

Renata Salecl

Cultural Aspects of Violence



Renata Salecl was born in 1962 in Slovenia, studied philosophy and sociology at the University of Ljubljana and completed her PhD in the sociology of culture at the same university. From 1986 on, she has worked as a researcher at the Institute of Criminology, the Faculty of Law, Ljubljana. She has been visiting professor at the New School for Social Research and Cardozo School of Law in New York. In her work, she analyses contemporary cultural and political phenomena with the help of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Her publications include: *Discipline as the Condition of Freedom* (KRT, Ljubljana, 1991), *Why Do We Obey Power?* (Drzavna založba, Ljubljana 1993), *The Spoils of Freedom: Psychoanalysis and Feminism After the Fall of Socialism* (Routledge, London, 1994), *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (co-editor with Slavoj Žižek, Duke University Press, Durham, 1996), *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* (Verso, London, forthcoming). – Address: Institute of Criminology, Faculty of Law, Kongresni trg 12, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia.

I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg with a big project to finish – my new book on love and hate, which deals with questions like: Why does the subject who is desperately in love endlessly block union with his/her love object? And why does the subject often destroy what he/she most loves? From psychoanalysis we know that love and hate go hand in hand, since the subject is both attracted and repelled by the uncontrollable *jouissance* of the other. However, the problem which haunted me from the beginning of my stay at the Kolleg is that, in contemporary society, intersubjective relations have changed, since people no longer identify with the social prohibitions as they did in the past. But this change did not simply bring liberation, it also triggered regression into various forms of violence, including even self-mutilation and new forms of tribalism. I thus started dealing with the question: Why, on the one hand, do we encounter today among some immigrant groups in the West a return to certain violent forms of initiation like clitoridectomy, while, on the other hand, we

observe forms of body art which play with self-imposed body mutilations, tattooings, body-piercing, etc.?

In pre-modern society, initiation rituals situate the subject in the social structure and assign to him or her a special place as well as his or her sexual role. In the modern, Enlightenment society, we no longer have initiation rituals, but the authority of the law (i.e. the symbolic prohibition) is still at work in this society. The law is linked to the role of the father; and in taking a position against this law, i.e. by distancing himself or herself from this law, the modern subject acquires his or her “freedom”. In contrast, in contemporary, post-modern society we have a total disbelief in authority, as well as in the power of the symbolic order as such. This disbelief has not simply resulted in the subject’s liberation from the law or other forms of social coercion, but has also incited various forms of violence. Paradoxically, many subjects today engage in practices of self-torture and body-mutilation, as if, lacking belief in the social authorities, they are trying to take prohibition into their own hands and thus find some stability in today’s disintegrating social universe.

In the conclusion of the book, I especially addressed the problem of the changed relationship to authorities in contemporary society and the way new corporations rely on the fact that people today no longer identify with the authorities as they did in the past. The new authorities, like Microsoft’s Bill Gates, thus function as superego figures who disguise themselves as benevolent doubles of their subordinates. As such, these authorities are hard to recognize as authorities; and for subordinates it is also hard to guess what the authorities actually require of them. This uncertainty about who the authority is and what it wants contributes to the subjects’ feeling of being at a loss in today’s society.

One of the ways in which people today deal with the nontransparency of authorities is to establish some kind of ersatz authority structures like support groups, ethical committees, etc., which help to create the illusion that the subjects themselves can “take charge”. But here I question whether the search for new rules and the establishment of multiform ethical committees is not linked to the fact that, globally, not much can be changed in society, since big capital is increasingly independent of politics. The point is not to oppose the establishment of ethical committees that, for example, discuss the impact of science; rather, it is to remember that only control over big capital can limit the risks science generates.

