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Introduction to the Special Section: Perpetrating violence

Perpetrating violence viewed from the perspective of the social sciences:

Debates and perspectives

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Abstract

What drives some people to “perpetrate violence”? Why do others, by contrast, not perpetrate violence, even under the same conditions? Do all violent acts involve a radicalization or a dehumanization and degradation of civil relations between subjects, sometimes even between neighbors or even within the same family or community, be it ethnic or national? This special theme gathers contributions from many different geographical areas (mainly Morocco, Syria, Germany, and Rwanda) and from several disciplines (literature, political science, sociology, history) in order to offer keys to understanding the factors that trigger or accelerate the perpetration of violence, but also those that curb or limit it. The reader will also find exhaustive states of the art and case studies on different types of violence (riot, political, paramilitary, genocidal), leading to transversal theorizations that go well beyond dichotomies and old debates. For example, the authors discuss the “old” opposition between a situational and a procedural approach, embodied—not without artifice—by Browning and Goldhagen, or the necessary dehumanization of the enemy generally associated with the study of genocides. Another methodological choice with a strong epistemological implication consisted in not contrasting the recent theories on radicalization with those on extreme violence, and rejecting any obvious determinism between both moments, in order to avoid explaining the perpetration of violence in too facile a way.

Keywords

extreme violence, genocide, perpetrating violence, radicalization, resistance, situational and processual approaches

Author biography

Sabrina Melenotte is a research fellow at the Research Institute for Development (IRD), member of the Migrations and Societies Research Unit (URMIS, IRD UMR 205). She conducts her political anthropology research on missing persons and the government of dead in Mexico. Former coordinator of the Violence and Exiting Violence Platform (FMSH 2015–2019) and of the ANR project “SoV—Sortir de la violence,” she is in charge of its research axis “Perpetrating violence.”

The concept of “acting out,” which originated in psychoanalysis (Allouch, 2019) and is often used in the field of criminology, has experienced a resurgence of interest in recent years. It is now used across various disciplines, in the political, social, human, and cognitive sciences, to such an extent that it is no longer always clear what it is referring to. Its meaning is complicated further by the fact that its terminology varies considerably between languages, for example from English to French or Spanish. For instance, whereas in French, its translation, “passage à l’acte,” refers indiscriminately to a concept used at once in psychoanalysis, sociology, and criminology, English distinguishes the psychoanalytic concept of “acting out” from “perpetrating violence,” more commonly used in other social and political sciences and in criminology. This article and the special theme it introduces will be based on the latter phrase, to show its theoretical and empirical implications and stakes.

First in the United States, after the September 11 terrorist attacks, then in other countries, particularly in France, jihadist attacks have brought the concept of radicalization to the fore, and, with it, the concept of perpetrating violence. Several authors were quick to make a distinction between the two (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011; Horgan, 2014; Khosrokhavar, 2017): since not all radicalization necessarily leads to perpetrating violence, they distinguish between radicalization and violent radicalization. Psychoanalysts also distinguish between the thought of a violent act and action itself, the step of crossing over from thought to act.

Some researchers and thinkers draw inspiration from psychoanalysis and linguistics and argue that mass murders are “social symptoms” (Uribe, 2010) that bear witness to the impossibility of finding in language the signifiers that would express conflict in a non-violent form. According to this view, perpetrating violence is the impossibility of finding a signifier, an “unsymbolized content” that involves the excess of an act of violence that has failed to find expression in the symbolization of language, where each party in a conflict prevents the other from realizing its identity and its humanity.

