

Scienza e Pace

Science & Peace

ISSN 2039-1749

VOL. XV, N. 2 (2024)

Revisiting structural violence: Galtung's legacy and power relations

Chiara Chisari

Rivista online del Centro Interdisciplinare
"Scienze per la Pace" - Università di Pisa



Paper soggetto a double-blind peer review

Ricevuto: 15 dicembre 2024.

Accettato: 15 aprile 2025.

Pubblicato: 31 luglio 2025.

Per citare il paper:

Chisari, C. (2024), "Revisiting structural violence: Galtung's legacy and power relations", *Scienza e Pace*, XV (2), pp. 1-24.

Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0



Revisiting structural violence: Galtung's legacy and power relations

Chiara Chisari*

Abstract

Although Galtung is best known for his research on peace and conflict resolution strategies, his work also extensively addresses the issue of violence. In particular, he is credited with expanding the understanding of violence beyond physical aggression, identifying its cultural and structural dimensions. His analysis of structural violence has been especially significant, contributing to the work of scholars across various disciplines in examining systemic inequalities. However, Galtung's concept of structural violence has also been criticized. In short, the literature suggests that it is too vague, with the relationships between power, inequality, and harm becoming blurred. This paper seeks to address these shortcomings, particularly by clarifying the characteristics of structural violence and its connection to power relations. This will establish a connection between structural violence and Foucault's concept of states of domination—namely, specific arrangements of power relations marked by the lack of freedom. These clarifications will also enable a brief review of Galtung's violence triangle, with a particular focus on the relationship between structural and direct violence.

Keywords: Johan Galtung, State of domination, Structural violence, Peace, Power relations.

Abstract

Sebbene Galtung sia noto soprattutto per le sue ricerche sulla pace e sulle strategie di risoluzione dei conflitti, la sua opera affronta approfonditamente anche il tema della violenza. In particolare, gli va riconosciuto il merito di aver ampliato la comprensione della violenza oltre la mera aggressione fisica, identificandone le dimensioni culturali e strutturali. La sua analisi della violenza strutturale è stata particolarmente significativa, contribuendo al lavoro di studiosi di diverse discipline nell'esame delle disuguaglianze sistemiche. Tuttavia, il concetto di violenza strutturale elaborato da Galtung è stato anche oggetto di critiche. In sintesi, la letteratura suggerisce che esso risulti troppo vago, facendo sì che i rapporti tra potere, disuguaglianza e danno tendano a confondersi. Questo articolo intende affrontare tali limiti, in particolare chiarendo le

* Research fellow in Criminology at the University of Bologna, for the PRIN PNRR project "The determinants of urban security policies and their impact on democratic institutions". E-mail: chiara.chisari@unimi.it.

caratteristiche della violenza strutturale e la sua connessione con le relazioni di potere. Ciò consentirà di stabilire un legame tra la violenza strutturale e il concetto foucaultiano di stati di dominazione — vale a dire, specifiche configurazioni di relazioni di potere contrassegnate dalla mancanza di libertà. Queste precisazioni permetteranno una rivisitazione del triangolo della violenza di Galtung, con particolare attenzione alla relazione tra violenza strutturale e violenza diretta.

Parole chiave: Johan Galtung, Stato di dominazione, Violenza strutturale, Pace, Relazioni di potere.

Introduction

Johan Galtung's research is an essential reference for anyone interested in peace. Born on October 24, 1930, in Norway, Galtung witnessed the injustices of the Second World War, an experience that shaped his pacifist convictions and profoundly influenced his academic work (Altieri 2014; Venturi 2013). He is particularly known for his efforts to develop strategies for transcending conflicts, which involve redefining conflict situations to unlock seemingly incompatible interests, creating new opportunities for coexistence (Galtung 2014). Equally notable is his reimagining of the concept of peace. Unlike the prevailing perspectives from peace and conflict studies of his time, Galtung argued that peace is not simply the “absence of violence” or the “absence of war”—concepts he referred to as “negative peace” (Galtung 1964, 2). Instead, he proposed a broader understanding of peace as the “integration of human society” (ibid.) or “a pattern of cooperation and integration between major human groups”, which he called “positive peace”¹ (Galtung 1968, 487; see also Galtung 1969; 1996).

While Galtung's studies on peace have become invaluable in their own right, it should not be overlooked that they are grounded in a thorough exploration of the concept of violence, which is equally valuable for contemporary researchers. Indeed, his development of an expanded notion of peace (positive and negative peace) began with expanding the

¹ The idea of “positive” and “negative” peace can be attributed to Quincy Wright, who wrote that “the positive aspect of peace – justice – cannot be separated from the negative aspect – elimination of violence” (Wright 1942, 1305). Galtung further developed these insights.

concept of violence. According to Galtung, violence is not limited to physical aggression against individuals or groups (direct violence); it also includes the unequal distribution of power and resources within a social system (structural violence) and the sociocultural dynamics that legitimize violence itself (cultural violence) (Galtung 1969; 1990). Thus, negative peace refers to the mere absence of direct violence, while positive peace results in the absence of all forms of violence, and it is achieved through creative strategies for conflict transformation (Galtung 1969; 1996).

Building on this foundation, this work aims to explore the understanding of violence proposed by Galtung, with a particular focus on structural violence. This concept is of great significance, as it provides a deeper understanding of social inequalities. Moreover, it has the potential to shed light on the processes behind the emergence of conflicts, as it refers to the dynamics that drive violent societies. As a result, this notion may also be valuable in informing the development of effective strategies for establishing (positive) peace and post-conflict social transformation. It is no coincidence that today the notion of structural violence plays a central role in the debate on so-called transformative justice, which advocates for transitional justice interventions capable of promoting social change (e.g., Gready & Robins 2019).

