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## Social movement learning about violence

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### Abstract

*The article analyses learning related to experiencing violence in social actions and social movements. Activists may experience physical abuse from individuals and from organised entities such as the police, both accidentally and as a form of intentional repression. Applying the social movement learning approach to the analysis of individual experience, collective responses to violence, and preparations for the eventuality of its occurrence allowed us to identify the functionalities of protest culture towards de-escalation of violence. The article offers a review of literature as well as an analysis of empirical data from our previous research projects. The result of the analysis is a model of social movements learning about violence, linking individual suffering with the potential of social change.*

**Keywords:** social movement learning, experience of violence, de-escalation, transformation, protest culture

### Introduction

The possibility of violence is inherent in social movements' activity, even when they decide to adopt a non-violence strategy. They can still face police violence or develop militancy under the pressure to achieve goals (Ryckman, 2020; Adam-Troian et al., 2020a). Importantly, some movements are mainly focused on the de-escalation of violence and establishing peace (such as the ones fighting – when we are writing this article – for peace in Ukraine). Yet, they too, are subjected to state-violence.



In democratic countries<sup>1</sup>, using physical violence against people is rarely accepted but violence appears even there, especially along with authoritarian tendencies (Jackson et al., 2018; Physicians for Human Rights, 2013; della Porta et al., 2016). The police brutality towards protesters is a disturbing phenomenon (Adam-Troian et al., 2020b). Besides repressive governments, right-wing social movements, not sharing traditional, progressive social movements' assumptions about the equality of people are still strong (Stier et al., 2017; Fischer, 2020). They promote social hierarchy as a social order (Virchow, 2017). Although at the level of the chosen tactics, they do not differ from other social movements, their specific feature is prioritising violence as a method or even a strategy of action (Minkenberg, 2019). These are often armed social movements, conducting military training for their supporters, and then 'the state loses enforcement capacity vis-à-vis the penetrating right-wing social movement' (Virchow, 2017, p. 643).

Participation in social movements is considered empowering for individuals and communities (e.g., Hall et al., 2012; Kim, 2016; Villenas, 2019), allowing them to learn democracy (understood in an equitable and participatory manner). They are associated with positive values, i.e., respecting human rights, equality, freedom. Yet, we bring here the 'other side of the coin', namely experiencing violence on the occasion of involvement. Our focus is on incidental acts of physical violence attempting to 'convince' people to withdraw or, contrary, to start protesting. We exclude, however, torture, symbolic violence, and violence in virtual spaces. Social movement learning about violence [SMLV] broadens the perspective of social movement learning [SML] by focusing it on a single challenge to respond to. One such answer is the de-escalation of violence.

We understand violence as an inflexion point in a conflict situation when using force causes bodily harm. Inspired by Wieviorka (2009) we speak both of objective (empirical factuality) and subjective (as experienced by individuals or groups) aspects of this phenomenon. Thus, learning about violence means recognising violence close to that point in order to answer the challenge properly and promptly. We believe that violence is a social fact, an issue that shapes human relations with the world. Violence accompanies the actions of social movements. People experience it and answer to the threat, and this is the base of how they learn. We stand against violence, though we cannot agree to tabooing the topic in SML analyses. Therefore, we aim to take a cold look at this hot topic and propose a way to integrate it into the wider framework of deliberations on SML.

First, we juxtapose various concepts of violence experienced by participants of social movements. Then we argue that the SML concepts has so far deliberately ignored violence, despite the fact that such events, even in their potential form, absorb social movement participants. We noticed omitting the topic of (in)direct violence in the SML discourse in both texts considered classic (e.g., Foley, 1999) and contemporary works (e.g., Hall et al., 2012). When we write 'deliberately ignored' we mean that the SML researchers focus on other threads – mostly positive ones – as if violence was not part of the experiences of social movements' participants'. Next, we will check what approaches to SML will enable us to narrow down such an 'omnivorous' concept to recognize the learning of just one issue. This critical literature review will result in a working definition of SMLV, operationalised for case analysis. Finally, we will try to show SMLV's usefulness in five diverse cases.

## Theoretical framework

Physical violence is often placed in the anthropological theory of rituals, particularly in the ritual role of sacrifice (Girard, 1972). Thus, physical violence is considered to play its role in processes of community formation and consolidation. The anthropological

approach to violence by Wieviorka (2003) focuses on violence coming both from the survival instinct and as a factor triggering subjectivisation of a person or a group. The emergence of political subjectivity caused by violence followed the interface between philosophy and militant activism (Sorel, 2014). Yet, contemporary voices on violence avoid Sorel's early 20th century way of analysing its functionality. The atrocities of totalitarian states and politically coordinated terror of non-state actors anchored our thinking of violence as having to be eliminated or at least reduced.

