

Ecological footprint and passive violence :

the importance of our individual action

I would like to suggest you to watch the video below, This is the recording of the TedX lecture by Arun Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, entitled - in English - :
" Nonviolence or nonexistence: choice of the 21st century ",
presented in Athens on 06/01/2019:
https://www.ted.com/talks/arun_gandhi_nonviolence_or_nonexistence_choice_of_the_21st_century/transcript.

During this conference, Arun Gandhi presents the concept of passive violence through an anecdote from his childhood where his grandfather, Gandhi, introduced him to this notion. The lecture is definitely worth listening to, as the lesson is explained in a simple and very effective way.

Passive violence is a concept that is rarely mentioned and often misunderstood. Even if we guess its meaning, it creates ambivalence. For it can explain many of our discomforts when we endure them, as well as injustices that we observe around us; but also, it is extremely likely that we use it regularly (even sometimes when we hide behind non-violent actions). Digging into the subject could therefore lead us to questioning ourselves in ways we are not too keen to consider.

It is in fact the most widespread phenomenon of violence that causes the most damage, from the most minimal to the most gigantic.

Passive violence consists of seemingly insignificant and harmless acts which in reality have concrete violent consequences through an accumulation or domino effect triggered by these acts. The multitude of these acts lead to a multitude of violences. And each act is directly or indirectly responsible for one of these violences. So by committing these harmless acts, without perpetrating any direct violence, one become responsible (for a part far from being negligible) either for the suffering which is the direct consequence of it, or for the violence which takes place at the end of the chain, and often, without being aware of it, or without wanting to be aware of it - hence the implicit or denied side of this violence.

For my part, I make the difference between passive violence acts of a psychological type, and passive violence acts linked to ignorance or carelessness.

For the first ones, there is unconsciously (or not in some cases) a will to harm. We can cite: manipulation, harassment, provocation, mockery, negligence, abuse of authority; which are in essence ways of exercising violence in a roundabout way; whether by cowardice, by perversity, or, in certain cases, the only way to counter direct violence when one is not on the side of the strongest. Lies, hypocrisy, disrespect and carelessness can also be part of it.

All these psychological flaws make it possible to practice violence without the person who endures it being totally aware of the process, even if he or she suffers from it, or if he or she is harmed.

And on a completely different level, there is a passive violence linked to the dilution of the responsibilities of those who practice it, or to the length of the chain of behaviors which result in violence experienced by others. It is this passive violence that Arun Gandhi talks about in the video.

The phenomena of racism, sexism, homophobia, competition, rivalry, the search for profit, are permeated with both types of passive violence, because there is always at least one harmed person, a victim of injustice, either directly, either by accumulation, or at the end of a chain of events.

Regarding the passive violence evoked by Arun Gandhi, it is omnipresent in our consumer society. And

in this context, our purchases, our wastage, our pollution are almost always an illustration of this. In this sense: our garbage, our glitter, our luxuries, our motorized transport, our easy options, many of our sources of pleasure and comfort, and variously part of our food, are at the root of violence. What many people call "freedoms" - and especially in these times of covid, where those possibilities are subject to restrictions - more often have little to do with "freedom", but with privileges very often resulting in passive violence.

Everything we consume has an impact on our environment and on the lives of many people on Earth.

Consuming blindly therefore consists in practicing passive violence. And the more we become conscious of this process, the more the gigantic size of this blindness appears to us.

When we integrate this concept, we understand that our ecological footprint is linked not only to global warming and other environmental destructions, but also to the presence of wars as well as to social injustices and to exploitation, misery and death of hundreds of millions of people around the world, usually quite far from our horizons.

And the relation that exists between our individual day-to-day behaviors, and the news from distant places presented by the media, is often difficult to establish, because the way in which all the drifts are presented to us, often does not allow to make the link between each separate act and each of the consequences linked to it. And yet this link should be obvious to us, given the size of the consequences.

However, even today, our culture - whether through the media, our surroundings, the entourage, advertising, leisure - emphasizes all the beneficial aspects of consumption. And anyone who does not follow the general trend is running the risk of being marginalized, judged, or even ostracized. Maintain one's status (possessions, signs of wealth, and distinctions - degrees - diplomas), respecting the social rules of wastefulness (parties, celebrations, gifts, travels), following fashion (voluntarily participating in planned obsolescence), etc. still remains nowadays vectors of social integration in most social environments, and in an extreme way in the richest circles.

In this context, it is difficult to open our eyes to the consequences of our actions, when these consist in respecting the rules of the game in order not to be excluded from it.

The reality should however lead us to refuse to continue in this way.

Here is a reasoning that makes more tangible this reality that we generally learn in small quantities, in a scattered and often toned-down way.

