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Preface: Violation and Violence as Cultural Phenomena

Jon Abbink

This book intends to throw new light on violence by offering a variety of studies on the 'versatility' of violent performance, and on the explanatory efforts to account for this.

Violence is a human universal: in no known human society or social formation is interpersonal aggression, physical threat, assault, or homicide and armed conflict completely absent or successfully banned. This may be trivial observation. But while phenomena of violence are pervasive in human society and are easily evoked in full dramatic force, the issue of how to explain what violence 'is' or does, remains one of the most thorny and challenging ones. At the same time these are becoming questions most frequently posed to (and within) social science, and to which instant answers and 'solutions' are demanded from wider, non-academic audiences.

| The problem starts with *definitions* of violence. In this book we do not claim a uniformity of approach among the authors, but perhaps it can be said that the conception of inter-personal violence underlying the contributions in this book is based on the following *four*, minimally defining, elements: the '*contested*' use of *damaging physical force* against other humans (cf. Riches 1991: 295), with possibly fatal consequences and with purposeful *humiliation* of other humans. Usually, this use of force – or its threat – is pre-emptive and aimed at gaining dominance over others. This is effected by physically and symbolically '*communicating*' these intentions and threats to others.¹ Such a description of violence shows that it is always, by nature, ambiguous interaction.² This problem was already amply dealt with in the path-breaking collection of Riches (1986).

x | Apart from definition, another challenge for social science is to disentangle the study and explanation of violence from the public media discussion and popular opinion. Not that these are unimportant, but as they tend to demand instant moral response, judgement and 'taking a

stand', one has to view them with reserve. This book intends to take a step back and look at what historical and cultural factors are at issue in situations and meanings of violent behaviour of either a personal or collective nature (This does, however, not entail a view that 'culture' – in whatever definition – is in any way explanatory of violence).

This collection of essays by historians, sociologists and anthropologists thus seeks to illustrate at least that, first, in studying phenomena of violence in their social and cultural effects, it is necessary to suspend moral and legal judgements while describing the empirical diversity of its manifestations; and secondly, the point that 'violence' is contingent and context-dependent, and thus not a straightforward urge in all humans wanting to come out. Violent actions are much more 'meaningful' and rule-bound than reports about them lead us to believe. Obviously, this understanding does not imply to ultimately suspend evaluations of violence altogether: we do not have to subscribe to the view that *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*, which in itself is a moral stance. Violence, though the defining image of our world, is infamy; and its dynamics consists as much of its exercise as of the attempts to refuse it. The social science approach is a child of the Enlightenment, and to many authors in this volume the best part of this philosophical heritage is the old Kantian idea of human emancipation and of broadening and democratising the human 'community of discourse'. But the point is that the theoretical implications of a view of violence that looks at its different cultural definitions and its situationality are still not sufficiently taken into account. Also in political theory, the issue of culture – i.e. the varying perceptions of the meaning of events and human agency – in the explanation of collective violence is usually bypassed, or only seen as secondary.

A relatively new point of view advanced here is that in many historical instances violence has the effect of a 'creative' or at least 'constituent' force in social relations:³ deconstructing, redefining or reshaping a social order, whether intended or not. This is not meant as an evaluative statement as to its positive or negative value, but as an analytical one. It is only to call attention to the vital role of socially rooted and historically formed relations of power, force and dominance – also in an ideological sense – in defining social relations, effected through violent action. The various chapters in this volume therefore intend to examine the meaning of statements and acts of violence being 'creative' or 'constructive' in this neutral sense.

Most of the contributors in this book are social anthropologists, and on this account their job is to explore social and cultural contexts as well as and cognitive constructions (and implications) of phenomena of

violence. This entails taking an essentially historicizing view. In turn, the historians who are represented here are strongly influenced by cultural approaches to issues of violence as found in social anthropology