After examining Galtung's concept of structural violence, this study explores its key developments. It then goes on to consider the critiques of the concept. Indeed, while the literature highlights the theoretical and practical value of the notion of structural violence, it also points out that it tends to overlap with various forms of domination that cause harm. This overlap can result in an inaccurate conflation of structural violence with unequal power relations, as well as of unequal power relations with harm. Furthermore, although Galtung frames structural violence as unequal power relations, the specific characteristics and dynamics of these relations remain underexplored.

The second part of this study tackles these issues, particularly by clarifying the features of structural violence and its connection to power. To achieve this, it focuses on relational perspectives on power and Foucault's concept of states of domination. These clarifications enable a reexamination of Galtung's violence triangle, with particular emphasis on the interplay between structural violence and direct violence in the context of mass crimes.

1. Understanding structural violence: Galtung's approach to violence

As previously mentioned, Galtung's work has significantly contributed to a deeper understanding of peace, particularly through the distinction between positive and negative peace and the development of conflict transformation paradigms. Central to this approach was the in-depth analysis of the concept of violence, which he reviewed in a way that uncovered aspects that had been largely overlooked until then.

Galtung's starting point was the recognition of frequent oversimplifications in the dominant Peace Research of his time, which equated peace with the mere absence of violence, primarily understood as intentional physical aggression. While Galtung agreed that peace requires the absence of violence, he argued that this view was incomplete, as it ignored the underlying causes of conflict and often resulted in merely restoring the status quo (Galtung 1967; Webb 1986). Consequently, Galtung believed that the concept of violence needed to be expanded to support more effective peace strategies. In his words, "the concept of violence must be broad enough to include the most significant varieties, yet specific enough to serve as a basis for concrete action" (Galtung 1969, 168).

With this objective in mind, Galtung initially provided a broad definition of violence as "influence," explaining that "*violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations*" (Galtung 1969, 168). Thus, according to him, violence is "*the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual*" (ibid.)—namely, the cause of a situation that has the potential to be better than it currently is. More specifically, Galtung conceptualized the difference between the potential and the actual as a condition of harm, deprivation or injustice, or of "avoidable insults to basic human needs, and more generally to *life*" (Galtung 1990, 292).

With this framework in place, Galtung went on to define several dimensions of violence (Galtung 1969). Among these, the concepts of direct (or personal) violence and indirect (or structural) violence are particularly significant. The primary distinction between them is whether there is "a clear subject-object relation" between those who act and those who suffer violence. More specifically, direct violence occurs when the insult to human needs results from individual actions and decisions, while structural violence occurs when the

insult is not directly linked to individual behavior (Galtung 1969). For example, consider a murder and a child forced to drop out of school to work and support their family: the actual somatic and mental realizations of both the murdered person and the child are below their potential—that is, the murdered could still be alive, and the child could be receiving an education. However, the causes of these situations are very different. The murder is the result of an individual's action (direct violence), while the child's lack of education is due to social factors (structural violence).

More generally, direct violence can be understood as an act of aggression against a victim or the behavior of inflicting harm on another person, which can be observed through the senses. In contrast, structural violence is “silent,” it “does not show”. It “is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (Galtung 1969, 173). Galtung identified two primary forms of structural violence: exploitation, which pertains to the economy, and repression, which relates to politics. However, he acknowledged other forms of structural violence, such as patriarchy, conceptualized as a vertical structure with men at the top and women at the bottom (Galtung 1996). More broadly, Galtung equated structural violence with “social injustice” (Galtung 1969, 171)².

In any case, structural violence indicates the existence of unjust social structures, which, according to Galtung, are “systems of interaction, for a given set of actors” (Galtung 1969, 175) or “patterned relationships among components of a social system” (Weigert 2008, 2006. See also Demmers 2017, 66). More specifically, structures are considered violent or unjust when social interactions result in unequal access to resources—namely, “the power to decide over the distribution of resources is unevenly distributed,” leading the top dogs gaining significantly more resource from the interaction than the underdogs (Galtung 1969, 171). In essence, structural violence is characterized by imbalanced or unequal power relations. This perspective emerges clearly in Galtung's work on imperialism, where imperialism is defined in terms of a “center” exploiting a “periphery” at various levels, including knowledge, economics, and politics (Galtung 1971).

² The scholar acknowledged that structural violence is usually labelled as institutional violence. However, he avoided using this term to prevent a narrow focus on violence caused solely by institutional systems (Galtung 1969, 187).

In addition to the direct and structural dimensions of violence, Galtung introduced a third, namely cultural violence. Cultural violence refers to “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence [...] that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence” (Galtung 1990, 291). Galtung argued that *avoidable* limitations on human needs occur because those who perpetrate, experience, or simply observe them view these limitations as “right—or at least not wrong” (ibid.). From this standpoint, in societies where violence is widespread, violent cultural domains are present, such as religion, ideology, language, art, and both empirical and formal sciences (Galtung 1990).

Galtung stressed that these three dimensions or types of violence—direct, structural, and cultural—are interconnected, continually influencing and legitimizing one another. This interrelationship is illustrated through a triangular model³ (Fig. 1).

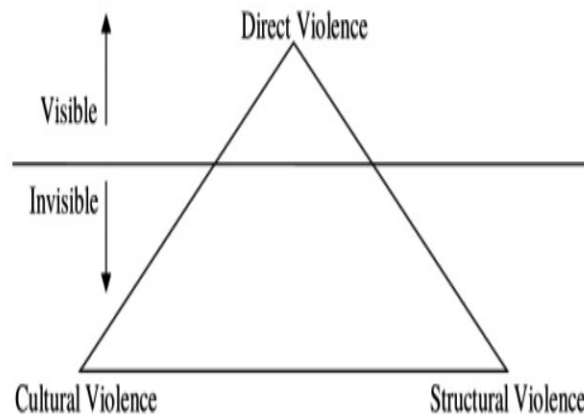


Figure 1: **Galtung's Violence Triangle**. Source: TRANSCEND Media Service.