Adopting this perspective allows us to interpret differently a lot of information that comes to us and that usually leaves us relatively indifferent. It's rough and brutal, but definitely more realistic and honest than the scenarios we think we live in.

- If we realize that individual effort accounts for a quarter of the global work that must be done to limit global warming (ref in French : https://www.rtbf.be/info/societe/detail_rapport_alarant-du-giec-sur-le-climat-nos-petits-gestes-indispensables-mais-pas-suffisants-pour-sauver-la-planete?id=10821019) ;

- if we take into account the fact that, in 25 years, approximately one person in 15 has died of hunger or poverty, in the world (number of individuals estimated at 450 million between 1991 and 2016 by Thomas Pogge according to the article (in French) : https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/les-chiffres-de-la-faim-dans-le-monde-sont-a-jeter-a-la-poubelle-20-11-2016-2084341_24.php) ;

Note: I chose to give this reference because in general we talk about millions of deaths per year, with very fluctuating figures depending on the sources and the years, and we never take these cumulative figures into account, because those who died leave statistics, and that allows us to keep our eyes closed on the real size of what that represents. This reference, on the other hand, takes into account the reality over time;

which multiplies the horror that it represents, and allows us to realize the scale that is involved. Another article also quoted that 58% of mortality in the world is due to hunger and malnutrition (ref in French : https://atlasinfo.fr/La-lutte-contre-la-faim-dans-le-monde_a2086.html); which means that more than one in two persons in the world will die of hunger or malnutrition.

- and if we know that currently in the world, between 800 and 900 million people are still in poverty, and threatened to die in these conditions ; this brings the total figure (450 million and 800-900 million out of a total of 7.8 billion) to nearly one in six people on the planet who are affected. This is an average figure at the global level, although most often we do not know anyone directly affected. To better understand it : imagine for a moment that in your social circle (family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, partners in leisure activities, local community), one in 6 people would be affected by famine, or even deceased. Or that one in two people will be affected by this problem in their life.

And if in Western countries, these situations are less frequent and less extreme, it is clear that in some regions elsewhere in the world, they are quite simply the norm, and almost everyone is then confronted with them. This fact alone should make us understand that the reception of migrants in Western countries should not be considered as a favor or a generosity, but as a duty, a necessity.

If we know all this, then it becomes obvious that our personal role in the efforts to be made is fundamental. And that, in addition to the work to be done to stimulate political, economic, cultural and media leaders to move in the right direction, we have to review, each one (and therefore in priority those who are aware of this necessity), each act of consumption that we make at every moment in our daily life. Put bluntly : everything we consume that is useless, we steal it from someone else, even if the laws protect us to do so.

Pope Gregory the Great expressed it (over 1000 years ago) in these terms: "If you have a second pair of shoes and a poor person goes barefoot, you don't have to give it to him, but to return it to him. "

Or even just recently, Marillys Macé, Director of the French Water Information Center, speaking about our water footprint : "When I buy a kilo of Spanish oranges, I do not realize that I'm plundering Spain's already limited water reserves."

(ref in French : https://www.rtf.be/info/societe/detail_vous-connaître-l-empreinte-carbone-connaître-vous-l-empreinte-eau?id=10830016)

It is not only the traffickers, the exploiters, the economical delinquents and a large number of leaders and rulers who keep this machine running. We are indeed a stakeholder in this system, as soon as we consume its production, and benefit from its advantages.

In a certain way we are part of those species that, in biology, we call "pests". Except the fact, all the same, that we are endowed with consciousness; which makes it possible that we can realize it, and decide, and do what is necessary to change this status, this reality.

And as the realizations do not all happen at the same time in everyone ; it is the first ones to achieve it who bear the responsibility for initiating the change, first of all on themselves.

And to find out the concrete ways to get out of the game, the easiest way is to measure our own personal ecological footprint. I propose a series of them in the article dedicated to it on my website: <http://sechangersoni.be/EN/6EN-Discover/Footprint%20EN.htm>).

However, the ecological footprint does not mention the most important point, which is, moreover, rarely, if not ever, mentioned, and which is taken into account in the following article written by Seth Wynes and Kimberly A Nicholas in July 2017 :

" *The climate mitigation gap: education and government recommendations miss the most effective individual actions* ", proposed under the "Environmental Research Letters":

<https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/aa7541/meta>

This article makes it possible to realize that, in the current context, choosing to have one less child has an effect nearly 10 times greater on the individual ecological footprint than all the other efforts combined

(the proportion taken into account here is for the USA and is different for each country). For example, according to the figures mentioned in the article : the annual reduction in CO2 emissions by becoming vegan is on average more than 70 times less important than that of choosing not to procreate. Taking a transatlantic flight is almost 35 times less impactful. Giving up the gasoline car is almost 25 times less. These are the 3 actions recognized as the most promising for reducing our ecological footprint (see the first of the two tables proposed in the article). Having a dog and choosing a 100% renewable energy source are also mentioned in the article as being of major importance in the ecological footprint. However, no comparison figure is provided for these last two points.