Others argue that contextualizing extreme violence does not help us to explain perpetrating violence, which always remains “unpredictable” (Sofsky, 2003) and raises the same methodological, heuristic, epistemological, and political questions and issues as any study of violent acts in their multiple forms of expression. The question of the act itself, as a murderous gesture with a strong social, political, and symbolic significance, is nevertheless unique on each occasion. Perpetrating violence is not self-evident. It relates to a suspended, mysterious space-time, which is the violent act itself that we aim to explore in this special section of the journal. This space-time is considered by some as the arrival at a tipping point and by others as a process, especially in the case of mass violent acts. What drives some people to “perpetrate violence”? Why do others, by contrast, not perpetrate violence, even under those same conditions? What is this liminal space that is created between radicalization, which may involve the imagination and fiction of violence, and perpetrating violence in a real and physical way? Do all violent acts involve a dehumanization and degradation of civil relations between subjects, sometimes between neighbors or even within the same family or community, be it ethnic or national? The analysis must consider the factors that trigger or accelerate the perpetration of violence, but also, in the same way, the individual, economic, and political conditions that curb or limit it.

Diving into the heart of darkness in search of meaning

Researchers working on violence are often accused of being fascinated by their subject. It is true that thinking about extreme violence implies immersing oneself in our own barbarity, as Jacques Semelin states in his now classic work *Purify and Destroy* (2007). He cites Claude Lanzmann as saying that “between the will to kill and the act itself, there is an abyss,” and it is in this “genocidal abyss” that

he situates the perpetration of violence. The first debates on the matter in the social sciences were based on this dive into the “heart of darkness” of genocide and acts of extreme violence. To understand the experiences of cases of extreme and mass violence, it was necessary to examine the meaning that could be attributed to them: in some cases collective acts of violence imply an astonishing degree of premeditation and sophistication, whereas in others the fratricidal dimension of certain collective acts of violence involves an equally astonishing degree of intimacy and social proximity. The first attempts to move beyond an analysis in terms of astonishment oscillated between, on the one hand, a functionalist, rationalist, and even deterministic vision of violence and, on the other hand, a vision affirming the impossibility of finding meaning in these unspeakable acts of violence.

For many survivors, extreme violence and the cruel destruction of the Other are expressions of the unspeakable, “taboos of history” in the words of Marc Ferro (2002), both because of the historical rupture that they embody and because of the difficulty of writing about the past. Primo Levi asserts in *If This Is a Man* (1959) that there is no “why” in this case, situating the crimes of the Final Solution in the realm of the unspeakable. Some have objected to the attempt to shed light on the enigma of genocide because understanding it might contribute to “excusing the crimes,” entering into the logic of the perpetrators and finding extenuating circumstances for them. Léon Poliakov confided his view to Jacques Semelin, on the subject of the Holocaust, that since the event had a multiplicity of causes, it is impossible to really know what the causes were. Nonetheless, authors such as Christopher Browning (1992), who studied the involvement of German police officers—“ordinary men”—in the final extermination during the Holocaust, have responded by saying that “understanding is not forgiving.” Michel Wieviorka (2009) considers that violence is not solely a dysfunction of the collective system, nor one modality among others, but that it refers to a modality of action that includes an element that is excessive, beyond measure, senseless, but without necessarily being a pure outburst of madness. This is also the distinction made by Semelin (2002) between violence and extreme violence, which refers to a state “beyond violence.” The paroxysmal dimension intrinsic to extreme violence is characterized by a desire for annihilation that necessarily leads to an excess in the way in which a person is executed: it is not just a matter of “killing” them, but of annihilating them and their group. To do so, the mutilation and dismemberment of bodies, carried out for example by Islamic State in the Middle East or by Mexican drug traffickers, reflect practices of cruelty and transgressive destruction, where the tortured body becomes a physical and symbolic “discursive vehicle” (Eltringham, 2012) of messages to enemy groups. In cases of extreme violence, the denial of humanity is expressed through methods of debasing and defiling the body (Douglas, 1966), where acts of cruelty violate the laws of war and thereby change the modalities of the perpetration of violence. So, the substantial literature on extreme violence reflects the effort to understand, “despite everything,” that which is unbearable (Kilani, 2014: 249): “As a general rule, collective violence does not consist of inexplicable eruptions, but social scenarios that repeat themselves, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. These scenarios are the work of thinking beings, not of madmen” (Welzer, 2007: 17).¹