The causal relationships among the three types of violence are multidirectional. However, in most cases “a causal flow from cultural via structural to direct violence can be identified” (Galtung 1990, 295). To illustrate, consider the exploitation of underdogs. Briefly, cultural elements (cultural violence) normalize the idea that a social system involving exploitation

³ Galtung emphasized that, despite the symmetry of the triangle, there is «a basic difference in the time relation of the three concepts of violence. Direct violence is an event; structural violence is a process with ups and downs; cultural violence is an invariant», since culture needs considerable time to change, and it remains the same for long periods (Galtung 1990, 294).

(structural violence) is acceptable. Those subjected to exploitation may attempt to break out of the “structural iron cage” that confines them to their social condition, often resorting to crime (direct violence) as a perceived means of redistributing wealth. In response, these individuals are met with repression and criminalization (counter-direct violence) and are stigmatized as aggressors. By criminalizing the victims of structural violence who react to their deprivations, the top dogs legitimize exploitation and reinforce the cultural norms that underpin structural violence (Galtung 1990, 295).

By highlighting the cultural and structural dimensions of violence, Galtung shed light on its multifaceted nature, extending beyond visible and tangible forms (direct violence) to encompass less apparent aspects concerning the way of living together. Within this framework, structural violence holds particular significance as it illustrates the dynamics underlying suffering, inequality, and conflict. In other words, focusing on structural violence reveals that these phenomena are not isolated events in time and space; rather, they are deeply rooted in unjust (violent) social structures and the power relations within societies.

2. Key developments and critical perspectives on structural violence

The notion of structural violence has received significant recognition in literature for its innovative nature. As noted earlier, it brings to light the hidden dimensions of violence that underpin unjust social systems. Aware of this, scholars across various disciplines have adopted Galtung’s framework to interpret different phenomena (for an overview, Rylko-Bauer & Farmer 2016). Notably, even environmental issues have been analyzed through the lens of structural violence (e.g., Nixon 2011), highlighting the explanatory potential of the concept.

To briefly review the main developments in research on structural violence, key works include those that have focused on its consequences, particularly by quantifying the suffering it causes in terms of life expectancy. Galtung and his colleagues were among the pioneers in this effort (Galtung & Høivik 1971), along with other scholars who developed complex systems of quantification (e.g., Köhler & Alcock 1976). Interestingly, these early works recognized both global and local processes as structural violence. However, they placed greater emphasis on global systems of domination and oppression as the primary sources of suffering and inequality.

The concept of structural violence has also been widely applied in peace, political, and social science studies. Ahmed (2007), for instance, analyzed the impact of the international economic order in terms of genocidal structural violence. Dahlberg and Thapar-Björkert (2023) relied on the notion of structural violence to describe the entrenchment of xenophobia in South African institutions. Other scholars employed it to criticize the limitations of traditional transitional justice initiatives. They argued that transitional justice often neglects the structural dimension of conflicts, focusing narrowly on addressing gross human rights violations while overlooking systemic abuses and inequalities in power distribution. As Galtung himself would probably suggest, this narrow focus obstructs the processes of social transformation necessary for achieving long-term positive peace (e.g., Gready & Robins 2019; Miller 2008; Mullen 2015; Nagy 2008).

Finally, anthropology has taken a leading role in investigating structural violence. Among the most significant contributions to this field are studies in public anthropology, which seek to encourage wide-ranging public discussions on social issues to drive social change (Borofsky 2000). However, special attention should be given to the work of the medical anthropologist Paul Farmer, as it stands out as one of the main points of reference when addressing the topic of structural violence.

Drawing on his professional experience in regions marked by profound social injustices and human suffering, Farmer defined structural violence as “a host of offensives against human dignity [such as]: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender inequality, and the more spectacular forms of violence that are uncontested human rights abuses” (2003, 8). More broadly, according to Farmer, structural violence is “violence exerted systematically—that is, indirectly—by everyone who belongs to a certain social order” (2004, 307). At its core, structural violence stems from social arrangements—economic, political, legal, religious, or cultural—that involve dysfunctional modes of interaction among individuals or “forms of desocialization” that make social inequalities and human suffering both possible and legitimate (Farmer 2004, 307). Within this interpretive framework, Farmer examined various phenomena, including the spread of AIDS among economically marginalized groups in Haiti. He attributed this to oppressive

political and economic forces rooted in the country's colonial history, further exacerbated by U.S. neoliberal policies that have perpetuated power imbalances (Farmer 2004).

Despite this appreciation, the concept of structural violence has not been without criticism. This applies both to Galtung's original definition and to its use in subsequent works. For instance, regarding Farmer's work, it has been argued that the term "structural violence" is "conceptually limited and limiting" (Wacquant 2004, 322). It is viewed as a broad category with unclear boundaries, merging different types of violence and structures of domination. This conceptual vagueness risks limiting the scope of inquiry into the phenomenon and makes it difficult to identify those responsible for it. Additionally, Farmer's research has been criticized for its determinism, since it fails to explain how historical, political, economic, and cultural processes shape everyday life and suffering (Bourgois & Scheper-Hughes 2004). Similarly, it does not address "how power operates not only on the global scale but in the daily lives of the people" (Green 2004, 319), suggesting the need for a more in-depth exploration of the mechanisms driving oppressive power dynamics, particularly through micro-level analysis.