I am conscious that the subject of giving up having a child is taboo and that, for the majority, this idea is inconceivable. But I also know that some people understand the meaning of this approach and can learn to find it acceptable for themselves. The idea is not to stop human reproduction outright ; it is those who are less attracted to parenthood, who have become conscious of the current issue, and who can consider other couple projects, which can help reduce the number of births. And this, especially since the ecological footprint is explosive in the richer countries and that it is therefore in these countries that the birth rate must be lowered first.

And thus, it will become possible to understand that founding a family is not always "in the order of things", and is not the only way to give a couple a sense of fulfillment.

The Wynes and Nicholas article also highlights that once the choice has been made to make changes, individual acts can be carried out very quickly compared to structural changes in society, or the time it takes to restore damage in nature. And so it is necessarily there that we must start, especially with teenagers who have not yet established a lifestyle choice, and have not yet imprinted habits and conditioning that will be much more difficult to do evolve later on. All the more so, as it will be up to them to make the choices to procreate or not in the coming decades.

Regarding our food, it is also interesting to refer to the water footprint of each type of food that we consume (see <https://waterfootprint.org/en/resources/interactive-tools/product-gallery/>) and to calculate the water footprint including water used to manufacture of our other consumption:

<https://www.watercalculator.org/wfc2/q/household/>

And then also, again implicitly : what we do with our savings has a huge impact on what can be done with this capital by the banks. There are ethical cooperatives, whose goal is not the return on investment, but to benefit those who need it most, among other things through micro-credits. By entrusting our money to traditional banks, it is equivalent to signing a contract so that this money falls into the hands of those who have the most power and the least morality. It is then also a heavy responsibility, which it is very easy to circumvent, because alternative cooperatives exist.

Even if we cannot be perfect at reducing our footprint - for, everything conditions us to do the opposite, and deconditioning ourselves does not happen in a snap ;

Even if no direct evidence is available to us to know the usefulness of these efforts ;

Even if no guarantee can be given to us that it is still possible to meet the challenges that threaten us ; only our conscience and the solidarity that can emerge from it are there to help us give the best of ourselves and support those who do the same, without seeking to blame and make feel guilty those who do not (yet) participate in this change.

This is the most important thing we can do right now. And to make those efforts worth, it has to be maintained it over time.

Informing those around us can also help if we remain measured and careful. For, by insisting in order to convince them, we are much more likely to arouse their resistance, and thus provoke the opposite of what we are trying to achieve. The key point lies in our individual action, and in our social and ecological commitment that goes with it. There is no point in trying to influence others or put pressure on those in power if we have not integrated the change ourselves.

In the sense that, as long as we maintain our ecological footprint greater than one, and we persist in pointing the finger of blame at people in power to hold them accountable, we continue to be part of the

problem. The moment we accept our responsibility in the process and translate that into action to reduce that ecological footprint as best we can; then we start to be part of the solution.

And even if no one around us accompanies us to do it, if no one supports us in the process, if no one approves us, or even understands us; we must know that we are not alone. That others are taking the same path, and are more and more numerous, even if this is not necessarily the case of our direct entourage. And the contagion or snowball effect works and will continue to work. And in the near future more and more laws will also help us move in the right direction. And it is extremely likely that shortages will also limit our excesses of all kinds. And in the same vein, the current events, which are multiplying everywhere, and which jeopardize the structure of our society, will inevitably bring more and more people to question themselves.

The more consciousness there will be among the population, the more solidarity can be manifested.

Choosing to evolve with optimism in all circumstances, then allows us to bounce back and helps our efforts to pay off.

It is up to everyone to manage their consciousness, by choosing the level of information about what they consume, and by changing their consumption behaviors. One cannot dictate behavior to others. I would just like with this text, to be able to stimulate questioning for those who have doubts, or to comfort those who are already sailing against the tide of this devastating culture in which we are immersed. For, the more we make links between our own behaviors and what is dysfunctional in the world, the easier it is to abandon them and adopt new, more constructive ones.

Beyond the efforts for sobriety that we can integrate, there will be a whole evolution of consciousness essential to achieve this, which implies more psychological questioning of our ways of thinking, of reasoning, and especially of our culture of omnipresent balance of power. I will come back to this at greater length in a document currently in preparation.

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September 2021

article published on the website : <http://sechangersoi.be/EN/EN-home.htm>
on the page : <http://sechangersoi.be/EN/4EN-Articles/Passiveviolence.htm>

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