There are, obviously, many other approaches to violence the value of which we do not deny: ethological, criminological and psychological. These remain essential to put violence in a comparative perspective and to consider possible phenotypic predispositions of assertiveness or aggressive behaviour of humans,⁴ as well as socialization processes (cf. Baumeister 1996). But as humans are historical and culture-bearing social beings engaged in relations of meaning-creation and symbolism, we have deemed it fit to explore the recurring questions about the degree in which historical and cultural contingencies of human social groups or societies shape violent behaviour and bring out these (alleged) predispositions. This is not easy: one meets recriminations of being 'partial to violence' if it is assumed that violence can have a 'meaning' or a creative effect. But such a view confuse the disciplinary idiom of social science with every-day language. Social science simply has the right and duty to use concepts and theories which are forged and used at one remove from everyday language – and the distance can be great. When we speak of 'meaning' it is not to advance a cultural-relativist view on the ('positive') meaning of violent performance for the perpetrators, but to refer to the contexts in which this performance is enacted and carries 'communicative messages'. For instance, as Zulaika has show in his exemplary study of Basque terrorism (1989), a whole range of implicit symbols and metaphors – and hence meanings – is present in the violent practice of Basque youth throwing bombs and liquidating innocent victims. But even the contexts of what is known as criminal violence such as random assault on the streets or football hooliganism often have their communicative messages. Hence, the obvious point is that one cannot explain violent behaviour by an immediate appeal to moral arguments, as one has to first explore the socio-cultural and historical contexts of violation – intimidation or transgressing behaviour towards other persons' physical and psychological integrity with harmful effect – and violence before one might appeal to moral or other factors.

This is not to deny that basic questions as to the psycho-biological nature of humans emerge at some point, especially when trying to describe and explain cruelty or extreme humiliating behaviour which appear to go beyond any instrumental or 'communicative' meaning. Here one perhaps touches upon the disturbing elements in the psycho-biological make-up of humans as social animals that derive physical and mental pleasure from inflicting terror and pain on others, bathing in feelings of

superiority and detachment at that moment. These are perhaps still taboo issues in the study of human society, but no less important (cf. Cameron and Frazer 1994; Baumeister 1996). Numerous statements of historical and contemporary warriors, concentration-camp guards, terrorists and common criminals could also be cited which demonstrate their sense of ultimate power and excitement during the acts of torture, rape and killing. One might claim that to contain and canalize such a human disposition is, and always has been, one of the challenges of any human society or group in so far as it attempts to create a meaningful order; it has also contributed to draw identities and boundaries between groups.

It was noted frequently (e.g. McFarlane 1986, Bloch 1992, Harvey and Gow 1994, Krohn-Hansen 1994, Keeley 1996: 4) that the explicit theorizing of violence in social anthropology has been limited. This despite the fact that armed conflict or violent encounters were a favourite topic in ethnography: a large corpus on 'tribal warfare', ethnic conflict, personal violence, etc. is available since at least the 1940s. Neither has there been a lack of general historical and social theories giving central place to violence as a factor in the constitution of human society or in the emergence of state civilizations. And already in 1871 E.B. Tylor, one of the pioneers of anthropology, posited his rule of exogamy (with its theoretical implications): humans face the challenge to be 'killed out' or to 'marry in', i.e. to ally themselves with others in order to overcome the disposition to animosity and fragmentation among social groups.

The problem of violence and social order was also central to the first generations of grand theory sociologists like Spencer, Marx, Weber, Simmel and Durkheim. Obviously, Freud was also deeply concerned with the question of violence and his work has had a profound impact on twentieth-century theories (both social and psychological) on the subject (one example: Sagan 1974, 1979, 1985). In one of the most influential theories of the twentieth century, Girard (1972, 1983) has identified 'scape-goating' as a basic psychological mechanism of classification which is generating violence. Also in the sociology of important theorists like N. Elias and, more recently, A. Giddens and P. Bourdieu, the study of violence and its relation to 'social order' or cohesion are key issues.

Nevertheless, what is probably meant by pleas for more theorizing of violence is that a fundamental discussion in social science and anthropology on the 'constituting force' and the ontological status of violent behaviour (in the definition given above) should be radically extended, not in the least in view of its importance in human history and culture and in its quality as an assumed 'predisposition' in human behaviour. What this implies, however, is not clear. One cannot revert to a psycho-

analytic model of violence and human aggression, given the decisive shaping of patterns of violence by specific historical and cultural conditions. For the same reason, one can neither explain all violence in terms of the evolutionary-biological (neo-Darwinian) paradigm (see Knauff 1991) which is focused on reproductive struggle and competition for survival and status, and tends to declare the rest epiphenomena, making social science analysis largely superfluous. For instance, the important monograph on homicide by Daly and Wilson (1988) fails on this account.