These concerns share similarities with those raised about Galtung's research. Indeed, Galtung's definition of structural violence has been criticized for being overly flexible and broad, to the point that Galtung is said to include everything he dislikes under the umbrella of structural violence (see Boulding 1977). Moreover, some scholars have questioned Galtung's account of both the genesis and defining features of structural violence.

From the first perspective, while Galtung stated that structural violence "is built into the structure," he did not explain how it comes into existence. In his view, the violent structure is "simply *there*" (Alexander 2019). Regarding Galtung's work on imperialism (1971), it has been consistently observed that while Galtung deserves credit for having outlined its different mechanisms, types, and phases, he fell short in explaining how and why they occur (van Benthem van den Bergh 1972). In other words, Galtung did not explain how violent structures are formed or how the unequal power relations he discussed are defined (Alexander 2019). It is true that Galtung argued that there is a "causal flow" between cultural, direct, and structural violence, meaning that both culture and human behavior enable structural violence. Moreover, the fact that Galtung saw social structures as

systems of social relationships implies that structural violence (violent structures) is formed in relation to the social interactions in a specific context. However, “Galtung’s formulation seems to suggest an initial creation of structure after which the relationship between structure and action is one-way only” (Brown 1981, 223; see also Weigert 2008). In short, the literature indicates that the processes of the genesis—as well as the evolution and survival—of structural violence should be further explored, especially in terms of the relationship between action and structure, even to avoid deterministic outcomes.

From the second perspective, it has been noted that Galtung did not explore the specific content of structural violence, focusing primarily on its outcomes—that is, the harm it causes. According to him, structural violence consists of inequality in the distribution of power or unequal power relations and manifests in macro phenomena such as exploitation or repression, where the top dogs have greater access to resources than the underdogs—where the center exploits the periphery. However, some questions remain unanswered: which power relations entail harm and social injustice? Put differently, how profound must a power asymmetry be in order to qualify as structural violence? After all, power relations are always, to some extent, unbalanced, and this does not necessarily entail harm or social injustice of the magnitude described by Galtung. Thus, Galtung seems unable to explain “the structure of (asymmetrical) interdependence relations upon which the interaction relations and mechanisms that he describes are based” (van Benthem van den Bergh 1972, 82).

To summarize, two main issues emerge in Galtung’s account. First, Galtung appears to portray structural violence as self-creative and static, without fully elaborating on its origins, development, or potential for transformation. Second, he does not provide a precise definition of what structural violence actually consists of. In his formulation, structural violence seems to be equated with unequal power relations, and unequal power relations with harm—a connection that is overly simplistic. Both of these limitations potentially constrain a more thorough understanding of this critical concept and may challenge efforts to apply it both analytically and practically.

The following paragraphs aim to address the second issue just outlined, which can be summarized as follows: what are the characteristics of structural violence and what does power have to do with it.

3. Unpacking structural violence: its characteristics and connection to power

As widely discussed, although Galtung's definition of structural violence has opened the door to interesting lines of research, it has also encountered criticism. Among other things, scholars have suggested that the concept lacks precision, particularly regarding the characteristics of the power relations involved. What is meant by unequal power relations? How do power relations imply suffering and social injustice? What does power have to do with violent structures?

To address these questions, it is helpful to first recall Galtung's idea that structural violence "is built into the structure" (Galtung 1969, 173). This means that structural violence primarily pertains to social structures; more precisely, when structural violence is present, the structure of a society is violent. Galtung further clarified that social structures should be understood as "systems of interaction" among social actors (Galtung 1969, 175), which is a widely accepted view in sociology⁴. Accordingly, structural violence—the violent social structure—is framed by Galtung in relational terms, as a set of unequal or imbalanced power relations.

Highlighting the relational dimension of social structure is crucial as it guides the refinement of the concept of structural violence and the characteristics of the unequal power relations it involves. Specifically, since social structures are fundamentally about relations, understanding violent structures necessitates adopting relational perspectives on power⁵, including Foucault's approach. In their essence, these perspectives advocate for a networked view of power rooted in interactions among social actors. Notably, they clearly

⁴ Specifically, the reference is to Marxist, structural-functionalist, and structuralist literature. Despite the differences among these perspectives, proponents argue that the essence of the structure lies in the relations it embodies.

⁵ In political philosophy, three main theories of power emerge: the substantive, the subjective, and the relational (*sostanzialistica, soggettivistica, and relazionale*) (Bobbio 1985).

distinguish power from violence, thus helping to avoid the equation of structural violence with harm or suffering.

3.1 Power as a relational intertwining

From a relational perspective, power is understood as the ability of one social actor to influence another to act in ways they otherwise would not. Weber was the first to define power as “every *Chance*, within a social relationship, of enforcing one’s own will even against resistance, whatever the basis for this *Chance* might be” (Weber 2019/1864–1920, 134). Later, many others developed similar approaches. For example, Dahl posited that “A has power over *B* to the extent that he can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do” (Dahl 1957, 202–203). Similarly, Luhmann (1975) defined power as the capacity to increase the likelihood that Alter adopts the course of action proposed by Ego. Despite their distinct theoretical perspectives—Weber viewing power as obedience to a command, Dahl as the exercise of influence, and Luhmann as a communicative medium – all these scholars share a common understanding of power as a relation among social actors.

The central feature of relational conceptions of power is thus its anchoring in social relations. Unlike the view presented in sovereignty theory (Hobbes), from a relational perspective, power is not something to be possessed; rather, it depends on the actions of social actors. Power is something that “arises from action and remains bound to action” (Anter 2020 12, referring to Weber). Essentially, power does not exist in the abstract, nor does it have any intrinsic content; it is formed when a relation is established and takes shape within it. As Dahl puts it, “power is a relation, and [...] *it is a relation among people*” (Dahl 1957, 203). Power, therefore, requires at least two social actors, who may be individuals, groups, nations, or any other form of organization. Power is inherently multilateral and extends beyond the political realm.

