258/http://articles.cnn.com/2012-03-12/justice/justice_florida-teen-shot_1_martin-family-gated-community-dispatcher, accessed on 01.05.2022.

³⁹ Mark Randall, Hendrick DeBoer, “The Castle Doctrine and Stand-Your-Ground Law”, 24 April 2012, <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2012/rpt/2012-R-0172.htm>, accessed on 1.05.2022.

⁴⁰ Reis Thebault, “Trayvon Martin’s death set off a movement that shaped a decade’s defining moments”, in *The Washington Post*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/02/25/trayvon-martins-death-set-off-movement-that-shaped-decades-defining-moments/>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

⁴¹ Thomas Barrabi, “Michael Brown robbed convenience store, stole cigarillos before Darren Wilson shooting”, in *International Business Times*, 25 November 2014, <https://www.ibtimes.com/michael-brown-robbed-convenience-store-stole-cigarillos-darren-wilson-shooting-dorian-1729359>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

distinctly described by Brown's friend Johnson, who witnessed the entire scene, and by Officer Wilson. According to Wilson, it was Brown who repeatedly punched him through the open window of the car, in his attempt to get his gun, which he had previously pointed at the two. The first shots fired were inside the car, continuing later in response to Brown's aggressive behaviour.⁴² In the second version, by Johnson, it was Wilson who attacked Brown, despite Brown raising his hands in surrender.⁴³

The protests, which followed the decision to acquit Wilson of any guilt, were marked by widespread violence and chaos, which have come to be known as the Ferguson unrest or Ferguson riot. The violent actions of the protesters, which ranged from smashing store windows to burning down shops, were followed by brutal police intervention, escalating into a conflict in which several people were arrested, and others were injured, including police officers.⁴⁴ The connection between the intensity of the protests sparked by Brown's death and the Trayvon Martin incident is not accidental. In the wake of the decision to acquit Wilson, widespread outrage has been transposed into the terms proposed by the Black Lives Matter movement. In other words, the conditions of Brown's death, distinct from Martin's, were related to the same sphere of discourse. The violence and the excess that characterised the Ferguson protests can be explained by the association of the previous event, unanimously outraging the protesters, who decided to identify with the ideology of the movement.

The same phenomenon occurred in the case of George Floyd's death, an event that succeeded in broadening the international outlook of the movement, with numerous expressions of solidarity across the globe. These are intended to support the Black Lives Matter initiative, while also targeting their own disadvantaged local minorities.

Forty-six-year-old George Floyd was arrested by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis on suspicion of paying with a counterfeit bill at a convenience store. Floyd's refusal to enter the police car, under the pretext of suffering from claustrophobia, led to Chauvin restraining him and using excessive force by kneeling for eight minutes on the victim's neck, a practice often used by American police officers.⁴⁵ Floyd's death, unlike previous cases, is distinguished both by the manner in which the entire event unfolded and the subsequent decision to sentence Chauvin to twenty-two years and six months in prison in April 2021.⁴⁶

⁴² Joe Tacopino, "Darren Wilson on why he shot Michael Brown", in *New York Post*, 25 November 2014, <https://nypost.com/2014/11/25/officer-darren-wilson-says-michael-brown-taunted-him/>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

⁴³ Carol D. Leonnig, Kimberly Kindy, Joel Achenbach, "Darren Wilson's first job was on a troubled police force disbanded by authorities", in *The Washington Post*, 23 August 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/darren-wilsons-first-job-was-on-a-troubled-police-force-disbanded-by-authorities/2014/08/23/1ac796f0-2a45-11e4-8593-da634b334390_story.html, accessed on 01.05.2022.

⁴⁴ "Number of people arrested, injured continues to rise in Ferguson", in *KMOV.COM*, 14 August, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141202024549/http://www.kmov.com/special-coverage-001/Reports-Ferguson-protests-turn-violent-270697451.html>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

⁴⁵ Yamiche Alcindor, Amna Nawaz, "What we know about George Floyd's death in Minneapolis police custody", in *PBS NEWSHOUR*, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/what-we-know-about-george-floyds-death-in-minneapolis-police-custody>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

⁴⁶ David Remnick, "The significance of the Derek Chauvin verdict", in *The New Yorker*, 20 April 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-significance-of-the-derek-chauvin-verdict>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

His sentencing sparked a wave of general ecstasy, and was perceived as a victory for the movement in its declared fight against white supremacy and violence directed at black people.

