

Research Article

Carlos Vladimir Zambrano*

“Violent Possible”: The Stochasticity of Institutional Violence

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Abstract: Conceiving violences, in the plural, as stochastic, that is, probabilistic, phenomena remains of interest both for advancing the understanding of their open and undetermined nature, and for neutralizing narratives that naturalize them, using them to promote labeling, incite stigmatization, and manufacture scapegoats. What follows here is a prolegomenon focused on the inveterate subtlety of institutional violences. Do institutions generate or facilitate, undo or disregard violences? Are institutions and violences symbiotic? Would it be useful to recover the ecological vision of classical anthropologies to observe in detail the mode of operation of institutional violences? The hypothesis has evolved from observing that multiple conditions materialize in events that may or may not become violent and, that, if they do, in fact, are not necessarily equal, even within the same institution, since they are segmentary, function in non-homogeneous contexts, and with relative temporalities. The notion of stochasticity is promoted to advance the description and eventual explanation of why institutions (social, cultural, economic, or political; altruistic or charitable; public or private) sediment at some probable moment “violent possibles”; a promotion that aids in the critique of structural violence, since the possession of a “potential for violence” by institutions cannot be construed to mean that all institutions are structurally violent or that they necessarily employ force for control at any given moment.

Keywords: Singularity, Diversity, Stochasticity, Governability, Probability

1 Introduction

“The very substance of violent action is ruled by the means-end category,
whose chief characteristic, if applied to human affairs,
has always been that the end is in danger of being overwhelmed
by the means which it justifies...

Since the end of human action can never be reliably predicted,
the means used to achieve political goals
are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world...”
Hannah Arendt.

The close-up on the rusted imprint of a bullet that pierced, to fulfill its homicidal purpose, a blue door – evocative of the sunniest skies of Bogotá or Málaga – resembling those of a 1960s Ford abandoned outdoors, constitutes the powerful metonymy of the cover of Bernstein’s (2013) book. This image revives the emotional jolt of discovering, in an old wound on the skin of the upper part of the shoulder blade of a young Nukak-Makú woman from the Colombian Guaviare jungles, the vestige of a bullet likely impacting her as a child, which over the years scarred as a protrusion similar to the largest lesions caused by measles. Now, in these turbulent

* **Corresponding author: Carlos Vladimir Zambrano**, Laboral Law, Universidad de Cádiz, Jerez de la Frontera, Spain,
e-mail: carlos.zambrano@gm.uca.es

times, rife with violences that once again the bells toll, both shots reveal the ultimate outcome of civilized institutions: their immense capacity to exert control over everything (people, animals, and things) using any type of violence, subtle or forceful, always armed, whether with bullets or signs.

Reading Bernstein's preface to his book (2013) obviates further elaboration, as it already highlights the institutional capacity of states – tested by the COVID-19 pandemic – to wield their intimidating force – a generator of legitimacy and institutionalizer of “violent possibles” – among whose probable outcomes is the activation of global war (against a global enemy like the pandemic, or among numerous localized groups, independent of states; although they serve it, its remains unimaginable). This war already exhibits its stochasticity. Hence, the author invokes a phrase attributed to Hannah Arendt, “thinking without banisters,” as a guiding principle for the governability of the violent.

As a corollary, this article is structured as follows: this introduction and a general conceptualization of stochasticity and institutional violence; three sections focusing on violence, the violent, stochasticity, the stochastic, and their interconnections; and concluding remarks on the stochasticity of institutional violence. Thus, the stochastic quality of violent behavior – stochasticity – opens the possibility of dynamically understanding institutional violence, while simultaneously outlining a critique of the notion of structural violence.

2 General Conceptualization

“[...] I saw millions of delightful and horrible acts;
none amazed me so much as the fact that they all occupied the same point,
without superposition and without transparency.
What my eyes saw was simultaneous; what I shall write is successive,
because language is successive.”
Borges (1999)

“A stochastic process is the mathematical abstraction of an empirical process whose development is governed by probabilistic laws” (Doob, 1990, p. v), given that an empirical process can be understood as the successive convergence of observable or verifiable events over time. Stochasticity would be the evolutionary, random, and irreversible quality of concrete events within the process, regardless of whether they are mathematically abstracted or modeled. This idea recalls Heraclitus's metaphor regarding the impossibility of bathing twice in the same river. Thus, stochasticity would reflect the inherent uncertainty and unpredictability of many real-world events that exhibit randomness and are susceptible to being treated – in addition to mathematically – ethnographically.

Since this work addresses concrete institutional violences, not only those of the state but in the broad sense afforded by anthropology (Hodgson, 2006), the central point is the possibility of ethnographically describing the empirical evolution, the stochasticity, present in the subtle behaviors of institutional reality, so that violence can be predicted or contained.

Stochasticity has been employed in biological anthropology and evolutionary archaeology. In the latter, not without reluctance, for “most archaeologists shy away from explaining...cultural changes as random”; researchers such as Binford, Braun, Cavalli-Sforza, Dunnell, and Feldman admit, however, the importance of stochastic processes for paleontologically explaining the evolution of human institutions (Nicholson & Sibani, 2015; Powers et al., 2016). Their work has stimulated the boldness of these prolegomena on stochasticity (Billiard & Alvergne, 2018; Sahay, 2024; Wolpert et al., 2024), and their critical possibilities regarding the linguistic violence of contemporary “stochastic parrots” (Bender et al., 2021), as some authors call chatbots.

