

REVIEWS:

## **MET ALLE GEWELD: EEN FILOSOFISCHE ZOEKTOCHT**

**H. Achterhuis**

**Lemniscaat 2008**

**793 pages, ISBN: 9789047701279**

*Jelle Jan van Baardewijk\**

### **Introduction**

What is violence? Can words be understood as acts of violence? Is there a possibility to legitimise violence, for example on moral or political grounds? Is violence a mean to an end? Or is it rather an absolute phenomenon, which follows intrinsic laws? And what are the ultimate sources of our propensity for violence? Can it be traced back to our animal nature, or must it be situated in cultural and social mechanisms? In his landmark work *Met alle geweld: een filosofische zoektocht* (By Force: A Philosophical Quest) the Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis tries to answer these and other questions concerning the different forms of appearances and sources of violence.

The way Achterhuis approaches the phenomenon of violence falls roughly into six perspectives: means-end thinking, mimetic desire, the battle for recognition, we/them thinking, moralising violence and mans animal nature. Eventually he unifies these six perspectives on the basis of evolution theories. With this multi-causal approach, Achterhuis wants to contribute to the political debate on practical manifestations of violence, like terrorism, humanitarian intervention and mindless violence. But at the same time he tries to take part in the more technical-philosophical debate on the nature and sources of our propensity for violence. In the following section I shall introduce the above mentioned perspectives on violence, emphasising on the more philosophical points.

### **I. What is Violence *and* What Not?**

Achterhuis demarcates his definition of violence from the concepts of symbolic and structural violence. In the concept of *symbolic violence* different power relations in cultures and languages are understood as violent. The fact that a man usually marries a shorter and younger woman, can for example be seen as an act of violence. Just as the fact that women are averagely remunerated less than men, is an act of violence. Actually, the whole practice of disciplined labour in modern western society, can according to this model be understood in terms of power and thus as acts of violence. It was the

---

\* *Mphil-candidate at the VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands and Freie Universität Berlin, Germany.*

sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who coined the term ‘symbolic violence’, Achterhuis argues however, that it can already be found in the philosophical works of Michel Foucault and Jean-Paul Sartre. The latter, for example, repeatedly termed the whole of American society as ‘fascist’.

Instead of symbolic violence the Nordic polemologist Johan Galtung rather speaks of *structural violence*. With this notion he basically means everything that makes the possibility of self-development impossible. The whole process of socialising, in which people have to curtail and adjust themselves, is then defined as a kind of violence. According to Achterhuis the British ethicist Ted Honderich also defends such a wide, structural definition of violence in his notorious book ‘After terror’. In this volume he posits that a decadent lunch with his publisher is an act of violence, because he could have fed an African child with it.

Achterhuis argues that, when everything we do is defined as violence, from having lunch with your publisher to a relationship with a younger and shorter woman, there seems to be little difference between such actions and shooting someone. Nevertheless there is quite a big difference between the two: whereas shooting at somebody is mostly the consequence of wanting to hurt someone, lunching with your publisher or a relationship with a shorter woman, lacks such an intention. Achterhuis therefore makes use of a definition of violence in which its intention is recognised. He defines violence as the more or less intentional inflict or threat to inflict damage to humans or objects. However, it is not with this exclusion of non-intentional acts from his definition of violence, that Achterhuis distances himself from the concepts of structural and symbolic violence. These concepts do not, according to Achterhuis, refer to real acts of violence such as shooting someone. They rather denote certain power relations in our culture and language.

Achterhuis provides two separate arguments against the concepts of structural and symbolic violence. In the first place he states that, when power relations are defined in terms of symbolic or structural violence, the chance exists that power relations generate real violence. To illuminate this Achterhuis stresses that this took place in the sixties and seventies. At that time intellectuals like Sartre over defined cultural power relations as violence, which eventually generated real violence – just think of the *Rote Armee Fraktion* in Germany. In the second place Achterhuis argues that talking about cultural power relations in terms of violence possibly closes the possibility to debate these phenomena in the public and political spheres, because the term ‘violence’ might block the dialogue with the people who defend the cultural power relations as being good habits.

