

IN DEPTH

Social movements against the violence that we don't want to see

Jordi Mir

Universitat Pompeu Fabra

I have spent half my life, all my academic life, talking about structural violence with people who, in most cases, have never heard of this concept and have never wondered either about what the term is trying to make visible, analyse, and divulge. Once explained, it seems to be understood, but shared or accepted is another matter. I first began explaining it in response to questions related to social mobilisation. The violence that appears in a social mobilisation tends to be very easy to identify and report. People who mobilise are all too often other men, other women, and it is always easier to label as violence what is done by other people, who are not like us, who are not us.

The mass media, governments, political representatives and society easily recognise physical violence against people or objects. If a recycling bin is burnt, if people throw things at the police, if the glass is broken, if there is looting, if there is physical fighting, if any of these things happen, there is considerable criticism swiftly attributed to the alleged violence of the people who are demonstrating. Sides are taken, and the mobilisation, in general, can be called into question, usually by people who disagree with its reasons. However, even people who agree and participate in it tend to be especially sensitive to these forms of violence while also finding it challenging to be aware of others.

Nevertheless, this article does not seek to analyse violence in social mobilisations, which is an important matter. It aims to study another manifestation of violence, namely that which demonstrations identify and try to reduce or eliminate. The paradox is of substantial dimensions. Social movements arise to denounce existing forms of

violence, diminish and eradicate them, and yet they are criticised for resorting to violence. This is a constant. A few years ago, a journalist from Spanish public television interviewed me for a report on protests that use nonviolent civil disobedience. After repeated questions seeking to identify as violence actions like dismantling a toll barrier and other attempts in a similar vein, he tried again. “But isn’t breaking the law an act of violence?”

The hegemonic construction of violence

If we define violence like as an act that breaks the law, we are extending the concept of violence to incorporate any action outside the law regardless of how it is carried out. There is a tendency in many societies to identify violence with anything seen as improper. It is not easy to think that the legal framework, the public administration and businesses can exercise violence. There are very few occasions when this reality is accepted from the standpoint of political, institutional, or economic power. Yet, some movements arise to denounce this fact and to change it.

It is always more challenging to see the other kinds of violence, for example, those against which social movements might be mobilising. This is not about challenging some types of violence with others or justifying one sort with another, but about being aware of how easy it is to see and condemn some types of violence and how difficult it is to see and condemn other types of violence. In our society, violence is usually rejected. The problem is what we do and do not understand as violence.

In how many countries, including those that claim to be democracies, do people and groups that mobilise to call for rights and justice risk their lives? How many societies that claim to be and are internationally considered democracies live with high rates of various types of violence? How much everyday racism (exclusion, discrimination, inequalities) is suffered even in societies that claim to have no problems with racism? How much social exclusion is suffered by less privileged groups (even in societies that are considered to be “advanced” and prosperous”) when it comes to access to health, education, housing, etc.? How long have we taken, and how long will it take us to become aware and act responsibly in opposing all forms of violence against nature,

against life, which have brought us to a situation of climate catastrophe? How long have we taken, and how long will it take us to become aware that social mobilisation builds peace by denouncing violence that is made invisible or about which there is still little social awareness?

“This is not about challenging some types of violence with others or justifying one sort with another, but about being aware of how easy it is to see and condemn some types of violence and how difficult it is to see and condemn others”

There is a hegemonic construction of what we consider to be violence. I mean that there is a set of prevailing, majority ideas that establish what violence is and what sort of violence is more or less decried or not at all decried. They have become established and dominant through a process by which, apart from possible impositions, a large part of the population comes to accept them as common sense. This common sense is simply the result of what has been thought and talked about, what appears in the media, what is said in political speeches, conversations at the workplace, educational centres, family members, friends, etc. Although it seems sensible, coherent, and rational, it is common sense that it is always a construction representing dominant ideas that ignore other ways of understanding, thinking, and acting.

I could analyse many social movements to show this, and they could also be studied at different times and in other places. Still, I shall now focus on two that present different characteristics: the feminist movement and the housing rights movement. They are movements we can find in the past and in the present. They tend to start on the fringes of society and eventually become mainstream. Movements that, as tends to be the case with all those seeking cultural and political transformation of society, try to convince people and are primarily nonviolent. Movements have arisen in societies with significant levels of various kinds of violence and also in societies that see themselves as nonviolent and democratic. Societies with such high levels of self-esteem that they

believe they have eradicated violence.

Like other movements, the feminist and housing rights movements have arisen to denounce the violence in our societies, various kinds of violence that are not acknowledged as such in many cases, violence that is denied, hidden, and justified.

Social movements denouncing violence

Social movements tend not to share mainstream ways of seeing, thinking and acting. Most social movements appear as minority initiatives in response to some prevailing or majority situation they want to change. However, social movements can become mass-based and even enjoy majority support for their ideas and demands. They can change society, politics, powers, beliefs, values, culture, etc. They can challenge hegemony in society and even change it.