The study of violences – in the plural – should consider the stochasticity of violent phenomena, as it is an objective quality of each and every one of them, because violences – regardless of content (magnitude) and form (organization) – are usually the effect of a succession of probable, interconnected, and random events that at a precise moment converge and erupt (with or without control) in an aggressive manner (Wolpert et al., 2024). The drift from the accumulation of tensions in triggering episodes towards aggressive actions is

presented here as the – unexpected – transition from “violent possibles” to “violent acts”; therefore, with the aim of supporting the unpredictability of the violent, this perspective challenges deterministic ideas that seek a single cause or a fixed set of them as inevitable generators of violences.

Apparently, they emerge not because of human ineffability, but because they are a possibility within a spectrum of probabilities resulting from the interaction between different levels of reality (local, national, or global; material, symbolic, or institutional, etc.). All violence is exerted with force to obtain some change in the regimes of coexistence, and all change can affect some more than others, even if they are supporters of the same interest.

Each social event contains its own “violent possibles,” probabilities of concretion, and its own stochasticity and potential interactions with other factors present in reality, either independently or correlatively; therefore, it is possible to consider them as variables in research and to be treated ethnographically (Wolpert et al., 2024). Such an idea, the stochasticity of violence as a describable *social fact*, would be useful for better observing and understanding institutional violences that, if manifested, would be the structuring effect of their own capacity and organizational strength. On the other hand, such ethnographic meticulousness would also help to prevent violence because it is a correlative action, decidedly optitudinal, understood within the definition of “violent possibles” such as internal actions of control, regulation, and governability, typical of institutions.

The “violent possible” events and “violent acts” are different; the former are based on possibility, and the latter are concrete violent actions. Both are probable and inherent to the exercise of institutions, each with its specific stochasticity. That is, it is necessary to conceive them according to the probabilities of evolution, considering three possible times: birth, maintenance, and expiration.

If violences are the effect of everyday imponderables and circumstantial dynamics that provide them with the characteristics of indeterminacy and stochasticity, it would be difficult to find structural violence because, being so varied and so integrated, the factors of violence are affected by the functional conditions of violence. Once identified, their specific structural values must be determined. Furthermore, following the same argument, given that violences are derivations of social relations that result from violent possibles and potential interactions, violences are not consequences of state failure, and even if they were, not all violences would be (although the state is always a part), because that is its more or less standard mode of operation; which does not mean that it is structural. It is still functional and circumstantial that the conditions of violence become aggressive; hence, it is interesting to rethink the idea of institutional inaction. By themselves, they are generators of cycles of violence. Institutional action and inaction may or may not be part of a “violent possible,” because the inaction and action of an institution are two sides of the same coin (Dye, 2013).

After the questions about the nature of violence or its origin, the question of the dynamics of violent behavior and the way to observe it arises. What is violence, and what is the violent? How are they produced, manifested, and behaved? These questions should be framed within the everyday normality of violence and the violent, perhaps taking into account how they are naturalized, sedimented, or institutionalized. A whole challenge posed by Herzfeld (1992), yet to be addressed, on the production of indifference in the face of circles of inoperability, bureaucratic indolence, the basis of our concerns, about the symbolic and real roots of bureaucratic violence.

In the following section, the analysis will address the distinction between violence and the violent; it can be understood, roughly, that to understand violence, one must access it as a phenomenology of the practices of the violent. And, to the violent, in turn, by identifying the expression of force in each event. However, they are only that, accesses, if the social production of violence is not taken into account, whose main quality is stochasticity.¹

¹ Elias writes that research on violence typically inquiries into why individuals perpetrate violent acts. However, the question should be inverted: How is it possible that, in societies as large and diverse as those of Europe, coexistence remains relatively peaceful? This coexistence is the truly exceptional phenomenon and, therefore, what demands explanation, not violence, which constitutes a deviation from the norm (Elias, 1982, p. 134–137).

2.1 Methodological Underpinnings²

The bibliography employs a “focus and case” approach, representing a refined selection from a broader corpus developed over decades. This method strengthens the three criteria used to study the stochasticity of institutional violence: (1) establishing its stochasticity and unpredictability; (2) providing evidence of its diversity, complexity, and probability; and (3) configuring data through relevant evidence, appropriate methods, inferable probabilities, recordable contingencies, and generalizable experiences. One outcome is a concise, foundational bibliography that may serve as a reference point and starting place for analyzing and discussing institutional violence as stochastic violence. It also integrates anthropological perspectives and anthropological dimensions from other disciplines (e.g., biology, cybernetics, ecology, philosophy) and research areas (e.g., autopoiesis, opitulation, symbiosis, which exhibit significant stochastic components).

Two pathways guided the bibliographic selection: conceptual and operational. The conceptual pathway supports the thesis that institutional violence can be understood through its stochasticity, given its systemic, indeterminate, complex, and random nature. The operational pathway helps delineate the anthropological axis and presents empirical research that develops this argument or studies institutional violence. Similarly, bibliography can be understood as comprising classic works (authoritative texts that serve as models for academic and scientific development), fundamental works (engaging in dialogue across various anthropological perspectives, including archaeological and paleontological ones), and case studies (diverse contexts where institutional violence manifests and is studied).