Nevertheless, Achterhuis does underline the difference between the freedom of speech – which includes the freedom to define cultural power relations as violent – and a real act of violence. He emphasises that it has often been

forgotten that words, contrary to acts of violence, can be laid aside. Therefore Achterhuis argues that words cannot be understood as violence; words represent no intentional infliction of damage to humans or objects. He does expose the danger that is related to the freedom of speech: although words do not legitimise violence, words can generate violence. Therefore one's choice of words should be deliberate.

## II. Is Violence a Mean to an End?

In his book 'On War' the German general Carl von Clausewitz famously defends the thesis that war violence is nothing more than the continuation of state-politics with other means. Von Clausewitz is also of the opinion that violence is a mean for political ends; politics can legitimise violence. This implies that political means are the measure of the use of violence. Hence, Von Clausewitz thinks that war violence may *not* be seen as an isolated and absolute phenomenon with its own intrinsic laws in which politics may not intervene.

On the basis of Leo Tolstoy's novel Achterhuis criticises Von Clausewitz's rational explanation of violence. 'War and Peace' can be read as one big dialogue with Von Clausewitz's thesis that war is a mean to a political end. Tolstoy for example pictures Napoleon as a half-diseased man, who does not oversee the battlefield and nevertheless gives orders, which can of course never be followed. But in 'War and Peace' every description of the battle between the Russians and the French as a rational means to a political end, is made ridiculous. Tolstoy makes clear that war and violence in general cannot be seen a neutral instrument. Plundering, raping and murdering are unintentional, but often, if not always foreseeable side effects of war. But it is not just Tolstoy who proves that violence can derail dramatically. It is quite often visible in history, for example when the Russians returned home after de Second World War.

In the line of Tolstoy, Achterhuis concludes that war violence and violence in general cannot be seen as a bare means to an end. In Achterhuis' opinion, violence has rational, as well as irrational, roots. In the last paragraph I will come back to Achterhuis' evolutionary explanation of the irrational roots of violence. But why does Achterhuis also wants to adhere to the rational character of violence? Are Tolstoy's arguments not convincing enough for him? Basing his thesis upon some thoughts of Hanna Arendt Achterhuis explains why we should always be open to the rationality of violent behaviour.

Arendt argues that violence may *not* be seen as a means to a political end, because the latter is logically prevalent to the former, which can end up in the political statement that 'the end justifies the means'. Indeed history has proven again and again that high political targets can legitimise unlimited uses of violence – for an example, consider the bombing of Dresden. But Arendt

goes a lot further with her analysis of the ‘means to an end’ model. She even refuses to answer the question ‘what is the objective of governance?’ According to her analysis even the apparently pristine answer ‘the objective of governance lies in the protection of the citizen’ can have extremely violent consequences. Arendt therefore argues that we should not at all be thinking in terms of ‘means’ and ‘ends’ when practising politics.

Now Achterhuis warns of the effects of seeing bare rationality in violence, and rather pinpoints the irrational aspects of violence, but he does *not* agree with Arendt that politics cannot be seen in terms of ends. He argues that even the policy of a terrorist organisation as Hamas can be motivated by a political end. Although individual suicide bombers often have religious ideas about their actions, the organisation in the name of which they undertake them has a clearly-defined political end. Achterhuis insists in an approach of terrorism and violators in general as rational discussion partners, in order to keep at least the possibility for discussion open. When violators are stigmatised as absolutely evil men, it is hard to just think about negotiating with them. According to Achterhuis, the recognition of rational objectives of any enemy will help to curb its danger. With this statement Achterhuis clearly takes position as a thinker who believes in the power of dialogue.