For example, why do most people think that breaking a shop window is violent while women do not have the same rights as men and are constantly subjected to patriarchal power is not seen as violence? In the nineteenth-century feminist suffragette movement, some people considered breaking shop windows an option of social mobilisation. People did not start criticising feminists and suffragettes for these actions as they were already being criticised for their ideas and initiatives. They were a minority confronting the power elite. They were dangerous, counter-hegemonic. And this behaviour meant that they were presented as violent. But very little or nothing was said about physical and sexual violence against women, which is part and parcel of patriarchal control over women. When did people start talking about physical and sexual violence against women? When did they start talking about patriarchal violence? A violence that was socially accepted and justified for centuries, and still is today in too many heads and places.

**“The feminist and housing rights movements
have arisen to denounce the violence in our
societies, various kinds of violence that are not**

acknowledged as such in many cases. Violence that are denied, hidden, and justified”

A violence that was accepted and justified as was violence suffered by other sectors of society. A violence that has even been deemed “necessary” because of the way women are.

Feminism is a social movement with a long history that can be studied in terms of its emergence in different waves. We could refer to that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and how it toppled the power structures and made visible and unacceptable certain kinds of violence. We could also talk about the present wave. We could think about how feminism has become involved in overcoming other types of violence and in peacebuilding in times of armed conflict and societies with too many kinds of silenced and hidden violence. There is violence, too much and in too many forms. And it is still present in all types of society. There is still much work to be done, which is why the struggle continues.[\[1 \]](#)

The housing rights movement also has a long history but without such a marked identity as feminism. In its present phase, it has forcefully appeared as a result of twenty-first-century crises related with the economy and debt. In terms of size, duration, and impact, one of the most significant mobilisations has taken place in Spain. In this society, there was no awareness of structural violence related to access to housing. The Spanish Constitution recognises the right to housing, but the law guaranteeing this right has never been enacted.[\[2 \]](#)

The economic crisis that began in 2008 had different consequences and ramifications. One of them concerned and still concerns people who had taken out a mortgage to buy a home during the economic boom in Spain (1997-2007). From 2009 onwards, they began to have significant problems paying off these loans. The crisis worsened and also affected people in rented accommodation. It has not ended, either. Now it has combined with the pandemic crisis. Many people are suffering because they are unable to pay for their homes, must leave them, or are being evicted.

In 2009, the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH – Platform for People Affected by Mortgages) was founded in Barcelona. After a few years, it had spread to more than two hundred towns around Spain. It aimed to guarantee the right to housing, and its good practice and the mobilisations of the 15M anti-austerity movement after 2011 led to its remarkable expansion. The PAH has permanently opted for a repertoire of nonviolent social mobilisation, pursuing innovation to avoid engaging in actions its members consider to be ineffective. For example, in its thirteen years of existence, it has organised very few demonstrations, mostly deciding in favour of protests in bank branch offices to call for debt cancellation and social rent, or bodily blockades to prevent evictions, and activities denouncing members of parliament who are not willing to vote for the draft laws they propose. They have not engaged in violence against people or objects, although there have been police charges against some of their attempts to stop evictions. Some commentators have tried to portray the PAH as a violent organisation, even equating it with Nazism because it denounced parliamentarians who are unwilling to support a law that would seek to change a mortgage law which is very harmful to people who are having difficulties in paying off bank loans after losing their homes and being left with the debt.

“Social movements even make a decisive contribution in creating awareness of violence that has gone unnoticed, even when caused or suffered”

On the other hand, in the political-institutional and media discussion, very little has been said about the violence of not guaranteeing the right to housing and evicting people who have not been offered alternative accommodation. Added to this is the fact of living in a society in which, after the economic and real-estate crisis, many unoccupied homes have come to be administered with the participation of the public sphere since the financial institutions that owned them have been rescued with public money.^[3]

Apart from their successes and failures, the feminist and right to housing movements have managed to get people talking about forms of violence that were never mentioned in the past and also about the fact that people are working to counteract them. Like others working in different areas, these social movements are engaged in peacebuilding in all kinds of societies since they are working to stop the various types of violence, including those that are accepted, hidden, and unacknowledged. In *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, bell hooks, who recently left us, wrote (p. 61):

Nowadays the problem of domestic violence is talked about in so many circles, from mass media to grade schools, that it is often forgotten that the contemporary feminist movement was the force that dramatically uncovered and exposed the ongoing reality of domestic violence. Initially feminist focus on domestic violence highlighted male violence against women, but as the movement progressed evidence showed that there was also domestic violence present in same-sex relations, that women in relationships with women were and are oftentimes the victims of abuse, that children were also victims of adult patriarchal violence enacted by women and men.[4]

Social movements building peace

Being involved in social movements often means being called upon to act in times of conflict, turmoil, and even violent episodes. It is pretty common to identify social mobilisation with violence, and there have been attempts to explain some of the reasons for this. It is about time that the dominant view of social movements changes, and some crucial steps have been taken, partly because of more incredible social support. The feminist and right to housing movements have moved from the fringes to the centre. This has many implications, which are also visible in other movements that have taken a similar course.