Thus, the bibliography presents theories grounded in a solid conceptual basis, robust empirical connections, and an explicit understanding of the role of probability and complexity in explaining institutional violence as a social phenomenon. It also involves a critical evaluation of data interpretation, seeking a balance between abstract theories and concrete empirical evidence that acknowledges the intrinsic complexity of social reality and the probabilistic nature of violent institutional relations. The selection emphasizes works demonstrating a deep understanding of contingency and emergence, valuing efforts that avoid reductionism and focus on the emergence of violence from the interaction of multiple factors, the influence of chance, and unpredictability.

3 Violence

Violence is ubiquitous and condemned, almost without exception, universally (Bourdieu, 1998; Curtin & Litke, 2022). However, despite this condemnation, there is no hesitation in engaging with it through television, video game consoles, books, or sensationalist news; it overflows into daily life. Perhaps for this reason, there is also no hesitation in realizing that it is an evident, normal, habitual, sedimented, and daily characteristic of social institutions such as the family, school, church, political party, health center, police office, etc., all organized around the “do not do,” “you are not” and sanctions. Moreover, it is not that latent violence is absent; rather, processes exist that escalate this apparent normality and trigger specific episodes (violence is synecdoche, the part representing the whole, as when “domestic violence” is used to describe a territorial disagreement between siblings over the use of space in a shared room, which does not involve parents or other family members).

Violence, therefore, is produced by the convergence of a plurality of probabilities with intentions to control and seize (maintain or reinforce) a position of dominance in contentious matters – motivated emotionally or rationally – which coincide in a single event, positioning, organizing, unifying, and confronting individuals, families, groups, communities, or nations; it behaves relationally (even with a phantom) and manifests diversely, at a particular moment, erupting into aggression. It is not an isolated event, not arising from nothing, but rather the product of a chain of events that, individually, may seem normal or even innocuous.

² This section, added at the request of peer reviewers, complements the original article. While not a literature review *per se*, its inclusion was deemed beneficial.

The “violent potential” – not to be confused with potential violence – manifests through three interdependent probabilistic movements: preparation, disposition, and materialization. Each generates particular dynamics of participation, derivation, delimitation, and culmination, whose development, though uncertain, is directly or indirectly detectable until the eruption of the violent act. Preparation involves the interaction of concrete factors that engender “violent potential”; disposition configures the propensity for violent action; and materialization corresponds to the triggering of violent acts, which cause violence to emerge as a discrete (though probabilistic) and singular event.

This threefold movement introduces an objective quality of violences, hitherto untreated, which is their stochasticity; one might say it introduces diachrony. That is, the historical as probability and singularity within diversity. Stochasticity, due to its probabilistic basis, contributes to improving the perception of the singularity of violences and to better projecting prevention methods, transcending deterministic approaches and acknowledging the inherent randomness of transitions from emergencies to violent acts. Perhaps the heterogeneity of violent manifestations can be better understood without discriminating against the potential importance of individual “violent possibles” (often overlooked in other perspectives) to large-scale collectives, recognizing the stochastic influence on their respective developments. Causal, historical, and anthropological mechanisms of violence are not, therefore, discarded, but rather integrated into this framework, where uncertainty, instead of predictability, determines the transition between the potentiality and materialization of the “violent act.”

The concatenation of these events, their interconnection, is what creates the potential for violence. Randomness plays an influential role because chance and the unforeseen affect the unfolding of events leading to violence and seem to operate systemically. They are not loose pieces in this complex device; thus, recalling Bertalanffy (1968), a small change in the system generates proportional changes within it; therefore, varying the sequence can alter the trajectory of the violent eruption (p. 56).

3.1 Normality and Daily Life

Among the daily experiences of individuals, groups, and communities, violence is a phenomenon that particularly stands out due to qualities that are not usually considered, such as its exceptionality (Agamben, 1998) and its pervasiveness (Galtung, 1969), in addition to more familiar characteristics like ritualization (Girard, 2013; Van Gennep, 2024) and diversity (Tilly, 2003; Tutenges & Sandberg, 2023). During the 1990s, emphasis was placed on the idea that daily life, the realm of the habitual and the normal, was the fertile ground for violence (Bourdieu, 1998; Das, 1995; Riches, 1986; Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Stewart & Strathern, 2002; Tambiah, 1997); violence was understood as a disruption of daily routine, an irrational outburst of frustration-anger-aggression (Gurr, 2011). Therefore, to make sense of these unexpected outbursts of frustration-anger-aggression, it was necessary to investigate whether violence was inherent to the normality of daily life and whether it was possible to make it visible. In this sense, Žižek (2008) offers insights for understanding the functioning of institutions through the normalization, sedimentation, and institutionalization of violence.³

“Normal” does not signify structural but rather a mode of operation that is demonstrable throughout history and across various institutions (Bielby & Davies, 2024; Brown & Cox, 2023; Muchembled, 2012; Zambrano, 2024). The range of cases is broad, and the best approach is through case studies because all forms of violence generate, develop, and transform their specific energy, of which they are simultaneously the effect, each in its own way [for example, ethnic violence (Agrawal, 2025; Harff & Gurr, 2018; Pita, 2017; Sanhueza et al.,

³ “The catch is that subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the “normal,” peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this “normal” state of things... is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent... It may be invisible, but it must be considered if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be “irrational” explosions of subjective violence” (Žižek, 2008, p. 2).