From the SMVL's needs' perspective, Wieviorka's (2003, 2009, 2014) classification of violence was helpful in reflecting what is happening with the subjectivity of perpetrators. It is an academic answer to the instinctive question of victims of violence, 'Why did violence occur?'. This classification covers: politically significant and broadcasted events, single acts of violence that do not generate such interest but are organizationally important for social movement, or become biographically significant for their participants. In this classification, violence, understood consistently with our definition, appears in five ways:

1. a loss of meaning. Violence replaces meanings because a) the existing ones disappear or b) there is a need to express something for which there are no words or c) a speaking subject emerges. This violence type is associated with unexpected riots;
2. a non-sense. The perpetrators are politically passive and subordinate to authority. They remain indifferent to the meaning of their actions. Most often, the perpetrators are police officers;
3. cruelty. It is violence that escaped the original justifications and became a form of obtaining pleasure. Only repression stops such violence;
4. fundamental violence. Although no less destructive, unlike the previous one, it does not deny someone else's rights. It results from feeling life-threatened;
5. founding violence. It is a transformative experience, changing the trajectory of biography. It can only be assessed after some time (Wieviorka, 2003).

This classification for SMLV helps activists understand and prepare for a possible adversary, as well as recognise the dynamics of their own biographies. Wieviorka's concept is politically and educationally useful, but the effects of violence on its objects, i.e., the victims, dissolve in the narrative about subjectivation. In this context, the research by Mojab deserves attention (e.g., Mojab & McDonald, 2008; Mojab & Osborne, 2011), showing the overwhelming power of experiencing violence even in a new environment, even if it was supposed to be a refuge from oppression. It shows, too, the potential of experiencing violence as a source of learning. We are dealing here with violence that happened, whereas considering the practically useful concept of SMLV, we must consider the efforts of preparation, i.e., future violence.

The experience of violence as harm and injustice can lead to anger in society. People who experienced direct violence assist society in recognising ongoing but subtle forms of violence, which include:

physical, psychological, economic, political and all other structural forms that intend to harm, denigrate, exclude and obstruct an individual or a group of people to function freely, fully and without fear in society (Mojab & Osborne, 2011, p. 265).

Mojab and Osborne (2011) see the need to consider structural forms of oppression, e.g., patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism, as well as new forms of violence. Such frames can be a source of motivation for action and learning, but in SMLV such

deepening of the thoughts on violence after facing its destructive nature will be considered intellectual work on the experience itself. Individual experience does not scale up easily because violence affects representatives of particular social groups, especially women, in a specific way (Monk et al., 2019). Particularly, domestic violence and war influence women's recognition of their rights and strategies of resistance (Mojab & McDonald, 2008). Spanish-speaking and Kurdish migrant women in Canada reported trauma, fear, uncertainty, and pointed to difficulties in learning, following the experiences of violence, especially in the initial stages of separation from the perpetrator. They stated that they learn the most when they receive individualised help, listen to other people with similar experiences, and when they experience participatory methods of the educational process. Trust and a sense of connection are crucial to them. Thus, researchers concluded: 'it is equally important to consider the experience of violence as a new source of learning, its basis, a learning that can transform social, sexual and political relations of power' (Mojab & McDonald, 2008, p. 51). This statement shows the relationship between the individual and the collective dimension of the experience. It is relevant for defining SMLV.

From the SMLV perspective, we may look at physical violence as a tool of activists' work (della Porta, 2008). Considering violence as a part of broader repertoire, reveals violence in its socio-political perspective in relation to the specificity of each social movement. People learn about violence and how to use it because it requires certain survival skills and its experience is usually intense. Castells (2009) and Wieviorka (2003) recognised such a perspective regarding fundamentalist religious movements. Virchow (2017) studied right-wing movements, noting that violence may appear in them as the primary tactic or goal of action, something unlikely in other contemporary social movements. Right-wing movements can combine non-violent methods (cultural performances, collecting signatures for petitions, occupying buildings, refusing to pay taxes, etc.) with sabotage and political violence (Virchow, 2017). Virchow warns against generalisations and simplifications on the issue of violence in right-wing movements:

[...] activists of right-wing movements often make use of a 'narrative of self-defence' to justify their own violence as a response to the behaviour of others which is framed as a betrayal of the people and the nation (Virchow, 2017, p. 636).

He argues that 'the decision of right-wing movements to radicalise or de-radicalize regarding exercising acts of political violence is influenced by different factors varying in relevance during a protest cycle' (Virchow, 2017, p. 637), such as the level of the movement's success, the level of repression by state agencies. Our task is to include in the definition of SMLV this need to recognise the dynamics of violence, particularly in the context of social movements seeking to exit a violent relationship with another movement. Social movements may try to avoid specific dynamics that lead to violence, especially if they have a history of violent tendencies.