When analysing the impact of social movements, we can study them in different areas. If we think about their impact on the existing violence in our societies, we can identify their power to denounce it, stop it, counteract it. But we must also keep thinking about their ability to create awareness. Awareness in different sectors. Awareness among the very people who are leaders of social mobilisation must have become conscious of this

violence at some point in the past. Awareness in society as a whole. Attention in institutional politics, political parties, the media... Social movements even make a decisive contribution in creating awareness of violence that has gone unnoticed, even when caused or suffered. In other words, they contribute to creating awareness about violence that is endured and inflicted. What might be necessary to shift from raising awareness to making fundamental changes to eradicate this violence is another matter.

“How long have we taken, and how long will it take us to become aware that social mobilisation builds peace by denouncing violence that is made invisible or about which there is still little social awareness?”

Thinking, too, about the history of the peace movement, it would be helpful to think about and rethink the relationship among campaigns supporting different causes, the links they have and have not had, what unites them and separates them, about double militancy, movements for more than one cause, and the kinds of violence that have appeared in movements that might be for peace and against violence. Let us not forget, for example, the rejection of the environmentalist movement by significant sectors of the antinuclear movement of the 1980s or the patriarchal violence that has existed and can exist in movements that claim to liberate people from various types of oppression. There are some very pertinent contributions in the work of bell hooks concerning ending violence from the standpoint of feminism, but this should be extended to other movements. Like peace, violence has many faces, and people have not always been aware of this. In the words of bell hooks, “It is essential for continued feminist struggle to end violence against women that this struggle be viewed as a component of an overall movement to end violence.” [\[5 \]](#)

Some kinds of violence are visible, and others are not. Some types of violence are seen and considered unacceptable, and others are seen and considered acceptable and even

deemed necessary. The catalogue of “necessary” kinds of violence is too long, and it shows us, throughout history and in the present, what our societies have been and what they are like. Some kinds of violence are not seen, and some people try to make us see them. In all eras, people have challenged the violence that exists in society. In all eras, people have managed to make some kinds of violence visible and to reduce or eliminate them. Many organisations, groups, and individuals have mobilised to achieve this, although they were criticised, criminalised, and persecuted for it. If our societies today have less violence and more peace than those of the past, it is because of their commitment. This should be studied, analysed, recognised, publicised and remembered.

[Article translated from the original in Spanish]

[1] For further information about the contributions of feminism to peacebuilding, see ICIPs *Peace in Progress* magazine, No 39, January 2021, at <http://www.icip-perlapau.cat/numero39/es> (in English, <http://www.icip-perlapau.cat/numero39/en>).

[2] For cases of mobilisation outside of Spain see Amanda Tattersall and Kurt Iveson (2021), People power strategies in contemporary housing movements, *International Journal of Housing Policy* at <https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2021.1893120>, and La resistencia a los desahucios en Europa (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2016) at <https://www.rosalux.eu/es/article/1065.la-resistencia-a-los-desahucios-en-europa.html> (in English, <https://www.rosalux.eu/es/article/1065.la-resistencia-a-los-desahucios-en-europa.html>).

[3] For further information about the PAH see two recently published works of great interest: *La PAH, manual de uso* (Rosa Luxemburg 2021) by João França (available online at <https://www.rosalux.eu/es/article/2025.la-pah.html>) and *La Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca*

Una década de lucha por la vivienda digna 2009-2019 (Bellaterra Edicions 2022)

[4] bell hooks, *El feminismo es para todo el mundo*, Traficantes de sueños, Madrid, 2017, p.87. (The book is available in English at

https://excoradfeminisms.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/bell_hooks-feminism_is_for_everybody.pdf).

[5] bell hooks, *El feminismo es para todo el mundo*, Traficantes de sueños, Madrid, 2017, pp. 89-90. (In English, https://excoradfeminisms.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/bell_hooks-feminism_is_for_everybody.pdf, p.63.)

About the author

Jordi Mir

Graduate and doctor in Humanities, he is an associate professor at the Faculty of Humanities of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra and the Faculty of Political Sciences and Sociology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. He is a member of the Center d'Estudis sobre Moviments Socials and the Observatori del Sistema Universitari.

Photography

Members of the Stop Foreclosures movement protest to avoid the eviction of a family in Valencia on July 21, 2011. Placards read Stop Evictions. By Heino Kalis.