The unspeakable nature of violence does not therefore contradict the “moral duty” of understanding its extreme and mass forms, with a view to, potentially, preventing them. By going straight to the heart of the problem of social bonds and the subject’s loss of meaning, one can approach violence as a subjectivity that is denied or broken (Wieviorka, 2009), but that can also be

¹ **Translator’s note:** Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign-language material in this article are our own.

recovered. It is then possible to analyze the rationality of violence and to integrate its social, political, and even psychological causes and effects, which involves combining subjective and even psychosociological study with sociological, anthropological, and political study. This also makes it possible to contribute to the construction of the still underdeveloped field of research of “exiting violence”: rather than imagining a clear boundary between violence and non-violence, a before-violence and an after-violence, research from this perspective integrates the whole range of situations and processes that often mutually overlap and intertwine, rather than being strictly juxtaposed.

A result of this approach is the heuristic choice—central to the special theme developed here—to consider the articulation between theories and theorizations on the one hand, and empirical knowledge on the other. This builds on four years of work in a seminar within an innovative project, the Plateforme Violence et sortie de la violence (Violence and Exiting Violence Platform) of the Fondation Maison des sciences de l’homme in Paris, which welcomed and supported more than 250 researchers and research proposals of various sorts, precisely in order to make “exiting violence” a field of research.² Several publications have resulted from this Platform’s work, notably the report of the Panel international sur la sortie de la violence (International Panel on Exiting Violence) (FMSH, 2019), which examines ten distinct and complementary themes, and the report of the project Sortir de la Violence (SoV - Exiting Violence), supported by the Agence nationale de la recherche (ANR - French National Research Agency), which devotes two of its lines of inquiry to the themes of the perpetration of violence and radicalization.³

From these research experiences, we can draw lessons with regard to methodology. First, it is important to take into account the context of the inquiry, to question the researcher’s axiological neutrality, and to reflect on the judgment they make about the object of study: a situation that is judged to be violent and intolerable at one time will not necessarily be viewed in the same way at another time. Second, the moral dimension underlying relations between individuals directly affected by acts of violence shapes norms, as well as an explicit or implicit model of the just and the unjust, which goes beyond oppositions of legal/illegal or private/public. Thus, anyone who conducts a thorough investigation of violence quickly realizes that it is difficult to simply identify certain actors as the “good guys,” that is, the victims of violence, and others as the “bad guys,” who would be the perpetrators of violence. The researcher cannot naturalize violence and the actors that gravitate around it, but must take into account the way in which the subjects can themselves naturalize or institutionalize the categories that they produce: analyzing the very act of perpetrating violence involves understanding the way in which human groups that construct binary categories and generalizing collectives—“the” Tutsis, “the” Jews, “the” Muslims, and so on—become gradually more polarized.

This consideration leads to another: the extent and the nature of violent acts must be analyzed over the long term. A perpetrator of violence at one moment in time may be a victim of violence at another. In this respect, the case of Rwanda is emblematic of a conflict that has persisted over the long term and where relations have been reversed over the course of history. This also shows the interchangeability of categories of “perpetrators” and “victims,” which should warn us against reducing the complexity of situations of extreme violence to rigid oppositions: although they

² For all of the Platform’s projects: <http://www.fmsch.fr/fr/recherche/24279>

³ See the program of the seminar on “Violence et sortie de la violence” (Violence and Exiting Violence) (2015–2019): <http://www.fmsch.fr/fr/recherche/29861>, as well as the research blog of ANR SoV – Sortir de la violence (project ANR-16-CE39-0010): <https://sov.hypotheses.org/>

may be relevant at a given moment, they do not take into account the diachronic and synchronic instability of contemporary modes of affiliation, or even the “multi-engagements” (Combes, 2011) of armed actors. The study of a conflict over the long term often shows that categories can be malleable and interchangeable depending on the context and time period.