### **III. The Lack of Recognition as a Source of Violence**

Achterhuis argues that the *lack of recognition* is one of the sources of our propensity for violence. He tries to understand the mechanism of recognition with the help of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and his twentieth century followers Alexandre Kojève, Axel Honneth and Francis Fukuyama.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel claims that a human being always desires to be recognised by the other. In more Hegelian words, a human desires the desire of the other and vice-versa. To become recognised as a human being, man desires to be recognised in its most fundamental aspect, in which he distinguishes himself from animals. This is, according to Hegel, his ability to face his own finiteness and to risk his own life. So someone can get his honour, his recognition as a human being, by showing the other that he is able to join a battle of life and death. Out of anxiety for a violent death one of them surrenders and becomes a servant that acknowledged the other as his master and will serve him by working for him.

For Hegel the mechanism of recognition continues to influence the behaviour of men after the split into masters and servants. The master can recognise another master as a human being, but a servant cannot. To be recognised as a master, a human must therefore battle with another master, since the mechanism of recognition functions, according to Hegel, only on an equal level. Eventually, the servants will risk their lives in order to establish a republic in which every man is recognised as being equal. Hegel argues that this happened with the French Revolution. He suggests – and

Francis Fukuyama famously resurrected this claim – that history has come to an end with this revolution, because the equality of man is therewith realised and a higher principle of recognition does not exist.

Now Achterhuis thankfully uses Hegel's insights on the mechanism of recognition, but he does not incorporate the condition of equality in it. According to Achterhuis Hegel projects the modern value of equality on the mechanism of recognition; he has trapped in a modern fallacy. Achterhuis argues that there are many grades of recognition, in particular in hierarchical, organised societies. But also the satisfaction of a sadist experiences on unequal grounds can be explained with the mechanism of recognition. When someone surrenders to a sadist he enjoys his or her powerlessness. Hence, recognition does not presuppose equality.

What is the relation between recognition and violence? When one fails to recognise the other, or even denies his value as a human being, the other might become violent. In particular, mindless violence and culture-related violence – like murder in the name of family honour – can be seen as a result of a lack of recognition. Achterhuis underlines that the role of recognition is central in our motivations, although it is more often identified as respect or honour. Achterhuis argues that, when we considerate the function of recognition in human behaviour, a lot of violence can be prevented. Nevertheless he upholds that the mechanism of recognition can explain our violent behaviour, but that it therefore cannot legitimise it.

#### **IV. Mimetic Desire as a Source of Violence**

Beside the mechanism of recognition, the *mechanism of mimetic desire* is a source of our propensity for violence. Achterhuis follows the description that the French anthropologist René Girard gave of this mechanism. Girard understands 'mimetic desire' as the desire of a human being for what other humans desire. Hence, Girard thinks that desire comes into life by imitating others. This often takes form in the desire to want to have the things the other owns, which can be everything from food to a partner. Achterhuis explains that the mechanism of mimetic desire will ultimately cause a scarcity of almost everything.

Now Girard means that a whole community can be infected by the desire of that one thing. The collective desire for one thing can, according to Girard, eventually derail in one big battlefield. On the peak of the battle the violence will be canalised to one victim, the scapegoat. This one person is killed and the battle is abruptly over.

With help of the mechanism of mimetic desire Achterhuis explains some different forms of violence between modern societies – in which every human is equal – and traditional societies. The inequality and hierarchy in traditional societies make sure that people cannot desire what people of other

ranks desire; a farmer did not desire what a noble man desired. This radically changed in the modern world of equality. According to Achterhuis this is why violence can take relatively big proportions in modern society. In addition to Girard's model he argues that our contemporaries do not believe anymore in canalising the violence to a scapegoat for the battle – and therewith we have lost a way of ending battles in modern society. In modern society people rather blame themselves for the violence. According to Girard, this unfortunately does not solve the spiral of violence.