Violence is easier to study when it occurs, hence the research task set by della Porta (2008) to identify routes into the de-escalation of violence in social movements. In this respect, the research on school violence becomes useful. Physical violence is no longer an acceptable means of control or teaching in formal education in democratic societies. Many social actors (teachers, parents, researchers, and policymakers) made systemic efforts to eliminate violence from the school environment (e.g., World Health Organization, 2015). Typically, specific procedures implemented and maintained at school are behind the reduction of school violence. Particular importance is given to the 'audience' (observers of violence), who must be taught not to 'reward' the perpetrators with its spontaneous behaviour (Roland & Midthassel, 2012). Thus, monitoring and combating violence are some activities implemented in formal education, but not

necessarily transferable outside institutions, especially to social movements. People may bring school arrangements to the movements, but for the SMLV concept, it will be important to pay attention to the organisational level of learning and the responses to the audience.

Also social movements undertook a struggle against violence e.g. the feminist movements. Here, violence emerges both as a theme growing out of experience and a task set by the movement itself. SMLV must be capable of sustaining this dualism. Researchers analysing learning in the feminist movement indicate domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender inequality as a source of experience (e.g., Simões et al., 2021). The task of social movements is to de-escalate these manifestations of violence. De-escalating violence can serve as a significant way of achieving social change, and political progress. Despite such a clear goal of de-escalation, SMLV is not a straightforward path into safety. Learning related to violence is also learning about violence. Progress towards de-escalation requires unlearning violence by abandoning specific solutions that previously seemed common-sense. It is about solutions that social movements had at their disposal, based on the potential with which participants entered and co-created the movement, e.g., their potential school experience of anti-bullying programs. We cannot reduce de-escalation to a unilateral rejection of violence. Non-violence is the default mode of many social movements, but it is not a panacea. The presence of right-wing movements requires considering the fact that people who were prepared to inflict violence will not give up their universal tool just because their potential victims do not intend to defend themselves.

The nuanced attitude of social movements to violence changes the importance of the tools developed in non-violence movements and looks like a denial of progress. We would like SMLV to shield people from resignation and pessimism. Cultural innovations remain the resort for life-saving creativity when violence is on the horizon. Nevertheless, educational researchers kept violence reduced to the role of context. In Foley's (1999) book, the described cases of incidental learning took place despite state repressions or during an armed insurgency. There, violence is treated as background, military training becomes a misunderstanding or a cover for learning something else, more important for the struggle. The issue of violence seems too fundamental to social movements to be treated merely as a learning context. Speaking in the language of Latour (2004) 'As a rule, context stinks. It's simply a way of stopping the description when you are tired or too lazy to go on' (p. 68). Under scrutiny, violence and repressions prove decisive for educational work. For example, comparative analysis of ecological movements led researchers to extracting an educational program which proved successful for the analysed social movements (Hall, 2004, 2009). Yet, researchers found counterexamples of social movements that implemented the postulated program but collapsed under the repression organised by the state (Walter, 2007).

To include violence in learning, we need to look at whether anything in the understanding of SML is preventing the problem of learning about violence from being addressed. From a sociological perspective, we can 'observe' learning through specific effects in changes in the collective interpretative framework of an issue concerning the social movement (Benford & Snow, 2000). We can follow the slow build-up of changes in understanding thanks to the recognition of the importance of culture in social movements (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991). Yet, Kuk and Tarlau (2020) showed that culture and the details of learning process were included in SML to object the state being the only entity capable of changing education. It was the transition between popular education and SML, to which Holst (2017) objected. He argued that the very terminology of SML is like a strategic concession of educators and researchers of social movements from

teaching. Teaching was an in-built challenge present in radical adult education. Holst wrote: ‘we do find ourselves increasingly referring to learning within social movements, rather than to the radical potential of educating for “really useful knowledge”’ (Holst, 2017, p. 81). This was an accusation against the new social movements seeking only ‘useful knowledge’. The erosion could be explained by the progress of the neoliberal version of capitalism in overpowering social movements in achieving political goals. Consequently, determining the minimum necessary link between learning processes and the processes of political involvement in systemic change became an issue for SML theory. This need seems satisfied within three levels of learning in social movements, a scheme proposed by Scandrett and co-researchers (Scandrett et al., 2010). At the micro-level, participants recognise, to a large extent incidentally, what they brought into the movement. At the meso-level, the movement develops its own way of seeing the world by interacting with allies and the media. And at the macro level, we are dealing with confrontations with corporate culture and powerful groups and classes. This model incorporated the concept of the circular ‘thematic universe’ (Freire, 2005) and eventually turned out to be adaptable to the study of successive social movements (Kluttz & Walter, 2018). The authors emphasise that the growing nature of such transition between successive levels of learning happens only in best case scenarios. Grasping the whole process within one scheme may become complicated ‘if collective learning divides, rather than unifies activists’ (Kluttz & Walter, 2018, p. 103). Such learning that leads to a breakdown of action was described in relation to a student movement (Zielińska et al., 2011). We can assume that apart from people who remain active despite being devastated and traumatised (Salazar, 2008), the experience of violence in large part eliminates people from the participants in social movements. What remains when people are gone are material and symbolic traces of events (Lindskoug & Martínez, 2022) along which social movements continue their struggle. McGregor (2014) traced materialistic tendencies in SML. In his opinion, the distribution of agency beyond people into material objects does not lead to better recognition of the human potential. It does not help answering Freirian questions about how to be human in the sense of the challenge and collective work of self-improving people in humanism. Yet, the issue of violence and its organisational-symbolic-material instrumentation in the context of SML can be treated as a Freirian theme that returns and is one of fundamental ‘obstacles that impede the people’s full humanization’ (Freire, 2005, p. 101).