My next project was editing a special issue of the journal *New Formations on the Ethics of Violence*, which asks what modalities of violence are witnessed today, from direct bodily (ethnic, sexual) violence, such as rapes and lynchings, through more refined forms of symbolic violence, up to the violent aspects of the very endeavors to circumscribe and fight

violence. My intention was to point out that violence is not simply external to symbolic communication, but also based on it and legitimized by it. Doesn't the very shift from the body and its violent materiality to thought's ethereal ideal universality involve the gesture of an extremely violent abstraction and/or repression? Not only does Kant's ethics, perhaps the most sublime philosophical expression of the ethical attitude, rely on a core of violence; its apparent opposite, Sade's assertion of the unlimited right to the pleasure provided by torturing other people, is itself based on an ethical stance – which is why Lacan insisted that Kant and Sade have to be read together. Acts considered as fulfillments of the highest ethical duty are often perceived by the community in which they occur as extremely violent impositions – consider the violence discernible in Christ's statement: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes even his own life – he cannot be my disciple." (*Luke 14:26*) Doesn't the same hold for Antigone, this commonly accepted literary example of insisting on one's ethical duty? And how are perceptions of violence dependent on a specific cultural context, so that while, for a Western gaze, circumcision is the utmost humiliation of a woman, some cultures perceive genital mutilation as an act that secures respect for women? Furthermore, in what way are today's "irrational" modes of violence (like the juvenile delinquency in our suburbs) the product of the very tolerant multiculturalist "open" society that more and more precludes any proper articulation of political antagonisms?

In working on these manuscripts, I realized what fantastic services the Kolleg provides for its Fellows. I especially profited from the Fellow-Dienste and from the friendly help that Christine von Arnim organized for me. My English manuscript was thus thoroughly checked by Mitch Cohen, who not only perfectly corrected the language mistakes, but also provided many interesting comments. Since I was simultaneously preparing a manuscript in the German language, I was most happy that Katharina Wiedemann was able to help me in organizing and editing various translations of the text. Without her enormous dedication to this work and the Kolleg's help in sponsoring the editing of my manuscript, I would not be able to present the German text to the publisher in a coherent form.

During my stay at the Kolleg, I surprisingly learned more German than I ever expected. When I joined Eva Hund's class, which consisted of Fellows with a moderate knowledge of German, I was first frightened when I observed my colleagues' initial enthusiasm in taking extra lessons, doing the homework, etc. Since my work on the manuscript prevented me from investing more time in learning German, I decided to just continue going to the lessons even if I did not have my homework done or even if I was

away for some time. My persistence paid off enormously, since at the end of my stay at the Kolleg, I was able to communicate with my Berliner friends in German (not too elaborate, of course), which I never imagined could happen.

I very much enjoyed the fact that Kolleg invites people from various disciplines, i.e. that it mixes scholars from social and natural sciences. Especially interesting were debates with a group of biologists who worked on vision, since we often compared discussions in neurology with the psychoanalytic understanding of the nature of fantasy in organizing our perception of reality. I was also most privileged to get to know Eva Jablonka and to learn a great deal about the links between culture and genetics. Eva was not only great fun to be with, but also eager to engage in speculative philosophical debates. Our discussions definitely proved that the bridge between the humanities and the natural sciences is not so hard to make.

Getting to know two wonderful Indian couples, Mushirul and Zoya Hasan, and Tapan and Hashi Raychaudhuri, was one of the high points of my stay at the Kolleg. In my discussions with them, I not only learned a great deal about India, I also enormously enjoyed their great sense of humour (Tapan's jokes were just out of the world) and their fantastic cuisine.

With my husband, Slavoj Žižek, we also spent time exploring Berlin, especially observing the changes brought by the German unification. We were happy to establish many contacts with Berlin intellectuals and enjoy the cultural events here. However, as big film fans, we had great difficulties finding good movies. One thing that I very much wish to change in Berlin in the future is the fact that most foreign films are dubbed into the German language and that cinemas are very slow in getting new films. I sincerely hope that future Fellows will satisfy their hunger for good films with the video collection that our group of Fellows gave as a present to the Kolleg.