Achterhuis reckons that the battle of recognition, as well as the idea of mimetic desire, are mechanisms that help to understand the roots of our propensity for violence. He does not claim that one is more fundamental than the other, but he does underscore a difference. The battle for recognition is a quite conscious mechanism, whereas the mimetic desire is rather an unconscious one. Achterhuis pinpoints the importance of understanding the motivations people have for using force, but again and again underlines that it is important to see that the understanding of violence is not a justification of it.

## V. Thinking in Contrasts as a Source of Violence

According to Achterhuis the murder on the Dutch cineaste Theo Van Gogh in 2004 can be seen as a turn in public opinion in the Netherlands. Until that attack the Dutch more or less believed in *one* Dutch nation. But this assault opened a discussion in which the foreigners were more and more seen as outsiders, for example as Moroccans, or more generally as Muslims. Achterhuis shows that this movement also took place in the intellectual debate around the murder. Intellectuals, writers and politicians stated that the freedom to speech is the counterpart of acts of violence.

Achterhuis defends that *thinking dichotomies* like language/violence, democracy/Islam or we/them can derail quite easily in violence. With the help of Carl Schmidt and John Maxwell Coetzee, he endeavours to uncover the importance of thinking in dichotomies for the functioning of politics. At the same time however, he warns for the risks of this way of thinking. He pays close attention to the moralising of the debate on war violence by identifying ourselves with the good and the others with evil.

Achterhuis persuasively shows that thinking in dichotomies as we/them and good/evil is one of the crucial conditions for massive manifestations of violence, like genocides. Moreover, the purifying of the own side and the dehumanisation of the other brings the matters to a head. This purifying is already seen in relatively small conflicts in which people already tend to identify themselves with the victims and the other as the victimiser. When we take into account the mechanism of mimetic desire, a whole group of people can be stigmatised as bad and eventually be exterminated, as happened in the Holocaust and more recently in Rwanda.

The way Achterhuis discusses the conditions for genocides is one of the highlights of the book. Illuminating is his analysis of the role conformism of the offenders as well as the victims play in genocides. In extreme violent contexts people from all sides of the conflict get used to murder and therefore tend to think that one can murder unpunished. Achterhuis celebrates the 'non-conformist' – a rare figure in extreme violent times –, like the hotel manager Paul Rusabagina, whose heroic life is portrait in the film 'Hotel Rwanda'. This Hutu man saved thousands of Tutsi-refugees in his hotel.

Nevertheless, Achterhuis warns for identifying the killers of the Tutsis as pure evil people. For Achterhuis Nelson Mandela is a clear example of a hero since he opened up the dialogue with his former enemy, instead of stigmatising the previous enemy as mere evil. With this openness Mandela chose for peace instead of new conflict.

## **VI. Man's Animal Nature**

The above mentioned perspectives behind violence were merely social or cultural, but Achterhuis also provides for a natural explanation of violence. On the basis of the research of the German ethnologist Konrad Lorenz, Achterhuis defends that aggression is an inherited instinct of man and animal. This means that aggression cannot be totally suppressed; it rather needs to be satisfied in some way, which can be a friendly one such as a ritual. Lorenz showed that the instinct of aggression is vital interest for the preservation of the individual animal and its sort. For humans however, he argues that aggression often derails into violence. Recent research has proved that animals too can be very violent, but the thesis that aggression is an instinct that searches for a way to be realised, has not.

Achterhuis argues that if man indeed has an instinct of aggression, we can never abolish it, rather we should channel it into commonly accepted forms of behaviour. So Achterhuis is quite optimistic about our chances to live peacefully with our instinct of aggression; we can learn to domesticate it. He underlines that the only big risk is that we try to abolish it, for example by forbidding certain rituals.

According to Lorenz certain animal and human habits can limit or even neutralise the instinct for aggression; there are ceremonies of pacification. A dog for example can lose its aggression to another dog, when the latter subordinates itself to the first by showing him his neck. What happens with dogs can be interpreted as the Hegelian movement of recognition: the one dog recognises the superiority of the other, like a man gives up the battle of life and death and surrenders. Lorenz defends that human behaviour as laughing and loving can also be seen as ceremonies of pacification. But

Lorenz argues that an armed man is not naturally limited by certain ceremonies; he is an evolutionary bastard.