Thus, we propose a synthetic definition of SMLV as any individual, group or organisational transformation of violence as an act or a topic leading to new or anew agreed and planned communication, behaviour or remembering for the common good. Now, we move on to the description of data used to test the usability of this SMLV definition.

## Data and methods

We do not analyse SMLV as a process in a selected social movement. Instead, we use various examples of efforts towards de-escalation in search of patterns of a more universal character. We use both primary and secondary data.

Primary data are fragments of interviews from our research projects:

- one study focused on describing the learning of adults engaged in various forms of social and political protests. The main research problems were: What and how do rebels learn? What learning mechanisms can we reconstruct? 22 adults (men and women) from Poland, Spain, Mexico, and Belarus were interviewed from

2014 to 2017. They were selected purposefully and using a snowball sampling technique. The aim was to start by analysing the individual experiences of these people and, ultimately, to describe and understand general mechanisms of learning in the context of rebellion. A biographical approach was used in that research project. For our text, we selected excerpts of one interviewees story (Case 1);

- excerpts from group interviews (with 8-12 people, both men and women, university students at BA, MA levels and post-graduates) from the study of participants of student 5-days occupation of a building at the University of Gdańsk in June 2018 (Case 2). It was a protest against governmental plans to reform universities. Protests were coordinated between major academic cities in Poland.

Secondary data are cases of violence documented in the literature and other sources:

- Piotr Szczęsny (Case 3), who committed suicide (self-directed violence) in a sign of opposition to the policy of the Polish government (Żuk & Żuk, 2018);
- an artistic intervention using colourful balloons (Case 4) to redirect nationalists' violence to things (data from own archive and with additional information from artists-activists);
- an analysis of the potential of allied groups and social movements by Graeber (2009) - Case 5.

The case selection was deliberate in terms of the variety of social movements and ways that social movements can transform violence. We chose cases for the analysis based on our research experience and interests. We also wanted to use examples that would demonstrate the concept we are developing. We tried to represent the dilemmas faced by social movements around the world, such as withdrawal from danger (Case 1) versus standing up to the threatening (Case 2) or avoiding casualties (Case 4) versus deliberate self-destruction (Case 3). Case 5 serves as an example, revealing activists' sensitivity to violence as well as a strategic attempt to keep the polarised position together in one campaign. In our choice we relied on our shared experience and intuition. We will analyse and describe the cases, considering several dimensions forming the skeleton of our SMLV model:

- A) levels of SML: individual learning, group processes, organisational experiences (cf. Scandrett et al., 2010);
- B) time perspective (past, happening, and/or future/potential experience of violence);
- C) type of violence in relation to subjectivity (cf. Wieviorka, 2003);
- D) the 'nature' of the transformation performed (our contribution to the theory of learning).

## Results

Violence appears in these cases in different ways. The nature of the transformation of violence is also diversified. The first example (Case 1) is a statement of a woman activist involved in protests and urban projects in her neighbourhood in Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain). She mentioned the risk of experiencing violence inherent in her social and political activity (protesting in particular). The most striking for her were situations of violence against other people and her friends through the broadly understood system,



especially the police. It was the situation during one of the strikes in Barcelona. Here is an excerpt from the interview:

There were round-ups on that strike, you know, simply round-ups. [Such as] that you go there and they catch you, then they throw you in a van and take you to the police station. [...] People hid in some gates, and some undercover cop must have entered the gate with them. And when the situation calmed down a little, the undercover said: 'Let's go out because everything is OK'. They just came out in the hands of the police. It was basically arranged. The police accused them [protesters] of setting fire to the containers and beating up the police. [...] This guy [a friend of the interviewee] works in a grocery. He is a very calm person and his girlfriend is a lawyer, so [laughs]. It was the case for me to learn about all these situations. Well, getting to know how it fucks up your life for a year when many people were fighting for his freedom. Not that they have to prove your guilt. It is you who has to prove your own innocence (woman, Barcelona).