Since power is a relation, it is worth recognizing that this relation is contingent and situational. Dahl (1957) suggested that A’s ability to influence B depends on factors such as the resources A has, the institutional conditions, and B’s behavior. Similarly, Weber pointed out that the chance of being obeyed depends not only on personal abilities but also on the context, that is, the structure of social forces in the situation where the power

relation takes place (Ferrarotti 2015). Luhmann (1975) acknowledged that the exercise of power is not independent of the social system. He argued that the system generates a specific arrangement of possible choices for social actors, within which power operates.

These considerations suggest that the social context in which the social relation—and thus power—is situated influences the relation itself. However, the cited authors do not adopt a systemic or structural perspective, with the result that they do not see power as inherently part of the social context. While they argue that power relations do not occur in a vacuum, power should not be confused with the resources available to the social actors participating in the power relationship or with the social system in which these relations unfold and on which they depend. In other words, power does not ontologically involve social space; it exists only if there is a relation between social actors (Chazel 1983; Pinzani 2007).

While this framework helps to outline the nature of power, it appears to overlook the importance of systemic factors in encouraging certain behaviours among social actors, and therefore the possibility that power is an integral part of the social system (Byung-Chul 2005/2019; Croce 2008). This aspect, by contrast, is addressed in Foucault's work. In line with relational perspectives, Foucault defined the exercise of power as "a way in which certain actions modify others." Specifically, power is "a way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions" (Foucault 1983, 219 and 222). Thus, from Foucault's perspective, power is the influence a social actor *intentionally* exerts over the actions of others (Brigaglia 2019)⁶. However, he pointed out that, while power is inherently interindividual, it is always closely linked to interconnected powers—what he called "power networks." More precisely, power networks arise *unintentionally* from interindividual power relations and essentially represent power structures⁷ that tend to manifest and reproduce in consistent patterns within the relevant social context (Foucault 1978/1976; Brigaglia 2019). Importantly, there is a circular relationship between interindividual power relations and power networks, in the sense that any social interaction creates power relations

⁶ Foucault first introduced the idea of power as intentional influence in the late 1970s, whereas his earlier works framed power as an imposition rooted in conflict (Brigaglia 2019).

⁷ Foucault avoids using the term structure when discussing power networks. This may be due to his caution regarding the associations it might evoke in a cultural context influenced by structuralism or his intention to highlight the complexity and unpredictability of power (Brigaglia 2019).

(power networks); however, social interactions among actors develop according to the structure's patterns, thereby contributing to its reproduction (Brigaglia 2019).

Along these lines, it must be noted that power networks “are not in superstructural positions, with merely a role of [...] accompaniment” (Foucault 1978/1976, 94). They exist as unstable and local microstructures that have “a directly productive role” whose outcome is contingent, provisional and unpredictable (ibid.). From this point of view, power appears to be a productive force that shapes reality from within. As is well known, Foucault defined power thus conceived as “bio-power,” which is “a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them” (Foucault 1978/1976, 136). This means that power has a pervasive and generative nature, which runs through the entire social body and encompasses the totality of relations (Foucault 1975; 1978/1976; 2004).

To summarize, power—understood primarily as an influence on the actions of others—is relation. However, this does not mean that it is detached from the social space; indeed, it exists within the interplay between relations among social actors and a dense network of structural factors that guide its exercise.

3.2 Structural violence as states of domination

To define the unequal power relations that constitute structural violence, an additional clarification of the constitutive elements of power is necessary. As mentioned earlier, from a relational perspective, power involves the ability of one social actor to elicit a non-spontaneous action from another. This definition may suggest that the actor, behaving in a way they would not have spontaneously chosen, is being forced to act. In other words, it suggests that there is a connection between power and violence, understood broadly as coercion or a constraint on freedom. However, this idea has been challenged.

The scholar who most notably rejected the equivalence between power and violence is Arendt (1970), who argued that when (political) power is present, violence is absent, and vice versa. More precisely, she pointed out that power cannot rely on violence or coercion to exist, but instead requires consent. When consent weakens, power falters, and violence

takes over. Similarly, Luhmann (1975) distinguished between the exercise of power and coercion. In power relations, both parties make choices about their behavior, while those subjected to coercion are left with no choices. Yet, it is Foucault who most strongly emphasized freedom as a key element of power relations. According to him,

power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. If one of them were completely at the other's disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there would be any relations of power. Thus, in order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides (Foucault 1997/1984, 292).

According to Foucault, violence and coercion have nothing to do with power relations, which are, in fact, characterized by freedom. If someone is forced by another to do something, that is not a power relation, as power can only be exercised over free subjects. Importantly, this implies that even in imbalanced power relations, there is always the possibility of resisting power, and thus escaping a power relation one does not wish to remain in. In Foucault's words,

[i]f it is true that at the heart of power relations and as a permanent condition of their existence there is an insubordination and a certain essential obstinacy on the part of the principles of freedom, then there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight (Foucault 1983, 225).

This aspect is particularly relevant because it clarifies that an imbalance of power in social relations does not, by itself, lead to systemic harm, as it seems to suggest Galtung. More specifically, while such imbalances may result in situations of injustice, these situations can be changed through acts of resistance by the social actors involved in that relation. This is why describing structural violence as imbalanced or unequal power relations seems overly simplistic. Not only are power relations generally unbalanced, but in the situations Galtung discussed, such as repression, systemic exploitation, and patriarchy, the underdogs often have little chance of changing power relations. In other words, these are cases where there is not just an imbalance of power, but an outright denial of the other's freedom.