Scientists have often related genocides to high technological developments like aircraft and artillery. But Achterhuis shows persuasively that high technological developments are no fundamental condition for genocides at all. The Hutus for example almost wiped out the Tutsis with chopping knives. Following Lorenz, Achterhuis defends that the possibility to arm is the source of genocides. With this thesis Achterhuis distances himself from the thesis that the Holocaust is a unique happening. We should therefore be careful regarding the possibility of a new genocide. Achterhuis opines that the politicians of the '*never again*' rhetoric did not do their job sufficiently, because they could not stop the Rwanda genocide.

## VII. Evolutionary Medial Concepts

After this discussion of the six sources of violence, Achterhuis unifies all these perspectives, in the last part of his book, in the process of evolution. Evolution theory involves two levels of explanation of violent action: On the one hand there are proximate objectives and causes for violent action. This concerns the mechanism that at the moment of violating someone immediately motivates a person, such as hunger or shelter. On the other hand, there are ultimate objectives and causes for violent action. These are the mechanisms that generate the proximate objectives and causes. Self-preservation and reproduction are examples of ultimate causes that, for example, generate the proximate objectives hunger and thirst. The military historian Azar Gat argues that proximate as well as ultimate objectives of a human being can be the cause of violent action. So a war can be a result of the ultimate ambition to defend one's self and one's family, but it can also be caused by the proximate objective to overpower someone.

When someone has all he needs to fulfil his proximate and ultimate objectives it might happen that somebody else tries to attack him. That is why he needs to protect himself, to which the other will react by rearming as well – be it out of defence or to inflict a threat – on foot of which the first party reacts again. Eventually this process will end up in an arms race, which Steven Pinker famously calls the '*Hobbesian trap*'. Achterhuis argues that the evolutionary roots of mimetic desire can be found in this Hobbesian trap.

Pinker also makes the idea of recognition a subject of his Neo-Darwinist discussion on human behaviour. In a stateless society – the Hobbesian state of nature – respect is of large value. When someone is disrespected he can take revenge. The importance of revenge must therefore be continually noticeable for the others; others must literally see your willingness to attack and - when necessary - to kill anyone.

All the social and cultural mechanisms that Achterhuis describes as being the causes and sources of violence are eventually anchored in the nature of man. It is on an evolutionary level that these mechanisms find their rational roots. Achterhuis doubts that the mechanisms can really be understood as ultimate or proximate ends of man, but he does think they find their source in the process of evolution. That is why he introduces a new model of evolutionary explanation. According to this model the six earlier described mechanisms are on a middle-level mediating between ultimate and proximate causes of violent acts. Achterhuis terms them 'evolutionary medial concepts'.

### Conclusion

The book *Met alle geweld: een filosofische zoektocht* is a treasure of philosophical thoughts concerning violence. It could be characterised as a philosophical encyclopaedia on violence, whereas this might overlook its unity. This unity consists in Achterhuis' argument that the above described social and cultural mechanisms are anchored in the process of evolution.

The question however remains whether violence is indeed fully understandable in evolutionary terms. What about extreme violent behaviour, like the affection of battle, fanaticism and genocide? Can these be rhymed with our ultimate motivations? Do these experiences not militate against ideas like preservation? Achterhuis does not persuasively answer these questions. But apart from these rather theoretical questions, there are practical questions waiting to be answered. Achterhuis conclusively argues for the importance of rituals, in order to channel our violent nature. But how common are such rituals in modern society? Is there currently any playful way to learn to deal with violence, apart from video games and television? When Achterhuis is right, we have to find new cultural space to ritualise violence. But are we open-minded enough for new violent practices and rituals? Is not every kind of violent hobby, practise and work scarifying most people in modern society?