The woman talked about these situations with fear and rage at the overwhelming system. It was felt especially in the way she spoke. The fear of the potential (possible) violence was inherent in her own protest activism. Because of the interviewee's reflection on activism and the risk of violence, she expressed the need to change the form of her activism. Her indirect experience of violence seeded disbelief in her in the possibility of gaining something through street protests. Thus, the interviewee got involved in minor projects in the city district. They seemed more 'constructive' and safer, as she explained below:

There are things much more constructive that give me something. There is some activism around in the neighbourhood: developing some local networks, talking to people. It has a lot more effects than going to demonstrations. I am glad that there are people who go to demonstrations. Personally, I stopped wanting (woman, Barcelona).

In June 2018, a wave of student protests against the reform of higher education swept through Poland. In Gdańsk, a group of around 30 activists organising discussions on the upcoming reform faced threats of violence from other students (Case 2). Provocative confrontations were conducted by members of far-right and even neo-Nazi student groups (especially, ONR, i.e., National Radical Camp).

Excerpts from the interviews show the jealousy of people who have already experienced violence towards those who have never experienced violence and are downplaying provocations. Activists who experienced violence feel discomfort, are aware of the dangers and are concerned about safety issues.

**We've learned security rules, because of the National Radical Camp's colleagues.** They [first-time protesters] are not used to something like that [i.e., threats of violence] and I completely understand that and that's very good. It's very cool that they are not. That they have never been in a situation like this face to face. **We've learned from each other that sometimes you don't have to jump and panic.** But you cannot be too calm. You must be prepared for every possible scenario. **We've taught ourselves a little defence system,** something that we can do. Just as we can organise this defence. This is also very cool (group interview, Gdańsk).

The students established safety procedures and agreed with the faculty authorities. They also organised self-education training in self-defence. They monitored the campus and avoided walking alone, especially off-campus.

The third case proves that social movements can be inspired by both the perpetrator and the victim of violence. Self-directed violence, especially self-immolation as an act of clearly political significance is such a unique example. Only some of the suicide attempts

are recognised as both rebellion and sacrifice for a community. In October 2017, a 54-year-old man, Piotr Szczęsny (Case 3) set himself on fire in Warsaw (Poland). He made his identification purposefully difficult, and he described himself as ‘an ordinary man’. It was not his spontaneous decision to make his suicide a sign of opposition to the Polish government’s policy. For six months, he prepared a manifesto condemning the ruling party for the systematic violation of law, inspiring discrimination against minorities, and deliberately destroying the country’s nature and educational system. Additionally, he wrote farewell letters justifying this decision. The manifesto was written carefully so that the depression he suffered from would not easily disavow his protest. In social resonance,

[f]ragments of Szczęsny’s manifesto appeared on walls throughout the country. A kind of ‘scattered protests’ were organized in some cities - individuals read Piotr Szczęsny’s manifesto in public places. [...] Portraits and slogans from his manifesto also became a permanent element of anti-government demonstrations (Żuk & Żuk, 2018, p. 614).

Civil disobedience activists from the social movement ‘Obywatele RP’ [‘Citizens of the Republic of Poland’] kept the memory of the event alive, and the manifesto was read every day for months in some places. Protest songs helped to keep the event and its significance alive. To avoid wasting and repeating this act of violence against oneself, self-immolation had to be used politically, that is, in accordance with the perpetrator's and victim's intentions.

On the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in March 2007 in Wrocław (Poland), a legal demonstration of nationalists marched through the city centre with the slogan ‘down with colour immigration’. The collective ‘maybe it’s the bees’ led by a post-artistic practitioner Paweł Kowzan - prepared colourful balloons to strengthen the anti-fascist counter-demonstration by creating an image of a visually unified community of people with balloons (Case 4). The act of holding a balloon and dropping it, if necessary, by protesters and onlookers, who easily adapted such an anti-fascist insignia and consequently did not stand aside, was conceived as embedded in the theory of weak resistance (see e.g., Majewska, 2019). The delicate, escaping, fun-filled balloons concentrated some of the physical aggression of the extreme nationalists in their attempt to take over the anti-racism day. Colourful balloons reduced the main slogan of the counter-demonstration ‘away with the coloured ones’ to absurdity. They were part of a series of activities of the anti-fascist movement understood as the ‘struggle for images’. These efforts included planning the choreography so that good, empowering photos were obtained while maximising the visible number of protesters by manipulating the location of the media, the availability of shooting frames, and the placement of banners in the background of the events.