In this context, Foucault's research appears relevant once again, as it focuses on those kinds of power relations where the freedom of the other is severely constrained. In such

cases, according to Foucault, we do not face genuine power relations, but what he has called *states of domination*.

When an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political, or military means, one is faced with what may be called a state of domination. In such a state, it is certain that practices of freedom do not exist or exist only unilaterally or are extremely constrained and limited (Foucault, 1997/1984, 283).

Thus, the state of domination is a particular arrangement of power relations that are so asymmetric they become relations of oppression. In this situation, the interests of the dominant group (top dogs) are significantly favored at the expense of the dominated (underdogs). This implies a conflict between social actors, whether explicit or latent. Unlike normal power relations, which are “strategic games between liberties” with possibilities of action for the involved parties (Foucault 1997/1984, 299), the state of domination is characterized by severely limited degree of freedom. This means that those subject to such a state struggle to act, resist, or negotiate their position within the power relation. Importantly, although not permanent, the state of domination exhibits stability, since the asymmetry of the relation tend to endure over time. Brigaglia (2019) suggests that Foucault perceives this stability as self-reinforcing, meaning that the power and privilege of the dominant contribute to maintaining the oppression of the dominated, and vice versa. This process often occurs unintentionally, as dominants do not always actively choose to dominate; rather, states of domination are anonymous, governing inter-individual relations without the awareness of either the dominant or the dominated (Brigaglia 2019).

Based on this, it seems that structural violence is more related to states of domination than to unequal power relations. The notion of states of domination appears more suitable for describing situations of systemic injustice that affect entire societies and are difficult to eradicate. Furthermore, it helps clarify what exactly structural violence consists of. Although Foucault did not explore the concept of the state of domination in detail in his work, one can infer the existence of inter-individual relations of domination and domination networks by drawing a parallel with his views on power. Similar to power networks, domination networks are essentially structures of domination. There is a circular relationship between domination networks and domination relations, as they are

interdependent and mutually reinforcing. These relations occupy and shape the entire social space.

From this perspective, structural violence is not identified with macro-systems of domination that entail suffering, as Galtung and Farmer suggested. Instead, it develops through the constant interaction between micro-dynamics of power relations and networks of domination, against which macro-systems of domination may eventually form, such as the domination of one class over another or one gender over another (Brigaglia 2019). Among other things, this implies that violent structures, far from being abstract entities imposed on social actors, are built and maintained precisely through the relations and actions of those actors.

In short, it seems that Foucault's research, combined with relational perspectives on power, helps to address the criticisms of Galtung's concept of structural violence. The analysis presented leads to a more precise definition of structural violence, which is no longer simply a macro-system of domination or a set of unequal power relations leading to harm. Structural violence is a state of domination, a set of oppressive relations, where oppression is a particular arrangement of power relations. More precisely, a social structure is violent when the social space is permeated by oppressive social and cultural models (networks of domination) that fuel and are fueled by oppressive social interactions (interindividual relations of domination). The oppressive dynamics characterizing the networks and interindividual relations of domination are stable and often unintentional, and the oppression of the dominated (underdogs) is such that their possibility of action or reaction to the status quo is significantly limited. In this context, it is not merely the imbalanced power relations that imply systemic harm; power relations cause suffering and harm only when they lose their constitutive element of freedom and become a state of domination. In this sense, the perspectives examined also help avoid drawing a parallel between power relations and harm.

4. Some final considerations on the violence triangle

What has been discussed so far leads to the identification of structural violence with states of domination that are stable and asymmetric power relations that condemn the dominated

to oppression. Suffering and harm, therefore, do not simply arise from unequal power relations, as suggested by Galtung's definition of structural violence. Rather, they result from power in the absence of freedom. Unlike unequal power relations, where there are always margins for negotiating positions of power, in states of domination the dominated can do nothing to escape oppression. This creates situations of widespread social injustice that are difficult to eradicate.

The analysis made on structural violence requires, for completeness, a re-examination of Galtung's violence triangle. In particular, it is interesting to briefly consider the relationship between structural and direct violence, exploring how states of domination can lead to direct violence⁸. While acknowledging that Galtung does not focus on specific manifestations of direct violence in his research, the following reflection examines the link between states of domination and large-scale violence. This is based on the belief that looking into the dynamics of mass violence can support the development of more informed pacification strategies, a goal that, as previously mentioned, has been central to Galtung's research from the beginning and is now a key concern within the field of transformative justice (e.g., Gready & Robins 2019).

As a quick reminder, Galtung emphasized the complex web of causal relationships between structural, cultural, and direct violence. His view was that direct violence is supported by structural violence and reinforced by processes of cultural legitimization. Specifically, regarding the relationship between direct and structural violence, Galtung framed direct violence as an attempt "to get out of the structural iron cage" (Galtung 1990, 295) and, thus, primarily as a reaction to a situation of social injustice (structural violence). This statement, while clear on its own, takes on even greater significance when aligned with the definition of structural violence as a state of domination. In fact, direct violence appears as a means for individuals to free themselves from the oppression they face within society. More specifically, because structural violence (the state of domination) implies that certain individuals or groups lack the freedom to peacefully negotiate their

⁸ The issue of how oppression or domination can entail direct violence has been addressed in various ways in the literature, with different approaches and emphases depending on the theoretical tradition. However, the following analysis does not aim to account for all these perspectives, but rather to reinterpret the relationship between direct and structural violence identified by Galtung in light of Foucault's notion of states of domination.

position within power relations, direct violence becomes the desperate attempt to claim that freedom⁹.