Protests sparked by Floyd's death began within a few days after the event, spreading from Minneapolis to at least one hundred and forty other American cities, while the National Guard was mobilised in twenty-one states. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets to protest against the injustice committed by Chauvin, degenerating into successive nights of general unrest, looting, vandalism, and gunfire, the targets of which were often either random or misguided. Louisville's police chief was removed from office after a restaurant owner was shot dead by police officers firing chaotically at protesters. Their violent actions were at odds even with what both George Floyd and Michael Brown's families would have wanted, that the injustice committed be peacefully resolved.⁴⁷ However, the protests are not only meant to be understood as the consequence of singular and independent events, but they were perceived by those who joined the Black Lives Matter movement as a necessary form of violence, a response to the state violence.

We reaffirm the theoretical evidence that there is an indispensable relationship between protester violence and American police violence, one that suggests a cause-and-effect relationship. In this particular case, this assumption becomes a false interpretation of events. The distinction between subjective and objective violence, proposed by Slavoj Žižek and exemplified by cases distinct from the American movements, cannot be a viable approach to interpret the violence regarding the Black Lives Matter movement.⁴⁸ If objective violence, unlike its subjective counterpart, has no concrete agent to which acts of violence can be attributed and is generated by capitalist ideology per se, the cause-effect relationship between the two often remains invisible. In the case of the Black Lives Matter movement, the violence exerted by the state is expressed through state police, who uses violent measures against the African-American population. This is considered an expression of systemic racism, perceived by the movement's followers as a form of institutionalised violence.

The relationship between direct violence and structural, institutionalised violence is theorised by J. Galtung, who also advances the concept of cultural violence as a form of propagating structural violence.⁴⁹ In the same manner, in P. Bourdieu's view, direct violence is supported by its symbolic form, which is culturally sedimented and becomes institutionalised.⁵⁰ This approach to violence, which goes beyond the traditional boundaries of understanding of the concept, acquiring a loose applicability to a very broad sphere of analysis, is present in the discourse of the Black Lives Matter movement. This discourse is centred on the concept of systemic racism, designed to highlight the institutionalised and, by default, linear nature of racism in American history.

⁴⁷ Derrick Bryson Taylor, "George Floyd Protests; A Timeline", in *The New York Times*, 2 June 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200602235547/https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

⁴⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence. Six Sideways Reflections*, Picador, New York, 2008, pp. 12-15.

⁴⁹ Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence", in *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 291-305, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/423472>, accessed on 18.02.2022.

⁵⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001, pp. 8-9.

The discursive forms and formulas of the Black Lives Matter movement can be evaluated through the discourse theory proposed by M. Foucault, to highlight the social impact of a discourse that is wrongly perceived to be linear, yet is marked by moments of discontinuity.⁵¹ In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault proposes a model for analysing a discourse by identifying moments of rupture, with event value, which change its evolution in a given historical time and space.⁵² These changes in discourse can be ascribed to a continuous dialogue, which enables a mutual “contamination” of several types of discourse that circulate unhindered in the epoch.⁵³ Thus, American racial discourse has been marked by multiple historical moments that have fundamentally changed its character, in contrast to the unbroken linearity advocated by the proponents of systemic racism.

The sociologist Joe R. Feagin defines systemic racism as “a material, social and ideological reality and is indeed systemic, which means that the racist reality is manifested in all major institutions”⁵⁴, in an attempt to debunk a phenomenon that has been going on unchallenged for centuries. In the very same way, the concepts of structural and symbolic violence proposed by J. Galtung and P. Bourdieu can also be understood as systemic, and it is difficult to become aware of this type of violence as it becomes embedded in the collective mentality, manifesting itself in ordinary everyday practices. This flawed understanding of the American racial discourse, by constantly referring to the point of origin as the landmark of the problem, which dominates the entire evolution of the discourse, is meant to reiterate a collective guilt to which the white American population must constantly relate.

Yet the American racial discourse is marked by events meant to change its evolutionary order.

