Collective Empowerment Tested by Violence

71- 01/02/2024 ***“How can non-violent collective mobilizations such as protest marches, based on human values of equality and respect, degenerate into dangerous confrontations?”*** **question two researchers in social psychology, Sik Hung Ng et Michael J. Platow**[1]

Their question aligns perfectly with our reflection on empowerment. Indeed, pacifist empowerment is at the heart of theories of empowerment*, whether at an individual level, reclaiming control over one’s life and future, or collectively, gaining access to resources and decision-making organs.

At the origin of these commitments is a desire to no longer endure an unjust constraint or an oppressive status quo. From the “salt march**” (1930) to #MeToo and marginalized groups, emancipatory work generally unfolds without violence and follows a multi-stage process: a critical analysis of situations, the creation of a supportive peer group, the design of alternative solutions, and projects for transforming society. In this framework, the community is led to raise awareness of its cause, organizing campaigns to gain visibility. However, during these demonstrations, the social movement can escape the organizers. At that moment, everything quickly shifts. The path transforms into a war zone, clashes erupt, and establishments are vandalized. At the end of the battle, each camp counts its victims and martyrs. Hung Ng and Michael J. Platow sought to understand how to avoid escalation and, beyond that, the risk of destruction for both parties?

Social identity and normative behavior

To fuel their thinking, the authors drew on theories of

interpersonal aggression (DeWall and Chester, 2021; Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Finkel, 2014), works on intergroup cooperation and conflict (Reicher et al., 2010; Sherif, 1967; Turner et al., 1987), and micro-sociology studies by Collins (2013). In their literature review, they explain how the concepts of identity and self-categorization are constructed and interact. They emphasize that a strong social identity leads to pro or anti-violence normative behavior. However, social identities are fluid and can evolve depending on the context. Thus, when pacifist and activist groups participate in the same collective action and are treated the same way by the police, they collectively recategorize themselves under a new common identity, within a larger and possibly more inclusive and radical coalition. This results in stronger opposition, confirming police fears and exacerbating the power imbalance.

A desire to transform society: the political dimension of empowerment – ©Image by 51581 from Pixabay

Political recategorization

This recategorization takes place under a more political banner and highlights the relative dominance between power and the minority (Sidanius et al., 2004). The group then shifts from inhibition to disinhibition, from a defensive posture to offensive behaviors (Ng and Cram, 1988). As for positive feelings like excitement, and pride, associated with the concept of empowerment, they transform under pressure into

negative emotions associated with violence. This transformation occurs in conflict situations where fear and tensions are heightened. The fear of police repression is replaced by anger or disgust. The enemy is then perceived as an abstract entity: “the other,” their humanity denied, and their interchangeable members may be subjected to blind acts of violence (Haslam et al., 2008).

In this mass happening, **public** plays an essential role. In case of confrontation, spectators have the ability to prolong violence (by applauding), reduce it (by actively opposing the fight), or have little impact (by being indifferent) (Collins, 2013).
Another factor to consider is **spatial incursion** (Nassauer, 2021). Control of space is vital for the police maintaining order; any overflow calls for their intervention and will be punished by coercive and repressive measures.

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Non-violent collective action, a three-phase process.
First, a phase of instigation and impulse where forces present position themselves, between provocation and resistance,
Next comes an intermediate phase characterized by a propensity for aggression,
Then a final phase of disinhibition marked by violent interactions. These phases will be intensified or mitigated by social media depending on the images of incursion or intervention they broadcast
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> *The scene of collective action becomes a space of transformation, a social theater, where what was previously impossible becomes an actively pursued goal. In this context of excitement and tension, excesses and degradations occur in a confrontational atmosphere mixing music, anger, crowd movements… Media sensationalism and social networks must also*

> *be taken into account, as they require images and subversive acts to generate buzz.*
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> *“In any case, collective action alters the balance of self-confidence within society, specifically, confidence in one’s ability to challenge relationships of domination” (Landmann & Rohmann, 2020).”*

Recommendations to reduce violence

How to reduce impulsiveness during these gatherings? The authors propose a series of suggestions. They suggest protesters deploy their own peaceful maintenance service, invite both parties to preserve dialogue by tolerating certain disruptions (Gorringe & Rosie, 2013). They also recommend distinguishing the pacifist majority from the hostile minority.
When these attempts fail, it is still possible to limit the propensity for violence by preventing emotions from taking over and adopting non-dominating verbal and bodily behaviors. As for journalists filming events up close, they could remind individuals engaging in violence of the charges they may face.

And if none of this works, it is conceivable that the organizers of the demonstration and law enforcement representatives agree to enforce a truce.

Finally, the authors advise against the use of non-lethal and remotely controlled riot control technologies. Controversial from an ethical standpoint, they also risk escalating the conflict. And they conclude with Gandhi’s call to turn one’s enemy into a friend.

When violence becomes total, both parties lose; the entire social body then suffers and bears the cost of damage to property, individuals, and democracy.

Summary and article analysis by Marie-Georges Fayn.

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*__Définition de l'empowerment__

Empowerment is an emancipatory approach that strengthens the power of individuals and communities by providing them with the means to take control of their lives and destinies. Founded on ideals of freedom, justice, and equality, empowerment cannot be associated with violent actions that would threaten the physical integrity of one or more individuals (Welzel & Deutsch, 2012). The empowerment process starts with an individual will to resist and extends through the construction of a supportive group of peers. Members establish an organization that facilitates the creation and acquisition of knowledge, the design of alternative solutions and the establishment of new norms, and deep reforms in society. The weapons of empowerment are critical awareness, learning, cooperation, and collective intelligence.

**The 'Salt March' was a demonstration initiated by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on March 12, 1930, aimed at securing India's independence from the British. https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marche_du_sel

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[1] **Ng, S. H., & Platow, M. J. (2024). The violent turn in non-violent collective action: What happens?. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*.**

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