Certainly, this does not imply that oppression inevitably leads to acts of aggression, nor does it suggest that claiming spaces of freedom necessarily requires direct violence, as testified, for example, by the Color revolutions of the 2000s. Galtung highlighted the circular relationship between direct, structural, and cultural violence, which implies that violent behavior is influenced by mechanisms related to cultural, cognitive, relational, and structural factors. In this context, scholars identified various social variables that can explain collective violence committed by one group against another (de la Roche, 1996; 2001), as well as moral disengagement strategies that enable violence (Bandura, 2016; Bar-Tal, 1990). In any case, regardless of the dynamics leading to direct violence in each individual case, large-scale violence may be seen as an attempt to claim spaces of freedom.

However, this is not the only possibility. Galtung stated that, in the face of efforts “to get out of the structural iron cage,” “counter-violence to keep the cage intact” may come into play (Galtung 1990, 295). Even this point becomes clearer when read within the theoretical framework proposed here. In his investigation of states of domination, Foucault pointed out that domination—oppression—is typically not intentional and is not perceived as such by all those who experience it. As Galtung also argued, both the dominated and (especially) the dominants may view the social structure as legitimate, largely due to the cultural processes that normalize it (cultural violence). Consequently, if the dominated take action to overturn the status quo, direct violence may be used as a means to preserve it. In line with this, it has been argued that collective violence is a form of “social control: self-help by a group” that entails the handling of a grievance by aggression (de la Roche 1996, 97). Therefore, from the perspective of who acts violence, it is not unjustified. For example, in interviews with some former Hutu perpetrators, they claimed they began killing Tutsis out of fear of being killed by them (Strauss 2006). From this angle, violence is a reaction to a

⁹ In this context, it is worth noting that people may misjudge the actual existence of a state of domination. What I am suggesting is that, given the highly imbalanced power dynamics in pre-conflict settings, the perception of lacking any room for peaceful negotiation of one’s oppressed position might depend on contingent or cultural elements. This implies that not only the violent structure but also the perception of the structure as violent plays a significant role in the genesis of large-scale violence.

—real or perceived—moral, social, economic, and/or political threat, and it aims to maintain social order.

Even within the dynamics just described, the occurrence of direct violence depends on the interaction of cultural, cognitive, relational, and structural factors, that is, on the mutual influence of all the vertexes of the violence triangle. This does not change the fact that when “counter-violence” occurs, even on a large scale, it may be understood as an attempt to oppose the underdogs’ claim for freedom, and thus to preserve social order.

In summary, we can identify two scenarios in which collective (direct) violence emerges in contexts characterized by highly imbalanced and blocked power relations (structural violence). On one hand, the oppressed may resort to violence against the oppressors. In this case, violence emerges (or is perceived) as the only means of claiming spaces of freedom within power relations. On the other hand, the oppressors may resort to violence against the oppressed to preserve the status quo, which they see as threatened by attempts from the oppressed to negotiate their position within the power structure. As mentioned, the idea is that these considerations, in addition to detailing Galtung’s violence triangle in light of the concept of the state of domination, provide, albeit briefly, an understanding of the dynamics behind mass violence and thus are useful for thinking about more informed peacebuilding strategies. Indeed, they suggest that violence, though destructive and to be condemned, always has a meaning, which must be investigated if the goal is to prevent its recurrence. Only this process, coupled with efforts to transform violent social structures, can ensure a truly positive peace.

References

- Ahmed, N. M. (2007), "Structural Violence as a Form of Genocide: The Impact of the International Economic Order", *Entelequia. Revista Interdisciplinar*, 5, pp. 3-41.
- Alexander, R. (2019), "Gender, Structural Violence and Peace". In C. E. Gentry, L. J. Shepherd, L. Sjoberg (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Security*, Routledge, London - New York, pp. 27-36.
- Altieri, R. (2014), "Presentazione. Johan Galtung e le Scienze per la Pace". In J. Galtung, *Affrontare il Conflitto. Trascendere e Trasformare*, Pisa University Press, Pisa, pp. 7-16.
- Anter, A. (2020), "Power and Rulership in Max Weber. Context and Effect of a Conceptual Pair", *Scienza & Politica*, XXXII, 63, pp. 9-20.
- Arendt, H. (1970), *On Violence*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York.
- Bandura, A. (2016), *Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves*, Worth, New York.
- Bar-Tal, D. (1990), "Causes and Consequences of Delegitimization: Models of Conflict and Ethnocentrism", *Journal of Social Issues*, 46, 1, pp. 65-81.
- Bobbio, N. (1985), *Stato, Governo, Società. Frammenti di un Dizionario Politico*, Einaudi, Turin.
- Borofsky, R. (2000), "Public Anthropology. Where To? What Next?", *Anthropology News*, 41, 5, pp. 9-10.
- Boulding, K. E. (1977), "Twelve Friendly Quarrels with Johan Galtung", *Journal of Peace Research*, 14, 1, pp. 75-86.
- Bourgois, P., Scheper-Hughes, N. (2004), "Comments on Anthropology of Structural Violence", *Current Anthropology*, 45, 3, pp. 317-318.
- Brigaglia, M. (2019), *Potere. Una Rilettura di Michel Foucault*, Editoriale Scientifica, Naples.
- Brown, C. (1981), "Galtung and the Marxists on Imperialism: Answers vs. Questions", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10, 3, pp. 220-228.

Byung-Chul, H. (2005), *Was ist Macht?* Reclam Verlag, Ditzingen.

Chazel, F. (1983), "Pouvoir, Structure et Domination", *Revue française de sociologie*, pp. 368–393.

