POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA AS A COMMUNICATIVE ACTION: A PASTORAL-SYSTEMIC VIEW

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Abstract

For the last couple of years, and especially prior to the elections during April 1994, South African society has been suffering because of ongoing violence. What could be the reasons for this phenomenon? Was it orchestrated or did it happen spontaneously? Is the miraculous and unexpected dawning of peace perhaps explained by the functional role which a 'symptom' may play within a system? The theory of functional symptoms states that the solution doesn't lie in identifying and eliminating the 'cause' of the symptom, but resides rather in the changing of the organisational patterns which necessitate the symptom. If the symptom is removed without adjusting the organisation, another symptom will emanate. A whole system should rather be changed to such an extent that the symptom becomes superfluous and disappears. From an 'ecosystemic' point of departure, the aim of any intervention would be formulated as follows: To change the context and by doing so to provide difference and thus open up possibilities for creative change. In this paper a paradigm shift is advocated which means a change in perspective from a linear view of the situation to a more holistic, circular, and especially an ecosystemic point of view.

Introduction

For the last couple of years, and especially prior to the elections during April 1994, South African society has been suffering because of ongoing violence. In spite of the endeavours of leaders of major political parties to persuade their followers to reject violence it continued, but then it suddenly stopped at the time of the elections and thereafter. What could be the reasons for this phenomenon? Was it orchestrated or did it happen spontaneously? Is the miraculous and unexpected dawning of peace perhaps explained by the *functional* role which a '*symptom*' may play within a system?

The theory of *functional symptoms* states that the solution doesn't lie in identifying and eliminating the 'cause' of the symptom, but resides rather in the changing of the organisational patterns which necessitate the symptom. If the symptom is removed without adjusting the organisation, another symptom will emanate. A whole system should rather be changed to such an extent that the symptom becomes superfluous and disappears. From an 'ecosystemic' point of departure, the aim of any intervention would be formulated as follows: *To change the context and by doing so to provide difference and thus open up possibilities for creative change.*

In this article I want to advocate a paradigm shift from a linear view of the situation to a more holistic, circular, and especially an ecosystemic point of view. What is needed for a continued peaceful development in South Africa, is a new epistemology - a way of knowing, thinking, and deciding, an epistomology which will not allow us to *blame*, but to rather *remember*, *forgive* and *reframe* in terms of the whole system.

1. The Current Situation

Prior to the elections, South Africa was regarded as one of the most violent countries in the world. During and after the elections a dramatic and remarkable change took place. The decrease in political violence was so sudden that it took everyone by surprise. This phenomenon is still the subject of discussion and interpretations are being put forward by researchers, the media, and by the public. The following statistics, provided by the

SA Police, indicate the difference between incidents of violence during the first two months after the elections, in comparison to the same months of the previous year:

Table 1: Incidents according to regions

REGION	MAY-JUNE 1993	MAY-JUNE 1994
Western Cape	676	57
Northern Cape	300	27
Orange Free State	169	41
Eastern Cape	491	108
Natal	302	231
Eastern Transvaal	144	15
Far Northern Tvl	9	4
Northern Transvaal	107	44
Witwatersrand	876	213
Western Transvaal	183	31
TOTAL	3257	771

Table 2: Number of Fatalities

REGION	MAY-JUNE 1993	MAY-JUNE 1994
Western Cape	35	0
Northern Cape	1	0
Orange Free State	5	4
Eastern Cape	7	3
Natal	187	136
Eastern Transvaal	7	2
Far Northern Tvl	0	1
Northern Transvaal	10	7
Witwatersrand	282	97
Western Transvaal	14	0
TOTAL	548	250

The ecosystemic approach to explain the phenomenon of violence, advocated in this article, is endorsed by these statistics. The general decline in political violence during and after the elections, underscores the viewpoint that violence should be seen as a *communicative action* and should therefore be interpreted in an ecosystemic way.
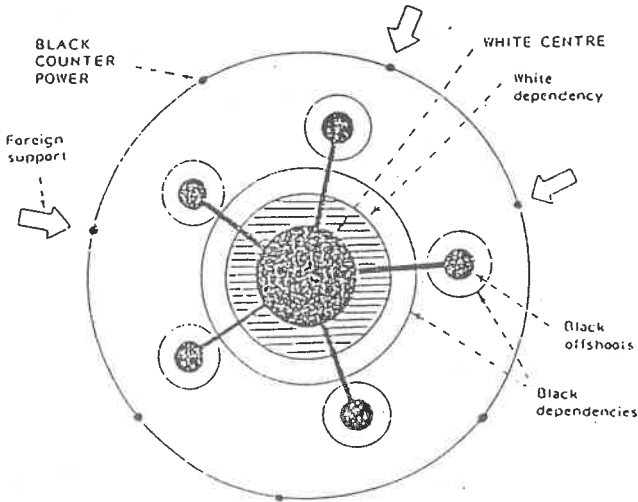
2. An ecosystemic View of Violence