In this regard, we briefly recall a series of events in American history that represent decisive steps in the desire to overcome a racially unjust reality. These would be the American Civil War, the Civil Rights Act of 1964⁵⁵, aimed at eliminating racial segregation and special requirements for exercising the right to vote, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968⁵⁶, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of race or nationality, regarding the sale or rental of properties. These moments were complemented by the interaction with other types of discourses.

In this respect, the crucial impact of the ideological change that the traditional American parties underwent in the 1960s, in relation to racial discourse, needs to be analysed. The influence of the period’s social movements and external

⁵¹ Sofia Vlad, *Identity politics as a subject of Foucauldian discourse. Black Lives Matter*, paper presented at Bucharest Student Letters Colloquia, 8th edition, 29 October 2021.

⁵² Michel, Foucault, *Arheologia cunoașterii*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 54.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, *Ordinea discursului*, Eurosong & Book, Bucharest, 1998, p. 53.

⁵⁴ Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: roots, current realities, and future reparations*, Routledge, New York, 2014, p. XIV.

⁵⁵ “Civil Rights Act (1964)”, in *National Archives*, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

⁵⁶ “Civil Rights Act of 1968”, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-343/pdf/COMPS-343.pdf>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

tensions, such as the crises generated by the Cold War, through ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union, had a critical impact on the ideology of the ruling Democratic Party. It had to assume a pro-African-American stance, despite an earlier Republican tradition associated with this perspective.⁵⁷ The destabilisation of the centrist position of the Democratic Party led the Republican Party to adopt a predominantly conservative view. It pursued the so-called Southern strategy, meant to gain the votes of the states of the formerly segregated South. The ideological shift, which was in fact mainly racially motivated, driven by the social movements of those years, also changed the racial discourse. It was subsequently guided by the antagonism between the doctrines of the two parties, with the intention of filtering the whole of American reality through the lens of a specific ideology. In this way, the racial discourse was modified by and through interaction with other kinds of discourse. The aspects that previously defined this discourse continue to be used, but no longer correspond to present reality. We offer as an example the terms used in the Black Lives Matter movement's manifesto, such as 'white supremacy' or 'black liberation', the use of which can no longer be rationally justified in today's American society, in which the racial issue has evolved considerably.⁵⁸

The above-mentioned arguments counter the systematic link between the *Black Lives Matter* movement's violence and the supposed institutionalised violence, that systemic racism is propagating. This approach is meant to connect all the violent acts against the people of colour to the same discourse. From such a perspective, the movement regards the economic, political and social issues that can apply to the whole American society, without being racially based, as a cultural phenomenon.

According to Francis Fukuyama, this paradigm shift is a characteristic of the 21st century, which tends to replace the economic perspective of the previous century with a cultural-identity perspective. Whereas in the 20th century the American left was focused on the issue of workers and labour unions, and the right wanted to expand the private domain, today both of them are concerned with the issue of identity. The Democratic Party is focused on the fate of the disadvantaged minorities, whose interests have been neglected for centuries, while the Republican Party defends the interests of the American middle-class people, who are feeling neglected.⁵⁹

The antagonism between the economic and the cultural dimension is consequently what distinguishes the theories of violence proposed by K. Marx and P. Bourdieu.⁶⁰ While both capture the systemic means by which violence is propagated and its role in maintaining relations of domination, for the French

⁵⁷ Doug McAdam, Karina Kloos, *Deeply divided: racial politics and social movements in Postwar America*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 21.

⁵⁸ "Black Lives Matter. About", <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

⁵⁹ Francis Fukuyama, "Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy", in *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2018, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2018-08-14/against-identity-politics-tribalism-francis-fukuyama>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

⁶⁰ Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, "Manifestul Partidului Comunist", in *Opere. Volumul IV*, Editura Politica Publishing House, Bucharest, 1958, p. 466.

sociologist the social and the cultural factors take precedence over the economic. This distinction is blurred in contemporary times, and identity movements such as Black Lives Matter are ascribed political and economic values, despite the prevailing cultural element. The consequences of this are manifold, the most obvious being the movement's failure to achieve real political and social change, especially for the African-American population.