Observing and analyzing the violent act: A methodological and disciplinary challenge

Studying the perpetration of violence therefore raises substantial methodological questions. By posing the question of whether an ethnography of violence was possible, the anthropologists Gérard Lenclud, Elisabeth Claverie, and Jean Jamin (1984) became aware very early on of the difficulty of apprehending a phenomenon that has such an elusive character. Beyond the initial problem of defining what violence is, the study of violence must contend with a twofold methodological issue: not only is it difficult to observe violence as it occurs, at the moment of its perpetration, but its study also consequently results from a process of qualification after the violent act, a process that is itself the subject of controversy.

For a long time, most of the studies in this field were the indirect result of other research projects, since ethnographic immersion was dangerous, if not impossible. There are a few exceptions: Philippe Bourgois (2012) found himself “caught in the crossfire” during a shooting in El Salvador in the midst of a peasant revolution, and Alan Feldman (1995) found himself “in a state of emergency.” After the Second World War, social psychologists analyzed the “perpetrators,” distancing themselves from the individualizing and pathologizing analyses associated with deviance. Milgram (1963) was the first to establish a consensus on the “ordinary” character of “perpetrators” who, as a result of obedience to authority, were able to engage in extraordinary practices. In the 2000s, new and extensive ethnographies from Anglophone researchers (Kleinman, Das, and Lock, 1997; Kleinman, Ramphela and Reynolds, 2000; Das et al., 2001; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2003) addressed more directly the political and epistemological issues of research in violent and conflict-ridden contexts. And, more recently, there has been a real shift to “political ethnographies of violence” (Makaremi, Calzolaio, and Colombo, 2016).

A major difficulty lies obviously in the danger to which the researcher or any individual undertaking the task of creating meaning is exposed. We can recall the death of Michel Seurat, kidnapped and then imprisoned by Islamic militias in the midst of the Lebanese Civil War, or more recently the death of Giulio Regeni, an Italian doctoral student who was conducting research on Egyptian independent trade unions. Yet the contributions in this section of the journal bear witness to the creativity of researchers in coming up with innovative research. How can one study, on location, the paramilitary political violence in Syria, a war-torn country where, as Uğur Üngör explains perfectly, the researcher necessarily alternates between, on the one hand, the danger and threats of an authoritarian regime and, on the other, the silence and distortions of pro-government militias? How can the researcher cope with the emotional strain, which is all the stronger in a context of ongoing violence where all social interactions are permeated by emotions ranging from fear to anger, not to mention anxiety, sadness, and pain? Reflexivity is necessary in order to succeed in describing these emotions that sometimes overwhelm the researcher on the ground, and that sometimes even alienate them, overwhelm them, or lead them to engage in self-censorship. The more or less subtle way in which the researcher makes use of their knowledge and networks, reaches hidden or even clandestine places, and is able to tackle delicate questions without exposing their interlocutors not only raises ethical questions but can hardly be learned from textbooks. This is where the researcher’s ability to throw themselves into such thorny subjects in order to offer new material is revealed, along with the risk they take, which is not always perfectly controlled or measured.

Today, the expansion of new technologies is profoundly changing researchers' relationship to the material they analyze, including that relating to violence. It is possible to vary the methods of investigation, by conducting interviews via Skype or by analyzing social networks (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, etc.), which can complement the ethnographic method and in-depth interviews. Recordings, especially audiovisual recordings, of conflicts, the use of cell phones, the body camera used by Mohamed Merah to film himself during his attacks, video surveillance recorded during terrorist attacks or street mobilizations are so many ways of dividing up sequences and extracting information that modifies the qualitative analysis: researchers possess unprecedented details of all the actors involved, their emotions, the spatial dimensions of the conflict, and the positioning of the victims, the armed actors, and now often journalists, too.

Apart from cases where violence was experienced "directly" by researchers or filmed, the production of knowledge about violence as it takes place—about perpetrating violence—is present in indirect sources, and is used to reconstruct the moment of action. Often, the means of approaching an instance of the perpetration of violent acts takes the form of memoirs written about the violence (Mesclier and Robin Azevedo, 2008; Robin Azevedo, 2008; Theidon, 2014; Crapanzano, 2011) based on oral or written sources (Feldman, 1997; Naepels, 2013, 2006), colonial sources, expedition reports, commemorations, museographies, and testimonies from truth and reconciliation commissions (Sanford, 2003).