Instead of identifying an institution or a group of people as the culprit(s) for the violence in South Africa, this article will try to reason from another paradigm, namely from an ecosystemic perspective. By following this approach, one runs the risk of being blamed for not taking the responsibility for the situation. This risk is even greater when the perspective is put forward by someone, like myself, who would be identified as a member of the privileged group which was a part of the previous oppressive system: this not because of active involvement and agreement, but merely because one was born that side of the divide. Allan Boesak once said:

> *...covering up evil, people try to deny their co-responsibility in the oppression of others. They hide behind the 'system', blaming the 'structures' as if these existed on their own and as if these structures in society were not created and maintained by people.*

However, when I am talking of 'structures and patterns', I am not referring to those political structures which were put in place and deliberately maintained by a government, but I am referring to the inherent structure and organisational pattern of society as a whole - the South African ecosystem. Moreover, the motivation for adopting this perspective is not to exonerate from blame , but to create a better understanding of the forces at work in our society. Mosala evidences this understanding for a complicated ecology of different subsystems within the whole of our societal system, when he says:

> *...our alienation is not alienation from White people first and foremost; our alienation is from our land, our cattle, our labour which is objectified in industrial machines and technological instrumentation. Our reconciliation with White people will follow from our reconciliation with our fundamental means of livelihood.*

Other researchers in the past also tried to create a more comprehensive understanding. These attempts should be acknowledged and the researchers should receive credit for them, but unfortunately they don't reason from an ecosystemic paradigm, and therefore still tend to use linear concepts. An example of this is the popular approach to look for a 'root cause'. Nürnberger's approach is a praiseworthy effort to create one 'model' out of the different subsystems in the country and thus provide his readers with a balanced outlook (see Figure 1 below). However, he doesn't really succeed in providing understanding of the communicative actions and patterns at work in South African society, because he does not employ an ecosystemic paradigm. He only construes a model with a central theme, namely *White power.*

3. Constructivism and Violence

Constructivism is a fundamental outflow of an ecosystemic epistemology and paradigm. According to the theory of constructivism an observer participates in the construction of what is observed. It constitutes a move from emphasising *observed* systems to emphasising *observing* systems.

By observing a system like South African society, with violence in mind, one is actively constructing a system which actually reveals more of oneself than of the system. A good example is from 'Derek Bauer's World':
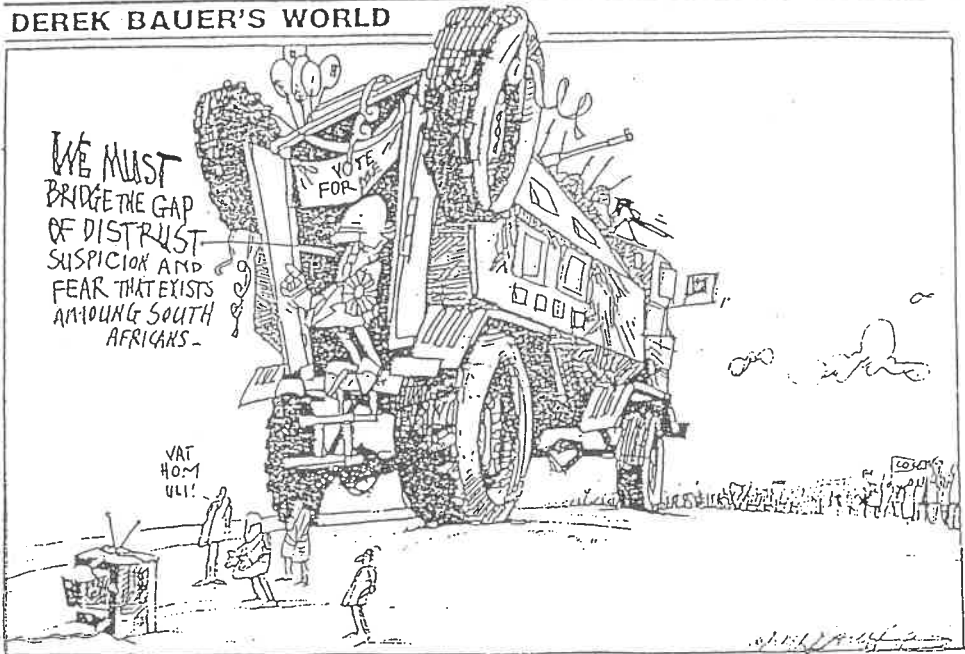
Like all pictures, this one is also a construct of what is observed by the artist. It is shaped by his perception. According to his portrayal, the 1989 situation of violence in South Africa was dominated by three large subsystems: the government structures, the 'struggle'-group (in the background), and the uninvolved, passive, rugby-viewing group (in front). Another artist would probably have portrayed the same situation in a different way.