In the essay "The Panthers Can't Save Us Now. Anti-policing Struggles and the Limits of Black Power", Cedric Johnson criticises the exceptional character attributed to the African-American population, black exceptionalism, by the American political elite during the 1960s. According to him, black militancy was centred on a discourse designed to highlight the problem of unemployment and the isolation of the African-American population in the well-known ghettos, in contrast to the white American population. This activism has often been associated, in a misleading way, with a movement from below, while it actually started from above, by the will of the American political elites. The initiative undertaken by President Lyndon Johnson, who in 1964 declared the so-called war on poverty, can be a relevant example in this sense.

Thus, before the slogan Black Power was popularised, political elites were outlining their own vision of African American emancipation, pointing to class inequality, but in terms of ethno-cultural exceptionalism.⁶¹ Hence there were liberal voices who argued that the poverty of the Afro-American population, in contrast to the economic prosperity enjoyed by the white population, could be motivated by institutionalised racism and the supposed cultural 'pathology' of the poor black population. The "culture of poverty" was frequently used to reinforce the exceptional character of African-Americans, an emphasis designed to highlight the cultural dimension at the expense of the class division.

The positive impact of this perspective has manifested by shaping a consciousness of belonging to the black community among African Americans. It thus led to a form of ethnic emancipation, but this was accompanied by the perpetuation of a false belief that racial and political identity were synonymous.⁶² The consequence at the time was the promotion of a reductionist, racially based vision designed to reiterate the division between the white and the coloured populations at the expense of the unity needed for real change. This phenomenon continues today through Black Lives Matter.

Due to its cultural character, which brings it into the sphere of identity politics, the movement becomes a product of the neoliberal society it denounces. This is at odds with the conception put forward by authors such as Barbara Ransby, in *Making All Black Lives Matter*, who prefigures the movement as a supposedly declared struggle against the liberal state. This paradox can also be captured from the author's exposition, which identifies feminist and queer movements as precursors. She also mentions the groups that came into being with the emergence

⁶¹ Cedric Johnson, *The Panthers Can't Save Us Now. Anti-policing Struggles and the Limits of Black Power*, Verso, London, 2022, p. 31.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 36.

of Black Lives Matter, in an attempt to highlight their kinship: Million Hoodies Movement for Justice, Dream Defenders and Black Youth Project 100.⁶³

The Dream Defenders was the first major group to emerge in response to the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012, whose feminist influence can be inferred from its so-called “manifesto”. Thus, we highlight the following: “We believe that liberation means the destruction of the Capitalist and Imperialist economic and political systems, as well as Patriarchy”.⁶⁴ Beyond the questionable plausibility of such resolutions, which seek to destroy an entire economic system *per se*, the ludicrousness of the statement is generated by the very juxtaposition of the last feminist resolution, which stands out for its oddity in the given context. With this reference, the cultural dimension is once again reiterated. The author also points to the movement’s initiatives regarding internal issues such as homophobic or sexist tendencies.

Black Youth Project 100 was initiated by African-American activist Cathy Cohen, University Professor at the University of Chicago School of Political Science. She organised a meeting of other black activists in Chicago to work together on a common project, aimed at changing the poor condition of African Americans. The timing of the meeting and the outcome of Officer George Zimmerman’s trial overlapped, and mutual dissatisfaction with the decision to acquit Zimmerman led to the group’s establishment. This testifies to the influence of feminist and queer perspectives on its character.⁶⁵

Along with the movements mentioned above, the Black Lives Matter movement was born at the initiative of the activist Alicia Garza. Her letter of gratitude to the African-American population was written in the form of a text that was shared on social media, along with the hashtag that went viral. Garza, assisted by feminist activists Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors, laid the groundwork for it, thus building the feminist component, strongly linked to the aforementioned particularity.⁶⁶ According to its own manifesto-like description, Black Lives Matter distinguishes itself from other African-American emancipation movements because of its interest in the feminine, trans and queer elements that have been neglected in the past. At their expense have been promoted the rights and liberties of straight, African-American men.⁶⁷ However, the distinction between Black Lives Matter and the social movements of the 1960s is much more complex. It is often overlooked by those who tend to give credit to the movement through a tradition, from whose corpus it does not (in fact!) subtract its ideology. By integrating itself into the sphere of identity politics, Black Lives Matter becomes a product of the present moment, of the paradigm shift that F. Fukuyama captured in his article.