Case 5 revolves around the impact of violent tactics on social movement organisational structures in relation to their overall democratic values. As described in David Graeber's direct-action ethnography (2009), the following conversation took place in New York in 2001 in preparation for the disruption of the Quebec City Summit of the Americas:

‘Did you see the guidelines they first proposed for the Quebec City actions?’ asked Jaggi.

‘Absolute nonviolence. Part of their principles of conduct were no ‘verbal violence,’ no one is allowed to use bad language. No, literally, I'm not making this up. Spray-painting slogans is a form of violence. No wearing of masks or other items of clothing that cover your face...’

The other Canadians were joining in.

‘Which then gives them the right to micro-manage everything’.

‘They're total control freaks. Marshals, everything’.

‘So, I don't get it,’ says one of the Americans. ‘What kind of process do these guys use?’

‘Yeah,’ another American asked. ‘Are they democratic, or do they have a formal leadership structure?’ (Graeber, 2009, p. 5)

Activists use relation to violence as lenses to collectively inspect a specific group or movement in order to coordinate future actions. Graeber used this approach as a method of a broader analysis of both the social order and the global resistance to capitalism. He explains why activists are concerned about the negative consequences of nonviolence:

Anarchists tend to favor militant tactics, but they reject anything that smacks of military-style discipline. Conventional protests are strictly nonviolent, but they are almost invariably organized in top-down, military fashion, with squadrons of official "marshals" to keep order and shepherd along otherwise often completely unorganized masses of protesters. Nothing could be further from anarchist ideals of self-organization. Alternately, when groups are organized, their internal organization is often itself explicitly hierarchical, with different groups dressed in identical hats or T-shirts, carrying printed signs, with a leader with megaphone calling out the chants. (Graeber, 2009, p. 362)

He provided more general insight as well:

Violence – particularly aggressive violence – is one of the few forms of human activity that does seem to be more efficient if organized on a top-down, command basis. This, and the concomitant need for secrecy, ensure that the more one prepares for war, or something like it, the more difficult it is to organize democratically (Graeber, 2009, p. 222).

Physical violence transitions to structural violence in his analyses, and resistance makes the veiled threats of violence real. Potential victims of violence must perform imaginative work in society, trying to recognise the perspective of potential perpetrators of violence. The threat of violence is a universal tool allowing stupidity because it liberates some people from the type of thinking that is important for democracy.

### *Dimensions of social movement learning about violence*

Now, we will analyse these 5 cases considering the dimensions mentioned in the previous section of the article (capital letters in parentheses in the further analysis will refer to the indicated dimensions of the SMLV): SML levels (A), time perspective (B), type of violence in relation to subjectivity (C), and the character of the transformation (D). They are the dimensions of SMLV. We give a brief summary of the cases in the table below.

*Table 1.* A brief summary of cases

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5
<b>Learning</b>	individual	individual & group	individual	organisational	organisational
<b>Time</b>	past & potential	happening	past	potential	future
<b>Subjectivity</b>	non-sense & founding	founding	founding	funding, cruelty, loss of meaning	loss of meaning
<b>Transformation</b>	avoidance	reading	invitation	art	discursive & theory

The first case (Case 1) exemplifies an individual attitude (A) toward systemic violence encountered as a result of participation in social movements. It is the anticipated possibility (B) of violence that influenced decisions in this case. We see two types of violence in relation to subjectivity (C) here. The first one is violence as non-sense, i.e., a result of performing duties and obeying orders by the Catalan police. Paradoxically, the perpetrator of such a bureaucratic violence 'is defined by passivity because of indifference to his own gestures, and is reduced to being the agent of bureaucratic instructions' (Wieviorka, 2003, p. 44). The second type of violence in this narrative is 'founding violence'. It is associated with the transformation of an individual's biography (Wieviorka, 2003). In this case, potential violence was one of the factors driving changes in attitudes toward activism and rebuilding the woman's life. There are two types of transformation (D) here. It is transformation towards avoidance, or the abandonment of a specific action (e.g., street protests). But it is also rebuilding and transforming activism into new forms, like urban activism. It could be a positive outcome of unpleasant biographical experiences with violence.

In Case 2, people who are happily inexperienced with violence learn the codes and grammar of violence with the assistance of more experienced colleagues (teaching-learning experience). This learning entails first recognising the potential with which activists came to the movement and then devising group responses to the challenge (A). The situation is tense, so we can talk about experiencing violence in the present perspective (B). Recognising impending violence is a fundamental (C) experience for the first-timers, similar to learning to read or write. It is equivalent to Freire (2005) description of the 'consciousness aspect' of learning, in which consciousness transformation, becoming aware of one's oppression, and learning about the tools to fight it are essential in social movements. Although Freire studied a different context and type of learning (literacy and teaching), viewing learning as consciousness-raising (*conscientização*) is useful. For SMLV, consciousness-raising is significant but not sufficient. People are being hurt, and feel strong emotions associated with their experience. Violence is a traumatic experience and something embodied. People seem to notice it in Case 2. The transformation of violence relies on turning it from an undefined and abstract context of activism into organisational procedures and physical exercises in self-defence (D). Literally and figuratively, dealing with violence is a struggle for survival in activism.