What to do with the accounts of perpetrators?

Another major difficulty in studying the perpetration of violence stems from the nature of the accounts that are available for study: the testimonies of survivors; the testimonies of perpetrators; more rarely, the discourse of groups that lived through the violence without being the perpetrators or victims (non-violent parties, deserters, resistance fighters); finally, in film or literary fiction, the staging of the perpetrators' actions imagined on the basis of historical sources. I would like to make a few remarks concerning the problematic status of the accounts of perpetrators, and to highlight once again the ingenuity of the contributions to the theme "Perpetrating violence" published here, in addressing this intrinsic difficulty of the subject.

It is always difficult to identify the first signs of murderous forms of collective action on the basis of accounts, especially if the information is collected in judicial settings during transitional justice—that is, in tribunals or in truth and reconciliation commissions (FMSH, 2019: 113–135). Depositions correspond to accounts produced by the attackers themselves, a different kind of eyewitness to survivors and victims: they too "saw" and "were present" at the scenes of the crimes, and were even behind the events. In this sense, their words are instructive, but they also raise the question of the validity of their testimony and the objectification of their account. Although these resources have made it possible to make advances in the knowledge of violence and the many motives for perpetrating violence in specific contexts by offering particularly rich descriptions that allow us to fathom the details of war crimes and mass crimes, they have also revealed their limits, particularly because of the "incomplete" forms of justice that they have produced and the amnesties that created the legal conditions for these statements without guaranteeing their truthfulness or integrity. The article by Brahim El Guabli is an illustration from the Moroccan context of yet another truth commission that was carried out without the perpetrators and that reproduced impunity.

It is therefore essential to contextualize the production of perpetrators' accounts: in a judicial setting, it is a narrative of justification, or even a defense technique aimed at legitimizing their violent action. Thus, for example, during Vojislav Šešelj's trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the war criminal undertook his own defense, innovating techniques that

disrupted the course of the trial by asserting his power in a controlled state of symmetry, in which the judges were challenged and forced to reaffirm the rule of law and their power to enact the law (Claverie, 2009). I have also shown how, in the armed conflict in Chiapas in Mexico, the defense technique of the paramilitary group that provoked the Acteal massacre consisted in depicting the Other, in this case the Zapatista rebels, as the initial aggressor in order to justify their own aggression and legitimize the use of physical violence (Melenotte, 2014). Using testimonies from members of the Chilean Army, in particular those of non-commissioned officers responsible for security in detention centers, Marcia Esparza (2007) analyzed thirteen confessions in criminal depositions, codified according to the dimensions of remorse and heroism established by Leigh A. Payne and the terms of the code of silence, loyalty, and due obedience, as examined by Erwin Chemerinsky. Confessional testimonies are ambiguous in that they acknowledge that there was violence, abuse, and even torture (but not in these confessions), but they do not clearly provide a more “true” version of events.⁴ Esparza shows that while some works had previously reflected on the confessions of “torturers,”⁵ these confessions were always dependent on the context in which they took place (religious, public, a “commercial market” if the testimony is bought, or a criminal trial).

According to Payne, there are four types of confessions of remorse or heroism among Argentine soldiers who were perpetrators of torture. The first, the “ideal” confession, is that of a “remorse confession”: for a personal reason, the witness takes a critical distance from the authorities that he served. The second is the heroic confession, in which violence is justified by the glorification of the policies of terror. The third type is the “peddling confession,” where the torturer admits, in exchange for money, to having tortured his victims. The fourth type is that in which confessions are given in public forums (such as the Argentine Senate) during official trials, and in this case they are confessions of self-defense, for example by claiming that they were defending the homeland, rather than of remorse.

