

CHAPTER I-1

Violence: The Difficulties of a Systematic International Review

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I. THE OBJECTIVES OF VIOLENCE RESEARCH

Ambitious academic studies generally serve their purpose when they provide accurate definitions of problems, clear descriptions, considered explanations, as well as convincing assessments, and encourage long-term work in the field. The whole process must be a reflexive one, allowing room for expressions of doubt and maintaining a critical detachment from the subject. This means that an international manual of violence research has to meet certain standards and fulfill certain expectations. The first question to be answered by a manual of this kind, dealing with one of the most enigmatic and, at the same time, most serious social phenomena, concerns the possible forms, types, and characteristics of violence. In answering that question, the manual must carefully distinguish between the many different phenomena, ranging from the individual act to the organized actions of groups or states. Explanations of violence are to be found in quite different academic disciplines and therefore have to be considered across the spectrum from psychological to sociostructural approaches. The standards applied and the normative foundations of assessments need to be clearly stated in each case. Finally, the study must highlight differentiated ways of dealing with violence, from individual therapy to changes in the structure of society. Even taken alone, these reasons are enough to make publishing a manual of violence research a rather audacious venture.

Almost all relatively detailed studies make it clear that violence takes extremely varied forms and may possess many different qualities; not only is there a very substantial range of (current) definitions, but there are also many disagreements about the authority of definitions of what violence is, or is said to be. Consequently, theories of violence not only vary in their validity and significance but also address different subjects and involve con-

troversial assessments of the efficacy of possible strategies for addressing the problem. Moreover, what seems the clear condemnation of violence is significantly challenged in many social and political situations, so that it is highly advisable to approach violence, and its different areas and contexts, on a basis of clear distinctions.

II. THE AMBIGUOUS CONTENT OF VIOLENCE

One of the central problems confronting a manual on violence is the *ambiguity* of violence itself, which is apparent in the characterization and framing of its phenomena, the logic of its occurrence and possible escalation, supposed causal explanations, and its evaluation. As a result, it frequently happens that clear divisions between levels of analysis and escalation dynamics become blurred, with the result that analyses cease to do justice to the complexity of violence.

The problems of violence research begin at the outset, with the attempt to determine exactly what should be classified as violence. There is, admittedly, a broad consensus that violence causes injury and sometimes death and results in many different forms of destruction, so that there are always victims. But at that point, if not before, the consensus certainly ends. It is not even clear precisely who or what has been injured, or how serious that injury is. Can cases of mental devastation be classified as violence, or—because they cannot be objectively recorded—are they merely subjectively nuanced injuries, where the victims themselves may even come under suspicion? Should the definition of violence include structural forms, which need no direct perpetrators but undeniably produce their victims, or is the use of the label “structural violence” merely denunciatory? This manual offers no solutions to these hitherto unresolved problems, which easily give rise to disputes over definitions and boundaries.

Any attempt to determine definitively what constitutes violence is a high-risk undertaking in various ways. The basic principle that constantly becomes apparent is the *overstepping of boundaries*, which—in an age when moral, sexual, educational, and legal standards and values are being abandoned, or at least widely relaxed—almost defies the drawing of clear, traditional dividing lines. Lawyers, for example, may arrive at narrow definitions in order to identify situations within the reach of the criminal law, but in a context of social reality the phenomenon of violence is always more multifaceted. New boundaries are being drawn around acts of violence, for example, because of increased sensitivity (marital rape) or changed models of perception (the sit-in as violence). It is precisely because the problematic of violence is a particularly unclear one that it needs to be addressed with greater sensitivity and reflexivity.

Another of these gray areas is that we have little soundly based or prognostic knowledge of the *logic governing outbreaks* of violence, and do not know whether violence will develop *regularly* or *irregularly*. Sequences of violent events are dependent on numerous alternative options for action, because violence represents a resource that is available for use by anyone at any time. If, for example, expressive forms of violence arise, where the act of violence itself or the intoxication of violent action is all that matters, the victims are random and are afforded little protection by “early warning systems.” If the violence is more instrumental in nature, it often seems predictable or calculable. Ultimately, violence can be perpetuated, reinforced, or prevented not only by action but also by inaction. Thus our attention is directed to motives, but also, at the same time, to unmotivated acts. Violence, then, either has rationally comprehensible causes or is shifted into the context of the inexplicable.

Violence also involves quite different types of victim. It matters little who is responsible for the violence—the police, as the executive arm of the state monopoly on violence, or the individual youthful perpetrator, or the plundering, pillaging, murderous mob: for those against whom violence is directed, violence is always violence. Here again, however, the degree and severity of injury suffered, the nature and type of the violence, and its extent and duration determine the physical aftereffects, the mental stresses, and the apparent or concealed traumas that the victims have to endure. The particular historical, contemporary, political, and cultural interpretations of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders appear to be central in the process of coping with experienced violence.

The diversity of social situations and political conflicts that are classified as violence thus makes it impossible even to begin to describe all its variations, especially as there seem to be no limits to the brutal ingenuity of individuals, groups, and government agencies when it comes to harming other human beings, individually or collectively. The events of September 11, 2001, provided particularly tragic confirmation of this, and those acts of violence against cultural symbols of the world of Western capitalism have opened up new dimensions of fear. But the consensus that that terrible day can clearly be classified as an instance of violence does not mean that its assessment is equally unambiguous: some see it as a barbarous violent assault, others as a reaction to the United States' own policy of violence. This again suggests that the prospects of certainty—as a solid moral base when academic and political approaches to violence have so few points in common—are slight. For that reason, a manual such as this is well advised to concentrate its analyses on Western industrial societies and to justify its selection of contributions.

III. THE FIELD OF STUDY: VIOLENCE IN MODERN WESTERN INDUSTRIALIZED SOCIETIES

The twentieth century witnessed a devastating level of violence by individuals, groups, and states. This applies both in comparison to earlier periods, and in contrast with the desire of the individual to preserve his or her integrity, the social and political utopian dreams of a world at peace, and the duty of states to protect human life and preserve social order.

In Western societies, the dream of a nonviolent modern age clashes with a reality that is massively overshadowed, if not totally plunged into darkness, by overt acts of violence and the potential for destruction. The founding fathers of sociological analysis of contemporary history and society—Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim—predicted the price that modern society would have to pay for its processes of modernization in terms of inhumanity and destruction. Defying all the optimistic hopes of progress, the modern age is specifically not an age of nonviolence, even if the state monopoly on violence provides a mechanism for dealing with inherently violent tensions. Even a modern state can act barbarically. But different societies deal with the potentiality for violence in quite different ways, for example, by striking a balance between traditional and modern universalistic group identities, in order, for example, to prevent the disintegration of whole sectors of the population and so also defuse the ethnicized potential for violence. In other cases there may be a binding canon of values providing for a graduated scale of punishments for violations. Often, however, violence is also seen as a phenomenon that decreases over the course of modern development, and as one that is securely encapsulated by the state monopoly on violence; in other words, as a phenomenon that is no longer a signifi-