The third case (Case 3) is an individual experience of violence understood as an extreme reaction to a bad situation in the country (A). Here, we are dealing with self-directed violence, ending in the death of the social actor. When writing farewell letters, the subject referred to his act as already done (B). His physical death is not death in a symbolic sense. The manifesto he left behind inspired social movements. Here, we see 'founding violence' (Wieviorka, 2003) (C). Self-directed violence as founding violence is an experience that completely alters one's biography, as if the event retroactively turns even the most intimate biographic meanings into symbols. The very decision to commit this act is the moment of such reconstruction and the letters and the manifesto are the primary tools in this process. Action is annihilation. When people felt invited to use this event politically through the manifesto, violence was transformed (D). Apart from the obvious tragedy, this brought together people who shared a similar dissatisfaction regarding the state's poor condition. Case 3 is a specific transformation involving material interpretative frames and material memorial traces of the event. Self-immolation in the name of higher ideas destroys a particular body, but the event escapes the statistics because of the prepared narrative, which resonates widely in society. Emotions drove people to spontaneously and creatively commemorate 'an ordinary man'. His image, some

manifesto words and protest songs became part of the protest culture. Case 3 depicts the transition of learning from an individualised non-mobilised level into the level of more or less mobilised groups and beyond, as it also affected political discourse in the country. Individual sadness and anger were effectively linked with a sense of collective responsibility for the circumstances that led to the event.

Case 4 concerns learning at the organisational level (A), where the planned action is a game with a dominant discourse and it required to consider the needs of all actors, including corporate media. Activities in the public space were prepared, the outbreak of violence was potential (B). It is difficult to include this case in Wieviorka's (2003) classification because the purpose of the counter-demonstration was to de-escalate physical violence and to redirect it to balloons as non-human actors of the protest. Without 'fundamental violence' against balloons, they would not become actors of the event. The threat of violence was to guarantee the nationalist movement would be the sole speaking subject of the day. The explosive nature of the violence and the success with which the anti-fascist movement redirected it to balloons suggests that some nationalists regarded violence as a pleasurable experience (C). In this case, the transformation of violence was artistic because of the aesthetic care (D).

Case 5 is an academic transformation of violence, such as the one we intend with this article. Yet, it concerns intellectual and collective work carried out from within social movements. The case presents a collective learning process on an organisational level (A). Such learning concerns the occurrence of future violence (B), particularly, the social actors' likely reactions to it, and the ways social movements maintain coherence despite contradictory traditions of dealing with violence. Control over violence translates in this case to control over who emerges as a speaking subject and over ways of legitimate articulation (C). Activists transformed violence into a topic of discussion (D). They used it as lenses for analysis and eventually it appeared as a theory of social action with the state.

## Discussion

Our proposal to study SMLV focuses on one aspect of social movements' functioning. Its usefulness comes from the fact that different social movements attach great importance to their strategic nonviolence or to their pursuit of violence. Alternatively, they nuance their tactics. The problem is not only the coordination of allied social movements, but the de-escalation of violence between adversaries.

SMLV is about changing one's thinking (Freire, 2005) and their manner of action. However, it is not only about strategic thinking in social movements. Violence is close to emotions, the body, sometimes even close to identity and physical existence. Some, otherwise critical theorists, e.g. Foley (1999) analysed many issues related to learning, but not from violent aspects of socio-political action. Interestingly, violence resonates faintly in Foley's SML analysis of the nationalist movement in Zimbabwe, concentrated on military training. And yet the violence we describe harmonises with the themes of power systems, inequality, and injustice. It is visible in Graeber's (2009), as well as Simões' et al. (2021) works. In SMLV perspective, violence is not just a learning context. It is, arguably, the content of learning and the matter to study by activists.

When proposing SMLV, we share with other SML researchers (e.g., Hall et al., 2012) fears of violence and anxiety about the unprogressive development of civilisation:

[...] social movements in and of themselves are not always progressive or making for a world that many of us may feel would be better. Religious intolerance, misogynist principles, restrictions of human rights, racism and exclusion are the stuff or catalysts of movements such as the Tea Party in the USA, the Neo-Nazi movements in parts of Europe as well as all religious fundamentalist movements world-wide (Hall et al., 2012, p. x).