As previously mentioned, the researcher is often dealing with reconstructions after the fact that create a spatial and temporal distance between themselves and the object of study. The testimonies of perpetrators and interviews published after the fact are valuable accounts—even exercises of memory—of the perpetration of violence, which can give an account of the performative nature of this violent act, provided that the contemporary political stakes of their production are considered. Here again, an important aspect is the researcher’s ability to find means of getting around these methodological obstacles: either they succeed in making these accounts produced in

⁴ Payne, whose system Esparza uses, illustrates the first type of confession, the remorse confession, with the testimony of Adolfo Scilingo, a torturer of the Argentine dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. The confession is “ideal” for two reasons: first, because Scilingo distances himself from the military institution and criticizes the military authorities, especially for having recognized and made public the list of the disappeared; second, because he feels betrayed by the Argentine military, which leads him to break the code of subordination or due loyalty.

⁵ Marcia Esparza, “Casi la verdad: silencios y secretos en la posdictadura del general Augusto Pinochet en Chile,” *Antipoda 5* (2007): 121–143, special report “Imágenes y relatos sobre la violencia: versiones desde África y América Latina”; Dan Foster, Paul Haupt, and Marésa de Beer *The Theater of Violence: Narratives of Protagonists in the South African Conflict* (Oxford: James Currey Ltd, 2005); Martha K. Huggins, Mika Haritos-Fatouros, and Philip G. Zimbardo *Violence Workers: Police Torturers and Murderers Reconstruct Brazilian Atrocities* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002); Leigh A. Payne, “Confessions of Torturers: Reflections from Argentina” (paper presented at the “TRC: Commissioning the Past” conference organized by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation [CSVr] and the History Workshop [at Wits University], University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, 11–14 June 1999).

judicial contexts speak “differently,” however incomplete and biased they may be, as the historian does with archives; or they produce new accounts, by meeting former perpetrators in order to ask them questions “differently” and to produce accounts of a different nature on the same subject; or they rely on other sources from the domain of fiction to draw additional knowledge. This is the case of the testimonial literature examined in Brahim El Guabli’s contribution. The subtlety of the literary descriptions and the psychology of the characters help him to analyze the construction of the impunity of the Moroccan regime through key characters of the regime within the Tazmamart prison (prison director, supervisors, guards), some of whom are violent yet also moral figures, with the author indirectly supporting the thesis that some perpetrators retain their humanity.

From radicalization to extreme violence: What sort of perpetration of violence are we talking about?

Numerous authors have advanced the understanding of the phenomenon of murderous violence through perpetrator studies or genocide studies, a field that is now well defined. Obedience to authority as described in Milgram’s (1963) pioneering study, social pressure and conformity to the group, and the adoption of a social role according to the situation are all themes from social psychology that have been used to support the situational approach and to challenge the view that perpetrators must have undergone prior radicalization. Similarly, the literature on political, state, revolutionary, or paramilitary violence under authoritarian regimes is now extensive, particularly for Latin America, Africa, and Europe. More recently, political scientists and sociologists have renewed the study of more classical forms of radical militant engagement, nationalism, and terrorism (Wieviorka, 1988; Pérez-Agote, 2006; Sommier, 2012; Ferret, 2015), viewing engagement, even violent engagement, as an expression of collective action and advocating the processual approach (Fillieule, 2001). The main transformation has occurred precisely in the break with past forms of militant engagement, including Islamist ones, because of the risks of death in violent clandestine action or armed struggle. In particular, Khosrokhavar (1995, 2015) has analyzed the breaks and continuities between the revolutionary martyrs in Iran and contemporary jihadists who share a quest for meaning, on the part of the subject who, through the spiritualization of death and self-sacrifice, becomes a historical subject.