2025), environmental violence (Allen, 2024), gender-based violence (Cleaveland & Waslin, 2024; Lorente Molina & de Torres, 2014; Wolf, 2020), ideological violence (Edelstein, 2025; Jurow, 2024), religious violence (Tonelli & Mannion, 2024); family and other social institutions (Myers, 2025), the penal system (Rodríguez et al., 2025), the educational system (Sanhueza et al., 2025), the healthcare system (Santos et al., 2024), etc.].

The probability of each event escalating (becoming more violent) will depend on a set of contingent influences, making the trajectory of violence unpredictable, yet susceptible to analysis of its stochasticity. The methodological corollary is that when institutional violence is treated as stochastic processes – plural and complex (characteristics of their objectivity) – they are, therefore, empirically verifiable, that is, observable in their heterogeneity, regardless of their contingency and variety.

3.1.1 Institutionalization–Normalization

Institutionalization is a process of sedimentation and normalization of the stochastic propensity for violent action that manifests through the aggregation of three interdependent movements: emergence, identification, codification, and legitimization (c. Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Searle, 1995).⁴ Emergence indicates the incipient formation of recurrent patterns in unpredictable events that consolidate probabilistically and gradually. Identification entails the recognition of the probabilistic formation and projection (as an event or variable) of the emergent pattern aggregators (they are cohesion agents). Codification consists of the integration of emergent pattern aggregators into categories, practices, and behaviors (social norms, organized practices, normalized conducts, and roles); it is impossible not to recall that violence is an integral social and cultural phenomenon. And legitimization involves the ideological or pragmatic, rational, ordered, and moral justification of institutionalization, concealing its violent nature.

Normalization renders violence imperceptible; it does not make it invisible since it is possible to see, feel, perceive, or inflict it through its acts. Institutionalization is one of the basic social mechanisms that legitimizes it and integrates it into cultural practices or symbolic and meaningful universes, making it appear inevitable or even necessary. Hence, many expressions of violence tend to appear as familiar anomalies, but those actions that reveal a naturalization of violence that harms social behaviors are usually seen as true systemic anomalies, even if it is a naive reaction of surprise upon noticing an order that seemed natural and unchangeable, instead of being recognized as evolutionary responses to systemic injustice. To understand violent acts, it is essential to recognize the underlying process of the institutionalization of violence, beginning with its stochasticity.

3.2 Institutional Violence

Institutional violence is violence, in the Plural. Violences, in any of their manifestations, in addition to their variety, present an intrinsic complexity that resembles Russian nesting dolls (matryoshkas): each violent event can contain others, similar or different, intertwined or housed within a seemingly multi-level structure, systematically linking macro, meso, and micro dimensions. Cazeneuve (1971) drew attention to events in which even apparently unitary events, such as patron saint festivals (referred to in the plural due to their internal multiplicity of acts, ceremonies, rituals, and games), revealed not only an intricate ritual complexity but also an integrative capacity for heterogeneous elements articulated around the ritual. Many authors from

⁴ Searle (1995) presents a compelling theory of institutions, articulated in two programmatic parts, premised on the assertion that institutions and their actions are the cornerstones of all societies, thus accounting to produce institutional facts. The first part addresses iteration, interaction, and logical structure; the second, creation, maintenance, and hierarchy. He emphasizes that many institutional acts can be created as speech acts, “such as declarations” (p. 30), and that speech acts can performatively enact violence. Berger and Luckmann (1991), in their analysis of society as objective reality, address institutionalization and legitimacy as fundamental qualities for producing and organizing symbolic universes, developing the concept of sedimentation, which, in a certain sense, addresses the “organization of instincts” (p. 64), a theme previously explored by Malinowski in his theory of culture.

different disciplinary traditions explain violence in terms of ritual (Agamben, 1998; Benjamin, 2021; Girard, 2013; Riches, 1986; Schmitt & Schröder, 2001), and generally, due to its capacity for aggregation or integration (Allen, 2024; Das, 1995; Galtung, 1969).

Institutional violence is characterized by the normalization and inadvertence (imperceptibility) of the violence inherent in everyday practices and institutional functions; to understand it, a distinction between violence and “the violent” is necessary. By “the violent,” we understand the juridical (norms), political (control), cultural (symbolic universes), social (institutions), and economic (classes) configurations of what may generally be called violence, as this would be the set of violent actions and acts. That is, violence encompasses the practices and behaviors of violent acts, so that when one says, “there is violence,” one is referring to verifiable facts, “violent facts.”

Two approaches to institutional violence are of interest. The first is systemic violence, as configured by Žižek (2008) based on subjective and objective interaction. Subjective violence is that which is perceived immediately, easily identifiable as a disturbance, something that breaks normality. Objective violence, key in Žižek’s analysis, is the inadvertent violence embedded within the structures and institutions of society. It is not perceived as violence, even though it is, because it has been normalized. Poverty, discrimination, demand, a work email on a day off, and judicial decisions are examples of objective violence; they cause harm, but that harm is considered acceptable or inevitable (p. 2). Subjective violence, often labeled “irrational,” is a reasoned and measured response to objective violence.

The second approach addresses institutional violence through a complexity lens, facilitating comprehension of the emergence and perpetuation of violence, drawing upon Elias’s questioning (1982). Pita (2017), following Clifford Geertz, posits that violence is a category of local politics, implying that its meaning is context-specific, a product of a particular historical process shaping sensitivities that both accommodate and submit to consensus.