⁶³ Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century*, University of California Press, Oakland, 2018, p. 30.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

⁶⁶ David Ryder, “The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter first appears, sparking a movement”, in *History*, 2013, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/blacklivesmatter-hashtag-first-appears-facebook-sparking-a-movement>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

⁶⁷ “Black Lives Matter. Her Story”, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

Thus, the violence specific to the movement needs to be analysed from a distinct perspective than the one which highlights it as beneficial, as a natural response to state violence, capable of bringing real change for the African-American population. Beyond the constant reaffirmation of issues justified in racial lines, the movement's resolutions and goals are not strongly articulated, making it unlikely to achieve what the social movements of the 1960s had achieved.

Another dimension of violence as an integral part of contemporary democratic society will be highlighted based on the perspective proposed by J. Keane.⁶⁸ If modernity was the historical period that reintegrated physical violence into its social structures through sophisticated mechanisms of extermination, thus marking the paradigm shift in the use and perception of violence in time and space, institutionalised violence as a mechanism of repression must be questioned in the contemporary world. Today, not every act of civil disobedience is a reaction to a form of injustice perpetuated by the state apparatus. The antagonism between the two forces is therefore no longer a standard one. In contemporary times, the democratic state tolerates civic disobedience up to the point when it becomes harmful to the parties not involved in the act. In other words, peaceful protests enjoy a high degree of legitimacy as long as they do not degenerate into violence and anarchy. However, the reason why the state does not tolerate violent protests is not simply a question of authority. The theory of violence proposed by R. P. Wolff raises the question of who does or does not have the authority that gives them the right to use violence.⁶⁹ Thus, this dimension inevitably links back to the forms of violence that J. Keane ascribes to the regimes of the last century. To the extent that there is always the possibility that the state will exploit the individual, and therefore scepticism is the solution, by filtering external reality through a constant antagonism between state and individual. R. P. Wolff's theory can be either a lesson of the totalitarian experience or a post-traumatic effect of it.

Shaping the state as a repressive mechanism, within the limits of M. Foucault's Panopticon, gives a false meaning to the protests' violence by becoming a useful way to combat a fundamentally evil state whose rigid mechanisms do not allow peaceful change. As a carceral space in which the individual is subject to constant surveillance, the Panopticon represents the dystopian reality of the last century. However, as the means of surveillance have been refined by technological progress, this image remains relevant to many even nowadays.⁷⁰ Against this oppressive force that constrains the individual, placing him under constant scrutiny, violence becomes the only means of liberation. It is not surprising in this respect that we find in the Black Lives Matter movement's manifesto terms such as black liberation, which inevitably evoke a prison dimension, an exaggerated metaphor for today's reality.

⁶⁸ John Keane, *Violence and Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 56.

⁶⁹ Robert Paul Wolff, "On Violence", in *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 66, No. 19, pp. 601-616, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2024177>, accessed on 18.02.2022.

⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, *A supraveghea și a pedepsii. Nașterea închisorii*, Paralela 45 Publishing House, Pitești, 2005, p. 265.

The protesters' individual motivation is outlined along the lines of a potential social change that violent actions can generate. The authorities' intolerance of violent protests is unanimously perceived as a form of vulnerability of the state in the face of these actions and the changes they may bring about. However, as we have previously exposed, the gains of the movement are minimal, but the myth of violence with a regenerative role still continues to operate alongside the nostalgic images of revolutionary moments.

Authors such as Johanna C. Luttrell analyses the brutal police intervention in street demonstrations associated with the Black Lives Matter movement as a response to the threat they pose. She associates them with a literary tradition of mourning as a factor for change.⁷¹ By using the figure of Antigone, whose mourning is an affront against a despotic government, thus highlighting the classic conflict between the laws of citizenship and moral obligation, the author intends to give the ritual act of mourning the value of an event in itself, through its concrete social and political effects. However, beyond the inappropriate romanticizing of real circumstances, the protests are not, as we have pointed out, an act of commemoration of those who lost their lives at the hands of the American police. Rather, they are a presumed means of countering state violence with violence. In this sense, it is not a real threat to order (the established power), but an attack against order in its basic sense.