The recent rise of studies on globalized radicalizations (Roy, 2002, 2004, 2016, 2017; Khosrokhavar, 1995, 2017, 2018; Rougier, 2009, 2015; Sageman, 2008, 2017; Neumann and Kleinmann, 2013; Kepel, 2005, 2010, 2016; Alliance Athéna, 2016; Crettiez and Ainine, 2017; Bonelli and Carrié, 2018; FMSH, 2019; Sèze, 2019)⁶ has shed new light on the forms of clandestine militant engagement, at the intersection between political and clandestine violence (Della Porta, 2006; Sageman, 2008), as well as on the trajectories of digital engagement of young people who join these causes “online,” with varying degrees of ideological strength and prior socialization (Ducol, 2015; Ducol et al., 2018). The rise of the radicalization paradigm has shifted the focus from the genocide paradigm by pointing to other logics of engagement, not structured by the state (unlike genocide) and often challenging and competing with it, as in the cases of Islamic State or drug cartels. However, it is surprising that the more recent literature on violent radicalization has drawn only very little on the older literature on extreme violence. Both share a lack of consensus on the objective “causes,” or the trajectories and biographical backgrounds of violent actors. Faced with such a heuristic difficulty, many studies on violence, armed conflicts, and forms of violent engagement have opted to change

⁶ See the program of the conference “Le Djihadisme transnational, entre l’Orient et l’Occident,” organized by the Fondation Maison des sciences de l’homme and the Institut Montaigne from May 31 to June 2, 2016: <http://www.fmsch.fr/fr/recherche/27589>

their orientation: rather than looking for the “roots” and the causes or factors that lead to violence, some prefer to focus on the “modus operandi,” “processes,” and “mechanisms”—the “how” rather than the “why” (Fillieule, 2001; Sommier, 2012; Crettiez et al., 2017). But the current tendency of parts of political science and political sociology to work on trajectories and biographies cannot avoid the task of analyzing political regimes and crises, the role of institutions in the conflict, and the more or less declared and official state of war in which the perpetrators are engaged. The approach advocated in this special theme aims to connect and intertwine the different geographical scales, from the local to the global, taking into consideration the restructuring of subjectivities associated with and traversed by global dynamics that take into account the “geography of anger” (Appadurai, 2006).

It therefore becomes clear that here, for this special theme, an important methodological and epistemological choice was made not to oppose recent theories on radicalization with those on extreme violence, but rather to connect them and place them into dialog with one another as much as possible. The study of the perpetration of violence provides an opportunity for a cross-cutting analysis of violence, both individual and collective violence, extreme and mass violence, state and criminal violence. Moreover, an analysis based on the act of perpetrating violence does not mean isolating it and reducing it to a moment *T* that would be understood *ex nihilo*. On the contrary, perpetrating violence can be understood as one of the sequences of participation in acts of violence involving different methods (shootings, round-ups, bombings, torture, hand-to-hand combat), different violent actors (politicians, criminals, paramilitaries), and different contexts, ranging from war to peace and including the analysis of what Marielle Debois calls “inter-war periods” (2013).

A second choice was an analytical one and built on the first while making it more nuanced. On the one hand, it is a question of rejecting all apparent determinism, even if there are explanatory factors to explain the perpetration of violence. Since perpetrating violence is not necessarily the outcome of radicalization, the reverse is also debatable: Is radicalization a necessary step in the process toward the perpetration of violence? On the other hand, recent studies on radicalization show that there is no causal link required between radical engagement and the perpetration of violent acts (Neumann and Kleinmann, 2013; Ducol, 2015; McCauley and Moskaleiko, 2009, 2014; Bartlett and Miller, 2012; Khalil, 2017; Khalil, Horgan, and Zeuthen, 2019). Benjamin Ducol (2015: 12) warns us against apprehending trajectories of jihadist engagement in terms of their violent outcomes, and against attributing the intention of perpetrating violence to any actor who might be engaged in jihadism. In another vein, Mohamed-Ali Adraoui (2020; FMSH, 2019: 61–76) proposes to avoid establishing a systematic causal link between quietist Salafism and jihadism. But the difficulty remains: by distinguishing the question of engagement in radical militancy from the concrete acts of violence that this engagement implies, there is a risk of validating the existence of two distinct models of entry and trajectory, as if we were dealing with two forms of militancy (Ducol, 2015). This may also be part of the reason why, although non-violent radicalization is distinct from violent radicalization (Khosrokhavar, 2017)—and the two are worth distinguishing—, work on jihadism and Islamist radicalization has had very little dialog with work on extreme and mass violence such as the Nazi, Rwandan, Armenian, and Cambodian genocides, despite the fact that the latter has contributed considerably to the study of motivations for killing. It therefore remains necessary to consider the factors and trajectories that lead to violent radicalization, mass terrorism, and extreme violence. Perhaps one of the keys to understanding this lies in the way in which we approach our subjects of study and the theoretical approaches we deploy: rather than attempting a totally coherent and systematic analysis of the perpetration of violence, we should accept that the stages leading to violence are far from unitary, systematic, and mechanical, and that it is important to separate the processes of violent engagement from a teleological viewpoint, that of a regulated mechanical