Institutional violence, therefore, manifests in diverse forms, ranging from open and direct violence to the more subtle and systemic violence operating through structural mechanisms that perpetuate inequality and limit opportunities. It is characterized by its persistence and its integration into the normal operations of the institution, even when operating covertly or seemingly neutrally. Its identification necessitates a critical analysis of institutions, considering the distribution of power, decision-making processes, and the concrete consequences of institutional actions on different population groups. The analysis must extend beyond mere harm assessment, considering the systematic and repetitive nature of actions and their cumulative impact over time. This definition avoids situations of mere incompetence or mismanagement, focusing on institutional action or inaction that causes significant and systematic harm.

4 “The Violent”⁵

The violent is unpredictable; its indeterminate nature prevents certain predictions of its form or occurrence. Furthermore, its expression through a vast diversity of forms complicates its definition and the capacity to predict its specific manifestations. Due to its variability, exhaustively defining violence requires more time than has been allotted thus far and must also consider its probabilistic nature. It is difficult to determine with certainty when or how it will occur, even when it is before our eyes or when its steps disturb tranquility. However, it is possible to deeply describe and study, and evaluate the probabilities of different “violent possibles.”

⁵ This section is constructed upon the contributions of the authors cited in the bibliography, with primary emphasis on Agamben, 1998; Arendt, 1970; Curtin & Litke, 2022; Dye, 2013; Elias, 1982; Lorente Molina & de Torres, 2014; Riches, 1986; Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Wolpert et al., 2024. The constructs of “violent possibles”, “acts,” “facts,” “institutionalization,” and “events” are grounded in fundamental social science concepts, but adapted for the specific context of violence studies. This adaptation is informed by the works of Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Bernstein, 2013; Bourdieu, 1998; Brown & Cox, 2023; Curtin & Litke, 2022; Van Gennep, 2024; Wolf, 2020.

“The violent” arises as an attribute of the convergence of multiple possible factors interwoven into a unity, enabling a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the violent event. Consequently, this surpasses the reductionist view of the violent as a physical, direct, and intentional act. It manifests according to context, situation, intention, and impact. Therefore, considering its temporal dimensions – providing access to its stochastic nature – leads to a more exhaustive, rich, precise, and complete understanding of any social event. The violent is, thus, the inherent, diverse, and objective attribute of violences (plural), helping to avoid the simplification that violence rests solely on its physical, direct, and intentional particularity, reinforcing the idea of violence’s multiple manifestations.

4.1 “Violent Possibles”

The term “Violent Possibles” does not refer to individuals identified as potentially violent, but to the inherent possibility within certain institutional situations to escalate into violence, even without an explicit individual threat. Stochasticity, therefore, implies that violence is not a precisely determined or predictable event, but arises from the complex network of probabilistic and indeterminate interactions within the institutional system. Any seemingly innocuous action or interaction could, under unpredictable circumstances, transform into a form of violence. This violence is not necessarily limited to physical aggression, but encompasses a broader range of aggressive behaviors, abusive power relations, and institutional mechanisms that inflict harm or suffering, yet are functional rather than structural.

This energy – the violent – is present even when violent acts, within the spectrum of probabilities, are nonexistent; all social action is susceptible to escalating violence when challenging any institution. The probability of a violent act depends on three not necessarily sequential states, though they may appear so, which also describe the stochastic transition: preparation of its future objective, disposition to undertake it, and the materialization of the act itself.

4.2 Violent Acts

A violent act is an aggressive action arising from a prior accumulation of tensions, triggered by a specific episode or event. Its principal characteristic is unpredictability: it is not the inevitable result of a single cause or a fixed set of factors, but emerges unexpectedly, even from individuals or groups previously categorized as non-violent, or as “violent possibles.” For example, a person subjected to a period of harassment within their institution (accumulation of tensions), during a cinema outing with friends (random circumstance), reacted with a punch upon being publicly reprimanded for a minor error (triggering episode). This act, although understandable within the context of accumulated stress, was certainly not predictable; it was not an automatic response to criticism, but the result of a complex interaction of factors that, together, caused violence to emerge unexpectedly, despite pre-existing tensions.

5 Stochastic, the Stochastic, and Stochasticity⁶

“Stochastic” is a probabilistic mathematical method that allows for identifying the behavior of plausible variables to model the evolution of systems where indeterminacy plays a significant role. “The Stochastic”

⁶ In Spanish, there are three words: *la estocástica* (stochastic, feminine, the science), *lo estocástico* (“the stochastic”, neutral before adjective, empirical and analytical objects), and *la estocasticidad* (Stochasticity, feminine, the quality of events within the set). They

would be the set of empirical manifestations of events studied using stochastic methods. And “Stochasticity” is the empirical quality of any process or event understood as a chrono-situated, open, and dynamic social construct, capable of evolution. General Systems Theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) can encompass them, and to deal with them, of opitulation⁷ (Zambrano, 2024). Institutional violence, particularly in its diversity, is a prime subject for analysis using these theories.

Both systemic and opitulational theories offer a complementary holistic interpretive framework, interconnected and in constant interaction with its environment, for understanding institutional violence as systemic violence and its social intervention. This possibility can contribute to reinforcing the explanatory power of both systemic and opitulational theories, because they can foreground the influence of probability and uncertainty within systemic dynamics. Since an open system, by definition, constantly exchanges matter, energy, and information with its environment, it creates a complex scenario where probability, rather than certainty, governs the diverse, differential behavior and unfolding of institutional violence, which can be described under the concept of stochasticity.