However, we are setting SMLV a less far-reaching goal, merely de-escalation of violence. Hall, Clover, Crowther, and Scandrett (2012) were also concerned about the appropriation of progressive movements' methods by fundamentalist movements:

[...] within movements that work contrary to a better, more just, sustainable and equitable world, the arts and other popular educational activities we use or put into practice are being appropriated (Hall et al., 2012, p. x).

It can be disturbing. We know from Virchow's research (2017) and from being victims ourselves, too, that radical right-wing movements may use aggressive tactics, often in disguise. However, in our opinion, it is not important who the tactics 'belongs to', but what purposes it serves. Arts can serve both a better, more just, and equitable world, and the de-escalation of violence, as in one of our cases. Therefore, we believe it is necessary to discuss violence in relation to learning. It may enrich the perception of SML.

We believe that SMLV is aligned with critical trends in e.g. (adult) peace education, which assert that 'there is much to be learnt from the experience of social movements and community organizations addressing social and economic hierarchies in highly unequal contexts' (Bajaj, 2015, p. 2). Violence is such an experience. However, peace education, in general, adheres to the principle that violence must be eradicated because it inhibits the development of human potential (Galtung, 1969). De-escalation of violence as a learning goal could be considered a weak principle of peace education at best. Any education adequate for adults in preparing them to articulate a political conflict through social movement actions publicly must consider de-escalation of violence as a necessary condition for survival.

De-escalation, rather than being an emanation of existential values, is viewed here as a creative practise with existential value. Many social movements ensure that their goals are reflected in the means by which they are achieved. This is particularly true for peace movements. Focusing on de-escalation implies acknowledging the ability of social movement participants to develop a lively response to direct violence. In relation to the strategic goals of a given movement, the tactic used for this purpose may turn out to be non-scalable. That is why we see more opportunities for SMLV in the sociological perspective of what adults learn in social movements, rather than what those movements try to educate society about violence.

The experience of violence is too important not 'to reflect and learn from' (Hall et al., 2012, p. ix), since it is inherent to activism but subjected to silent assumptions, such as it is a slippery slope into terrorism. We mean discussing violence, theorising cumulative experience, using art to redirect assaults, learning optimal collective and individual behaviour, minimising losses and restoring optimal mental state after experiencing violence, including witnessing events. We offered insight into such cases, for which we could not find equivalents in the SML literature.

## Conclusion

In this article, we tried to give insight into the learning potential related to violence in the context of participation in social movements. Therefore, we focused on learning one

phenomenon in social movements. We proposed a definition that we used to organise the collected five cases. As a result, it was possible to analyse and describe the dimensions of SMLV: SML level, time perspective, subjectivation, and transformation of violence. They formed a grid of the SMLV model. These dimensions clarified the description of both violence and learning itself. Our cases were a diverse collection of SMLV examples, but the same analytical approach can be applied to any single social movement anywhere in the world. People who remain active despite the threat of violence are transforming the experience in some way. We focused on SML levels, the appearance of which is shaped by the organisational capabilities of a given social movement. We considered the time perspective of this learning because it indicates whether the participants are aware of the threats and are preparing; whether people with activist experience are able to respond immediately to unforeseen (violent) events; or whether their power is based on the processing of the past events. The typology of violence we used nuanced the occurrences of physical violence, which can be perceived similarly at the personal level (as being beaten for example). As a result, we offer a tool that, when applied to the history of a single social movement, can assist in diagnosing its strengths and weaknesses in the face of violence. Violence, as we argued in the text, is inherent to social movements, regardless of their choice of tactics. Therefore, keeping learning and violence separate is merely idealism, and it limits our ability to understand how de-escalation occurs.

De-escalation associated with SMLV has to do with the periodic latency of social movements when participants retreat or rethink their actions in the face of personal costs of activism. It allows us to see the protest culture as both a functional and humanising power able to save lives. SMLV forced us to reflect on protest action and security issues, whereas the usual SML approach focuses on the backstage of campaigns. Yet, eventually, violent events test resilience and self-care potential in social movements. We consider this a crucial discovery of our study. We anticipate that comparing social movements with varying histories and degrees of thematisation of violence, such as peace movements vs anarchist movements, will reveal structural differences in how they respond to violence. In this regard, our analysis does not allow us to draw any conclusions.

Finally, when we started this analysis, we certainly did not expect we would be finishing it in the times when war rages in Ukraine, and protesters in cities occupied by Russian forces are being shot at. We are aware of the additional attention the problem of violence receives in this context, as well as of the urgency of supporting Russian social movements aiming at peace. We hope that further research in SMLV would allow movements and their researchers to be useful on such a broad scale as well.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In the case of non-democratic countries, the problem of violence is fundamental in the sense that police violence is inherent. Furthermore, in the context of learning under a repressive state, people must prepare to be victims of violence long before engaging in a social movement.

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