Croce, M. (2008), *Sfere di Dominio. Democrazia e Potere nell'Era Globale*, Meltemi, Rome.

Dahl, R. A. (1957), "The Concept of Power", *Behavioral Science*, 2, 3, pp. 201–215.

Dahlberg, M., Thapar-Björkert, S. (2023), "Conceptualizing Xenophobia as Structural Violence in the Lives of Refugee Women in Gauteng, South Africa", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46, 12, pp. 2768–2790.

de la Roche, R. S. (1996), "Collective Violence as Social Control", *Sociological Forum*, 11, 1, pp. 97–128.

de la Roche, R. S. (2001), "Why Is Collective Violence Collective?", *Sociological Theory*, 19, 2, pp. 126–144.

Demmers, J. (2017), *Theories of Violent Conflict. An Introduction*, Routledge, London - New York.

Farmer, P. (2003), *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Farmer, P. (2004), "An Anthropology of Structural Violence", *Current Anthropology*, 45, 3, pp. 305–325.

Ferrarotti, F. (2015), "Lo Studio del Potere nelle Scienze Sociali (con particolare riferimento a Max Weber)", *La Critica Sociologica*, XLIX, 196, pp. 57–68.

Foucault, M. (1975), *Surveiller et Punir: Nascence de la prison*, Editions Gallimard, Paris.

Foucault, M. (1978), *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, Pantheon Books, New York: (or. ed. *La Volonté de Savoir*, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1976).

Foucault, M. (1983), "The Subject and Power". In H. L. Dreyfus, P. Rabinow (eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 208–226.

Foucault, M. (1997), "The Ethic of the Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom". In Rabinow, P. (ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: The New Press, pp. 281–301 (or. ed. "L'éthique du Souci de Soi Comme Pratique de la Liberté, interview with H. Becker, R. Fernet-Betancourt, A. Gomez-Müller, January 20, 1984, *Concordia. Revista internacional de filosofia*, 6, 1984, pp. 99–116).

Foucault, M. (2004), *La Naissance de la Biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France (1978–1979)*, Seuil, Paris.

Galtung, J. (1964), "An Editorial", *Journal of Peace Research*, 1, 1, pp. 1–4.

Galtung, J. (1967), "Social Position, Party Identification and Foreign Policy Orientation: A Norwegian Case Study". In J. N. Rosenau (ed.), *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy*, The Free Press, New York, pp. 161–193.

Galtung, J. (1968), "Peace". In D. L. Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 11, The Macmillan Company and The Free Press, New York, pp. 487–496.

Galtung, J. (1969), "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research", *Journal of Peace Research*, 6, 3, pp. 167–191.

Galtung, J. (1990), "Cultural Violence", *Journal of Peace Research*, 27, 3, pp. 291–305.

Galtung, J. (1996), *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*, Sage Publications, London.

Galtung, J. (2014), *Affrontare il Conflitto. Trascendere e Trasformare*, Pisa University Press, Pisa (ed. or. *Transcend and Transform: an Introduction to Conflict Work*, Pluto press, London, 2004).

Galtung, J., Høivik, T. (1971), "Structural and Direct Violence. A Note on Operationalization", *Journal of Peace Research*, 8, 1, pp. 73–76.

Gready, P., Robins, S. (eds.) (2019), *From Transitional to Transformative Justice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Green, L. (2004), "Comments on An Anthropology of Structural Violence", *Current Anthropology*, 45, 3, pp. 319–320.

Köhler, G., Alcock, N. (1976), "An Empirical Table of Structural Violence", *Journal of Peace Research*, 13, 4, pp. 343–356. Luhmann, N. (1975), *Macht*, Ferdinand Enke Verlag, Stuttgart.

Miller, Z. (2008), "Effects of Invisibility: In Search of the 'Economic' in Transitional Justice", *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 2, pp. 266–291.

Mullen, M. (2015), "Reassessing the Focus of Transitional Justice: The Need to Move Structural and Cultural Violence to the Centre", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 28, 3, pp. 462–479.

Nagy, R. (2008), "Transitional Justice as Global Project: Critical Reflections", *Third World Quarterly*, 29, 2, pp. 275–289.

Nixon, R. (2011), *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, London.

Pinzani, A. (2007), "Verso una Nuova Ontologia del Potere?". In De Simone, A. (ed.) *Diritto, Giustizia e Logiche di Dominio*, Morlacchi, Perugia, pp. 311–340.

Rylko-Bauer, B., Farmer, P. (2016), "Structural Violence, Poverty, and Social Suffering". In D. Brady, L. M. Burton (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Poverty*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 47–74.

van Benthem van den Bergh, G. (1972), "Theory or Taxonomy? Some Critical Notes on Johan Galtung's A Structural Theory of Imperialism", *Journal of Peace Research*, 9, 1, pp. 77–85.

Venturi, B. (2013), *Il Demone della Pace. Storia, Metodologie e Prospettive Istituzionali della Peace Research e del Pensiero di Johan Galtung*, Emil di Odoya, Bologna.

Wacquant, L. (2004), "Comments on An Anthropology of Structural Violence", *Current Anthropology*, 45, 3, pp. 322.

Webb, K. (1986). "Structural Violence and the Definition of Conflict". In E. Laszlo, J. Y. Yoo (eds.), *World Encyclopedia of Peace*. Oxford: Pergamon, vol. 2, pp. 431–434.

Weber, M. (2019), *Economy and Society: A New Translation*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge: (ed. or. M. Weber, *Soziologische kategorienlehre*, 1864–1920).

Weigert, K. M. (2008), "Structural Violence". In L. Kurtz (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict* (Second Edition). Academic Press, pp. 2004–2011.

Wright, Q. (1942), *A Study of War*, vol. 2, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.