Because each theory possesses its own stochastic specificities (continuous changes, adaptations, etc.), an apparently minor change in a variable or the emergence of an event can trigger, through the intricate network of interrelations within the system, considerably larger and unpredictable effects. This recalls the non-linear nature of many open systems, where small causes can produce large effects – a fundamental principle that stochasticity helps explain and ethnography helps describe (Bertalanffy, 1968, p. 56).

5.1 Stochasticity (as a Method)

Stochasticity is a science, or a method, or a set of mathematical and statistical methods used to model and analyze phenomena exhibiting an element of randomness or uncertainty. It is not a science that predicts the future with arithmetical certainty; rather, it provides estimations of the probability of different possible outcomes. Stochasticity provides tools to quantify uncertainty, describe data variability, and make inferences based on incomplete or noisy observations (Doob, 1990).

5.2 The Stochastic (Empirical Phenomena)

“The stochastic” refers to empirical events or phenomena exhibiting a random component and are, therefore, amenable to study using stochastic methods. They are concrete manifestations of uncertainty in the real world. Examples of “the stochastic” include natural, social, technological, cultural, and paleontological phenomena, as

signify three distinct things and to avoid misunderstandings should maintain their respective meanings when translated into English. This translation emphasizes the conceptual differences between the three Spanish terms. While there isn’t a perfect one-to-one mapping in English, this approach clarifies the meaning of each term within the context of the explanation. Direct translations (“stochastics,” “the stochastic,” and “stochasticity”) could be misleading if used without further explanation because they don’t fully capture the specific meanings in the original Spanish.

⁷ *Opitulation* is the conscious and deliberate action of integrating and coordinating multiple efforts, resources, and actions directed toward any problem of interested social relations, regardless of its magnitude or complexity. It is also the adjustment of mutual support toward the unequivocal resolution of that which motivates an opitulational action; that is, the cycle of adjustment–maladjustment–enhanced adjustment (+), being an action in constant renewal. The word appears in the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española, Edición del Tricentenario*, of the *Real Academia Española (DLE-RAE)*, updated in 2023, and in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, published by Oxford University Press since 1879 (currently under revision). Both dictionaries concur in defining *opitulación* and opitulation using the substantives “*auxilio, ayuda, socorro*” (aid, help, succor) in the former, and “help, aid, assistance” in the latter, which also includes the entry for opitulating. However, it is evident that these definitions do not capture the intended concept, which, based on an evolutionary integration of resources, is as described above. This footnote is a conceptual text elaborated from excerpts taken from the book *Opitulación* (Zambrano, 2024).

exemplified in García Márquez's short story, "*Algo muy grave va a suceder en este pueblo*."⁸ Further examples include fluctuations in violent events, the dispersion of institutional messages, the occurrence and intensity variations of protests, homicides, the expansibility of violent events, their distribution across groups, potential violences, identification of probable events and their probabilities, public opinion, social networks, electoral forecasts, and the generation of behaviors to support policies. "The stochastic" encompasses any process or event whose characteristics cannot be predicted with accuracy, even if the current state of the system is known (Bender et al., 2021; Doob, 1990).

Essentially, "the stochastic" involves a sequence of probabilities that play a decisive role in determining the subsequent state, intervening in the diachrony of events. This conception aligns with Stephen Jay Gould's view of historical contingency, where evolutionary trajectories follow random paths, determined not only by predictable selective forces but also by fortuitous events that divert evolutionary pathways towards unforeseen directions (Powers et al., 2016). Applied to the phenomenon of institutional violence, this conceptual framework highlights the complexity of the process, where the emergence of violent acts is not reducible to a simple sum of causal factors but emerges from an intricate network of interactions, contingencies, and random events that unpredictably modify the system's dynamics. Therefore, understanding institutional violence requires an analysis that integrates the inherent stochasticity of the process, acknowledging the influence of random factors and the impossibility of predicting its manifestation with certainty. Any intervention or policy aimed at mitigating institutional violence must consider this intrinsic complexity and the probabilistic nature of its evolution.

5.3 Stochasticity (as a Quality)

Stochasticity is an inherent property or quality of institutional violence because it is a system or phenomenon that evolves non-deterministically. It manifests in the presence of random variability in the system's behavior, making precise predictions of its future state impossible. Stochasticity does not imply chaos or a lack of order; rather, it describes a particular type of order based on probability. Systems with high stochasticity exhibit great variability in their possible trajectories, while systems with low stochasticity show more predictable behavior. As a quality of reality beyond arithmetic, stochasticity conceives of violence, based on probabilistic development, complexity, and diversity. From this perspective, it can be generally termed stochastic violence. Furthermore, stochasticity allows us to differentiate stochastic violence from other forms of violence and concomitant social phenomena, establishing their links and convergences; it also permits its conception as a total social fact. Violent behaviors and actions do not exist in themselves; there are only probabilities that may become such under specific circumstances, and upon this depends their magnitude, size, and capacity. The following sections explain why this is so, from where it is situated, and what questions it answers, so that this proposition may be developed, supported, or challenged.

5.3.1 Interaction

The evolution of stochasticity depends on the behavior of each probabilistic event, which is registered as a random variable and described with mathematical and empirical precision. This possibility of empirical verification allows us to abstract from reality its stochastic character, that is, its capacity for movement and malleability of every event. A stochastic model, consequently, being empirically verifiable, reinforces the understanding of the stochasticity of any part of reality or the system. With this logic, violence can be ethnographically described from the particular stochasticity that might be identified.