Again, the same artist would most certainly depict the situation differently today. Since 1989 new aspects of the system of violence have emerged and what might have seemed to be only one subsystem, has since been differentiated into yet smaller parts. For instance the rivalry between political parties and/or ethnic groupings as one of the main reasons of violence, evolved into a much more visible phenomenon of the South African situation. In the post-election era, this is the only form of ongoing political violence, while the artist of our picture, did not or did not want to recognise that aspect in 1989.

Constructivism, according to the ecosystemic paradigm, means that the communicatory world is mentally determined. Meaning and value is attributed to an object or event not on account of the object or event as such, but on account of the meaning that a person attaches to it. The concepts used in this process (also the non-verbal images in the cartoon) are actually semantic frames that give meaning to political frames of reference.

This means that events are triggered by *difference* (as experienced and constructed by the different observers) rather than the way forces and impacts shove billiard balls around. This theory of *difference* is clearly described by Keeney and Ross with the metaphor of a party, the invited quests, and the hostess:

> *The invitation that you didn't receive in relation to the invitations your friends received (as well as to the invitation you thought you would receive) is a difference which can trigger your interaction with the party's hostess.*

4. Political Violence as a Communicative Event

Function within a communicative world refers to the mental process of differences triggering off communicative events. Political unrest and violence can be seen as communicative events. These events then function as news of difference, which triggers off new differences and thus form part of the 'cybernetic circuit as a recursive chain of transformed differences'

I suggest that violence should be defined in terms of power and its abuse. In doing so, one is constructing a picture of the South African situation. According to this construct, violence is not an end in itself, but rather a means of obtaining something (in this case, power). Violence is a means of communication and as such it is always functional. It is a means by which a system sustains itself in a meaningful way (according to its own perception).

This, in a sense complicated, construct can perhaps best be explained, by referring to Keeney's metaphor of the pianist:

> *Each sequent of depressing keys on the piano is modified according to the patterns of sound resulting from the previous sequent of depressing keys. This process represents a whole cybernetic circuit or system: music-ears-brain-muscle-piano-music. More specifically in terms of a circuit of differences: (difference in patterns of sound, i.e., 'music') - (difference in cochlear*

vibrations) - (difference in cortical activity) - (difference in muscles) - (difference in depressing keys on the piano) - (difference in patterns of sound). The idea, 'person playing a piano', represents the recursive looping of these transformed differences.

In this process, there is no beginning and no end. Any place on this circuit can be a beginning and an end. One may say: 'the piano appears to be playing her hands', another could say: 'she appears to be playing the piano'. The punctuation is always arbitrary.

Within this paradigm it is impossible to say what 'causes' the violence in a system. Let me try and explain by punctuating on the level of 'difference in muscles'. The different power-groups in a society can be seen as the different muscles of the body. When one muscle is activated with force, the result will be another kind of difference, 'in depressing keys on the piano'. In the case of violence, the 'depressing of keys' (events of violence) becomes destructive and the music thus becomes a painful sound, which again leads to 'difference in cortical activity', which means that on account of the painful music (results of violence), new decisions are being made by the control body of the system (the government and/or other power-based institution), which might lead to new music with more painful or less painful sounds.....

One can mark the cycle at the point of the painful sounds and then endeavour to convince people to make harmonious sounds, but what about the discomfort on account of muscles in disharmony, and all the other experiences of difference. Any demarcation can do and would probably provide a functional punctuation for the interpretation of the situation, but this would inevitably lead to the various differences.