Interesting attempts to meet the challenge of theorizing violence in anthropology are to be found in recent studies by, among others, Riches (1986, 1991), Moore (1994) and Nordstrom and Robben (1996). They emphasize the constructed nature, the symbolism within which it is embedded, and also the destructive, traumatic effects of violence. But here — especially in the latter book — we often see a full turn towards phenomenological description and 'evocation' of violence. This indeed brings a very useful methodological point, because the views and commitments of perpetrators and victims are often not fully recognized and assessed, and because the horror and humiliation of violence can perhaps never be reduced into discursive accounts let alone adequate theories making it 'rational' and controllable. But a radical empiricist approach as seems to be offered in the latter book and in much of recent writing — however impressive, revealing and attentive to the victims the case-material may be — may reinforce a tendency to abdicate efforts of comparative explanation.

There seem, nevertheless, to be no cogent reasons to give up the search for more integrative explanations of the dynamics and socially re-ordering effects of violent action. Apart from its being rooted in the social nature of humans, there are seemingly certain socio-historical conditions which tend to generate or stimulate violence. While each discipline has its own distinct contribution to make to the study of violence — the new developments in criminal sociology, law, ethology, history, psychology and human evolutionary biology simply cannot be ignored — the challenge, however, is to integrate some of them into a larger whole and to reshape our perception of the nature and causes or relevant factors of violent behaviour. This change of perspective — which entertains the idea that interconnections are vital for understanding — is a long way from being accepted among social scientists. Especially anthropology — due to its holistic and comparative perspective and its interest in intersecting domains of human behaviour — should continue to search for such integrated views. Whether a general theory of violence or violent behaviour or violence is possible is, however, another question. This would embroil us into a discussion of theory and epistemology in general, and will not be taken up here.

While the case-studies in this book give evidence of the pervasiveness of violence in human society, they also demonstrate the need to understand its contingency, its historical variability and its cultural guises. There is no law stating that human societies will eventually generate the same amount and intensity of violence or the same measure of intimidation and cruelty. Although there is still a widespread popular image to the contrary, there is no easy hierarchy of 'more' or 'less civilized' societies either (see for the backgrounds of engrained violence in American society: Brown 1994, Duclos 1996).

Hence, the chapters in the present book, while referring to this problematic and pleading for a more holistic view of phenomena of violent performance, do not elaborate on the issue of whether such unified theories of violence are possible, or even necessary. What is suggested is that the enduring task of a social science approach – especially social anthropology – to human violence is to help shape an informed academic discourse and public debate on violence. It can do this by sensitively describing and demonstrating its historical forms and its discursive forms, revealing its cultural aspects and its social reproduction among humans, and in doing so contextually explain its variability and contingency. Any essentialized views of violence as inevitable and immutable in human nature – or, allegedly, in some societies or so-called 'cultures of violence' – can thus be rejected as explanatory non-starters. This underlying theoretical orientation is amply demonstrated in all of the cases described in this book – selected for their empirical novelty, their broad range, and their dealing with generative and constituent aspects of violent performance.

Notes

1. A case could be made to extend this use of the concept of violence to other beings (animals, especially the higher apes or primates, see Cavalieri and Singer 1993), as violence in this sense may not be 'typically human'. But this aspect will be excluded from the present discussion: apes do not live in a universe of verbal discourse and symbolism.
2. Actions like destruction of property or common resources, or sacrificing animals (and humans), or (accusations of) witchcraft pose problems of another nature, but because of their often being contested, they have clear elements of violence.

3. This point has recently also been made by Kurimoto and Simonse (1998: 10) in their overview of studies of age systems in North East Africa. They state that '...war and antagonistic relations are sometimes constructive or creative' (ibid.), and exist in conjunction with peaceful relations between those involved.
4. Although they remain very controversial; compare Blanchard and Blanchard (1984). See also Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Salter (1997).