⁸ "Something serious is going to happen to this town" by Gabriel García Márquez.

Each stochasticity would be the resulting quality of a collection of random variables ordered in time and verified in a concrete stochastic process; that is, it would be a sequence of events where the outcome of each event would be uncertain, but its probable effects could be qualitatively described, diachronically modeled, and presented as the state of the system (or the violent act) at a specific and unique instant.

Stochasticity, as a quality of the probability of the occurrence of violence within complex systems, can be inherent to all types of functioning within social networks according to the capacity for interconnection and mutual influence, because within each system, there exist multiple specific and unique processes. These processes, while unique due to initial conditions and random events (stochasticity), are neither isolated nor autarkic, but are limited and enabled by the system. Their combined and emergent behavior shapes the general functioning of the system, which is more than the sum of its parts. This framework is highly relevant for understanding institutional violence.

Institutional violence is not a monolithic entity, but a complex system with multiple interacting processes: police practices, judicial procedures, social inequalities, political power dynamics, cultural norms, and media representations, to name a few. Each process has its own trajectory, influenced by initial conditions (historical context, existing power structures) and random events (unpredictable individual actions, unforeseen crises). Emergent properties are not simply the sum of individual acts, but a consequence of the interactions between these processes. A discriminatory police practice, for example, could be exacerbated by biased media coverage and a lack of accountability in the judicial system, creating a vicious cycle that sustains and amplifies violence.

Analyzing institutional violence, therefore, requires studying both individual processes and their complex interactions. Recognizing the role of contingency and stochasticity is crucial because it acknowledges the unpredictable nature of specific events, while understanding how these events contribute to the overall, emergent pattern of institutional violence. Probabilistically stochastic events are significant, regardless of their discrete nature; they are significant because, in terms of probability, they possess potential violence, and it increases according to the capacity for interaction within the system with different factors that generate and sustain this violence, as if it were a butterfly effect.

5.3.2 Probability and Institutionalization

The analysis of stochasticity seeks to identify patterns in randomness, exploring, for example, whether certain institutional conditions or circumstances increase the probability of outbreaks of violence, even if they are unpredictable. The objective of stochastic processes is that their probabilities become institutionalized; that is, that they become habits, customs, and practices, which is problematic and requires qualification. While the repetition of violent acts, initially stochastic, can lead to the normalization of violence within an institution – turning it into habitual practice and contributing to a culture of violence – this is not an inherent objective of stochasticity itself. Rather, it is a potential and worrying consequence of the failure of control and oversight mechanisms within the institution. Stochasticity provides the tools to analyze this phenomenon, but it does not promote it as an objective. The institutionalization of violence, in this case, represents a system failure that allows initially low or dispersed probabilities of violence to become high probability and routine actions through the perpetuation of harmful practices.

The stochastic approach in the study of violence prioritizes the probabilistic analysis of potential violent acts and their occurrence, that is, the shift from “violent possibles” to “violent acts.” Using methods of statistical inference and ethnographic identification, it seeks to identify the qualitative variables that influence the probability of the appearance of violence, thereby informing decision-making under uncertainty. Its value lies precisely in its capacity to generate actionable knowledge: to prevent, control, and intervene in violence.

5.3.3 Stochastic Control

To establish variables that may increase or decrease the probability of the occurrence of a violent act, without attempting to identify a single, deterministic cause for each event (mobilization discourses, performative

narratives). The stochastic model of institutional violence requires identifying and describing the ecosystem of violent events; analyzing the obtained data; critically assessing the probabilities of occurrence; modeling future probabilities; making decisions regarding probabilities of occurrence; and communicating the inherent nature of probabilistic predictions.

The identification and description of the events that affect the probability of the occurrence of violence and its disaggregation into variables, specifically institutional ones (families, groups, associations, communities and norms, policies, practices, surveillance and organizational cultures, etc.), through the exploration and compilation of data on the occurrence of violent acts, in mode, time, place, circumstances, and characteristics (including victims and aggressors). The objective would be the modeling of the estimation of the probability of occurrence under different conditions, to predict with more accuracy the next act of violence, simulating scenarios and making the evaluation of the impacts of potential interventions (new policies, social programs, etc.), so useful for decision-making. This work includes the criticism of the models and eventual biases in the data.

The results of stochastic analyses should not be interpreted as absolute predictions, but as probability estimations that allow action in terms of prevention and mitigation of violence, guiding policies and strategies towards the reduction of the probability of the occurrence of violent acts.

Stochastic control addresses the uncertainty inherent in a system and ensures its evolution. When an element external to the system is introduced, it generates proportionally scaled changes throughout the system. Probability is not the objective occurrence of a concrete social fact, but rather *how* it will occur within a probability range. Thus, stochastic control differs from deterministic control precisely because of its explicit consideration of uncertainty. In a deterministic system, given an initial state and an action, the future state of the system is completely determined.

In a stochastic system, uncertainty, typically represented by random variables or stochastic processes, affects the system's evolution. This uncertainty may originate from at least two reliable sources: random disturbances affecting the system, and the minor contingencies of daily life. The key to stochastic control lies in finding control policies (strategies for decision-making at each instant) that optimize a specific objective, taking this uncertainty into account. The aim is not to eliminate uncertainty, which is inherent to the system, but to minimize its negative impact on the desired objective.