To look at political violence from the perspective of power and the experience of power-difference, is only one way of constructivism, but to my mind a functional one. 'Powerlessness' then becomes the important term, used as a tool to observe and interpret political reality, whilst violence is seen as an act of communication in order to express a sense of powerlessness. Or again, according to the concept of Keeney: The difference which is experienced (observed) within the system and between subsystems, is a sense of powerlessness. Then violence is a way of expressing difference in interaction between subsystems. The 'party's hostess' (according to the first metaphor used above) is in this instance the government and political structures. Violent interaction is triggered off because of the perception of groups that they are being treated differently (not all were similarly invited to participate in the government). In the KwaZulu-Natal region it seems as if the violence is not directed towards the 'party's hostess', but towards the rival 'guest' who is perceived to be in a more favourable position at the 'party', and therefore the violence is continuing.

The efforts, so well known to us, to reduce violence by putting a pressure cap on the system, by introducing stronger measures and by using totalitarian political power, are limited and superficial 'solutions'. Attention should be given to the interactive pattern between subsystems (groups) in society, and therefore, the value that is given to subsystems and the differences which are experienced. If violence is a communicative event, repressing the violence without addressing the interactive pattern which facilitates violent behaviour, is of no use.

5. A pastoral-systemic solution

It is important to make a distinction between a balancing of power as a solution as is done by Nürnberger, on the one hand, and by a reframing of interaction patterns and subsystems on the other. The mere balancing of power between subsystems may be a sound political solution, but it may not be a sound *pastoral* solution. A balancing of power can be a common-sense solution, to be applauded by the church, but the church on the other hand, should try to achieve more than this. The task of the church is to reframe the situation in such a way that the result will be a new understanding and interpretation of the value of others and the significance of relations. To ask for reconciliation on the basis of give-and-take is most certainly not an evangelical solution. As the church, we have the obligation to reframe in such a way that it becomes possible for people to seek and to give forgiveness. That is something completely different from the balancing of power by means of give-and-take. The church should create a new kind of difference by helping its members to re-evaluate the other 'guests' at the 'party'. Only then can a true spirit of reconciliation be established.

What we experience now in South Africa, as I see it, is less violence (more harmonious sounds by the 'piano') as a result of less strain on the 'muscles' because of a difference in the difference between power-groups. This again results in more soothing sounds which again makes a difference in the experience of the difference between groups. After all the bitter experiences of the 'cycle of violence', we are now experiencing a cycle of non-violence (with exceptions in certain areas). Now is the time to tune the piano and to massage the muscles of the pianist. The Church can play a major role in stabilising the homeostasis of the system, in creating a situation where the strident and painful sounds of violence become unnecessary. The church can contribute to such a situation if it has the wisdom to understand and interpret the system as a whole and be prophetic yet without blaming the one or other group.

Ellul summarises the traditional position of Christians towards violence in three categories:

(1)   *compromise* and the accommodation of the use of power;

(2)   *nonviolence* and rejecting the use of power; and

(3)   *violence*, or the legitimisation of the use of compulsion under certain circumstances.

What I am proposing in this article is yet another way, a fourth way: an ecosystemic reframing in the light of the gospel[1]. In this way all three the categories of Ellul can be accommodated in a responsible way, but the emphasis is placed on reframing and therefore on a re-interpretation of the situation from a ecosystemic viewpoint. In this way we can make a responsible assessment without oversimplifying because of a

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1   This way is something different from the proposal by Guinness who also does not want to allow only one choice as a *modus operandi* for the Church:

Sometimes the Christian must have the courage to stand with the Establishment, speaking boldly to the radicals and pointing out the destructive and counterproductive nature of their violence. At other times he will stand as a co-belligerent with the radicals in their outrage and just demands for redress.

Guinness, O 1973. *The dust of death: A critique of the establishment and the counter culture and a proposal for a third way.* London: Intervarsity. 176.

linear approach. The Church should never be in a position: where it merely declares a person or a group guilty or not-guilty; where it justifies or rejects violence; where it compromises on the basis of a power balance. The gospel, like the ecosystemic paradigm, allows us and urges us to have a circular view and render a more balanced interpretation. This approach would put the Church into a situation where on the one hand violent acts would have to be rejected, but on the other hand, where the Church should show the courage to interpret and reframe what is happening. In doing so, the Church will be constructing a new reality, a reality where the system becomes one harmonious communicational event. In this way the Church is like a piano player. In order to contribute to a solution, the Church needs more than boldness; creativity is also needed. By promoting this paradigm, the Church can participate in the healing process in a creative yet biblical way.

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