H. Arendt's concept of power and violence, which defines power as the product of a group of individuals joining together towards an ultimate goal, fits within the same paradigm.⁷² Protest thus becomes a way of reiterating their collective power in opposition to the state. Civil disobedience is a means by which an active minority manages to influence the majority, but cultural movements such as Black Lives Matter find a false justification in this tradition of civil disobedience, which H. Arendt attributes to the American space.⁷³ If the concept needs to be defined in relation to a group, the act of protest being distinct from an individual exercise of conscience, Black Lives Matter cannot fit into the tradition of civil disobedience because of its individualistic character. In this sense, we will understand the violence on the basis of the individual motivation of those involved to take part in a collective movement, out of a desire to belong to the community created.

Barbara Ransby examines the impact of Black Lives Matter on the individual lives of people who have chosen to join the movement, out of a desire to reiterate a relationship, now frequently discussed, between the political and the personal. In this respect, we are given concrete examples, such as the case of a woman who, due to Black Lives Matter, accepted her queer side, which she had kept hidden all her life, and then chose another activist associated with the movement as her partner.⁷⁴ The individual cases begin with personal traumas, overcome by

⁷¹ Johanna C. Luttrell, *White People and Black Lives Matter; Ignorance, Empathy, and Justice*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2019, pp. 75-80.

⁷² Hannah Arendt, "Despre violență", in *Crizele Republicii*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 153.

⁷³ *Idem*, "Nesupunerea civică", in *Crizele Republicii*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 99.

⁷⁴ Barbara Ransby, *quoted work*, p. 54.

being part of the movement, and culminate in social and status changes, including giving up mediocre jobs to become full-time activists. The invasion of the public space by the private space is extolled by B. Ransby as an asset of the movement rather than as a flawed association that gives an individualistic character to a supposedly collective initiative.

The public/private distinction, along the lines proposed by H. Arendt⁷⁵, is also addressed by J. C. Luttrell, who argues in favour of the role that Black Lives Matter (which she associates with past movements for the rights of black people!) deserves to occupy on the public stage.⁷⁶ The author's argument portrays the movement as political action, in the sense proposed by H. Arendt, whose concrete outcome should not be questioned, since it is characterised by the absolute novelty of the event that generates change. However, as we have previously illustrated, through the concrete examples of groups that are related both ideologically and in terms of temporal coordinates to Black Lives Matter, the movement is not unique in the American space. Its advancement as a political action is what Alain Badiou calls the portrayal of a false event as an Event with a capital letter, one that is individualised by its singularity and its potential to address the universal.⁷⁷ By reducing the Afro-American population to a racially grounded identity, the movement is meant, as Slavoj Žižek observes, to permanently divide the black population from the white population, addressing an economic problem, the impact of which reverberates throughout American society, in racially particular terms.⁷⁸

The need for constant reaffirmation of the roles that the two 'camps' hold, and the white population's tendency to appropriate the suffering of the African-American people, as J. C. Luttrell emphasises⁷⁹, become a strong argument to underline the individualistic motivation behind the protests. They occur out of a desire of belonging to a community created by adhering to the values of the movement. The phenomenon of appropriation is not incidental, but becomes a means by which the white individual can redefine their identity in relation to the movement.

The current questioning of the individual's subject value becomes relevant in the context of social movements, as a reaction to the ideological exhaustion of political identity in the twentieth century, as Alain Touraine observes, and of economic identity in the contemporary world.⁸⁰ This is to be understood in the context of the relationship between the 'same' and the 'other', as proposed by E. Lévinas⁸¹ in which the 'other' (here, with reference to the African-American population) needs to be invested with the status of a subject in its own right in relation to the same (the white population).

⁷⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Condiția umană*, Idea Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, p. 73.

⁷⁶ Johanna C. Luttrell, *quoted work*, p. 104.

⁷⁷ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay of the Understanding of Evil*, Verso, London, 2001, pp. 72-74.

⁷⁸ Slavoj Žižek, "Black Lives Matter and Identity Politics [Transcript]", in "Scraps from the loft", <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/politics/slavoj-zizek-black-lives-matter-identity-politics/>, accessed on 01.05.2022.

⁷⁹ Johanna C. Luttrell, *quoted work*, p. 69.

⁸⁰ Alain Touraine, "The Subject Is Coming Back", in *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 2005, pp. 199-209, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20059683>, accessed on 19.05.2022.

⁸¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalitate și Infinit*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 1999.

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