6 Concluding Remarks

This work has attempted to contribute to the study of institutional violences by introducing a non-deterministic perspective. The fact that violence is unpredictable does not mean that it is impossible to determine and prevent it with some accuracy. While certainty regarding the time, place, mode, and magnitude of a specific violent act is unattainable, it is possible to identify contexts and situations of higher or lower risk and to develop prevention strategies focused on reducing the probabilities of tensions escalating into aggressive episodes. Deterministic theories relating institutions and violence based on single, predictable causes, binary constructs, and polar categories – useful as points of reference – fall short in the face of the complexity, diversity, and relativity of institutional violence. This work aimed to advance beyond such limitations.

Understanding that much institutional violence is systemic and affects society is very important; this systematicity is characterized by the naturalization of oppressive practices that are transferred to society as innocuous, necessary, or reliable. This makes identifying and understanding them extremely difficult. One does not know how much violence one is capable of enduring, nor how much one is capable of inflicting, Bourdieu (1998) and Lorente Molina and de Torres (2014) observed.

This analysis avoids explaining institutional violence by labeling institutions as violent or non-violent, as not all institutions can be categorized in this way, and not all institutions with the potential for violence exercise it (furthermore, there are numerous instances of institutions without inherent potential for violence that suddenly escalate to violence). Therefore, the aim has been to understand the systemic processes within which institutional violence is normalized, making it difficult to identify, as acting, sedimented violence. By

reducing institutional violence to common, verifiable aspects such as its state-based nature, hegemonic management capacity, or the cultural origins of its functions and officials, the difficulty of observation is also reduced. This is further simplified by studying the intricate network of interactions that fuel violence contextually and situationally, whether symbolic, political, or economic. All these elements are essential and must be considered, along with their interactions and syntheses, to improve the perception of “violent possibles” and institutional violence.

The presented approach may be more fruitful by understanding institutional violence according to its stochasticity; that is, according to the set of probable events in which contingency and the interaction of multiple factors and intentions play a decisive role in shaping patterns or trends of violent institutional acts. Therefore, the impossibility of predicting with certainty when and how the violent potential of an event will manifest is recognized. Stochasticity necessitates considering the multiplicity of factors that contribute to the emergence of a violent act (e.g., inequalities, individual, group, or community experiences, social constructs, media impacts, etc.) to seek conditions that make certain forms of violence more probable than others.

Recognizing the stochasticity of violence is the first step toward developing more effective prevention strategies, rather than seeking magical solutions. The stochastic perspective necessitates addressing both risk and safety factors within the same event (situated and contextualized), as these interact to reduce or escalate the probability of violence manifesting, suggesting an ecological rather than a purely statistical mode of configuration. Hence, the proposal of a conception of stochasticity that views institutions as complex, systemic ecosystems, where violence is not an intrinsic characteristic but the product of the dynamic interaction between their various components and their environment. Internal segmentation, contextual heterogeneity, and the temporal relativity of institutions are key to understanding how violence materializes and transforms within these settings.

Stochasticity acknowledges the existence of a ubiquitous “potential for violence” in any social structure; this potential, far from being inherent to the institution itself, manifests as a probable event, dependent on the complex interaction of multiple internal and external factors. Institutional violence is not an inevitable outcome but a conglomeration of “violent possibles,” whose probability of occurrence depends on the confluence of specific circumstances. This foundation does not negate the responsibility of institutions in generating violence, but rather emphasizes understanding the conditions that increase or decrease the probability of its manifestation. The stochastic model, therefore, offers the possibility of a more precise analytical tool for identifying risk factors and designing more effective intervention strategies aimed at mitigating the probability of the “potential for violence” materializing into concrete actions.

Institutions – be they “social, cultural, economic, or political; altruistic or charitable; public or private” – sediment, at a probable moment, what we have termed “violent possibles.” This represents a paradigm shift from the search for culprits to the construction of complex and contextualized solutions capable of navigating the inherent uncertainty of this institutional phenomenon. Future research should delve deeper into this area, developing methodologies appropriate for analyzing the complexity and uncertainty inherent in the relationship between institutions and violence.

Stochasticity is a fundamental component for understanding the complexity of the open and dynamic systems described by Bertalanffy’s General Systems Theory. Incorporating probability and uncertainty into systemic analysis allows for the development of more realistic models and more robust predictions, recognizing the intrinsically random nature of many real-world phenomena. By embracing stochasticity, systems theory is strengthened as a tool for analyzing and understanding the intricate network of interactions governing the behavior of complex systems.

Stochastic studies are crucial for a complete understanding of violence, particularly in its historical and social manifestations. While research has explored deterministic factors such as poverty, inequality, or lack of opportunity, the influence of chance and contingency on the genesis and propagation of violence has been systematically neglected. By integrating stochasticity into models, we can better explain the variability in the intensity and form of violence over time and across different contexts, overcoming the limitations of purely deterministic explanations. This stochastic perspective, applied to the past, allows for extrapolation to the future, modeling the probability of outbreaks of violence considering the contingency inherent in social processes. Since the present is situated between the past and the future, a stochastic approach allows not

only to understand the origin of current violence patterns but also to predict, with greater precision, their possible future trajectories, recognizing that random forces, such as unexpected events or fluctuations in social dynamics, play a fundamental role in their configuration. The need for stochastic models specific to violence data, rather than simple adaptations of models from other disciplines, becomes evident for achieving significant progress in understanding violence in its entirety.

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