system in which all radicality is read in the light of its violent potential or by conferring on it in hindsight a unity that it did not initially have.

Reinterpreting sources and overcoming dichotomies

The authors of this special theme provide an up-to-date survey, and even an exhaustive one in some cases, of the existing work on the issues at hand. The reader will therefore find a consistent bibliography throughout, which can be used to support further research. The effort of the contributors to go beyond the debates and dichotomies that already exist involves theorization based on unpublished empirical material or, in some cases, analyses of blind spots in the data and analyses of already existing material that has been reinterpreted. For example, Nicolas Mariot revisits interviews translated and published in existing major books on the genocide of the Second World War, and Omar McDoom rereads interviews on the Rwandan genocide already published by other researchers, which he places alongside his own. In addition, the two authors focus on the need to deconstruct the now classic opposition between situational and processual approaches.

A great divide seems to have emerged over the last thirty years following the publication of Christopher Browning's (1992) seminal work on "ordinary men." This book has generated long debates that have advanced the understanding of the phenomenon of murderous violence. Among the best known is that triggered by Daniel J. Goldhagen's controversial book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), which rather hastily swept aside Browning's thesis. In his analysis of Reserve Battalion 101 of the German police force, the latter sheds light on various aspects of the reserve police officers, those "ordinary men" who became serial killers. Most of them, who were not registered members of the Nazi party, or who were even social democrats or communists before 1933, obeyed the order to execute hundreds of thousands of Jews in Poland between 1941 and 1943. Browning shows that a quarter of them refused to take part in the massacres; another quarter participated with pleasure and pride, and the rest obeyed the instructions after overcoming psychological and moral difficulties (nervous breakdown, unease, drunkenness). Browning considers a series of factors to explain their participation: Nazi propaganda, conformity, psychological pressure from the group, fear of appearing to be a coward, and the brutality and cruelty of the war against the USSR, which accustomed the soldiers to massacres and relieved them of moral responsibility.

For Goldhagen, the Nazi horror and the implementation of the Final Solution are not the result of a few men. Similarly, the long and almost intolerable descriptions of the decisive moment of the perpetration of violent acts on the part of police officers during the shootings in occupied Poland, concentration camp staff, and the guards in charge of evacuating the concentration camps upon the approach of the Allied troops, taking the victims on "death marches," do not reflect actions taken solely through obedience to authority. For Goldhagen, the perpetration of violence was the result of a single causal factor, a thesis for which he has been criticized: in his view, an "eliminationist antisemitism" deeply rooted in German society is the sole explanation of why the Holocaust happened only under German inspiration and control. Bypassing a whole range of causes highlighted by several decades of historians—the operation of a bureaucratic machine that enabled the Final Solution, the geopolitical relations involved in the genocidal enterprise, the psychological factors present in the mass killers—, Goldhagen makes racial hatred the main factor in the history of the genocide (Traverso, 1997). For him, the Holocaust is the epilogue of the exclusively German national project, born out of the failure of assimilation a century and a half earlier, when Christians tried to put an end to Judaism through conversion. According to this view, genocidal antisemitism would therefore be the consequence of a dominant and natural feature of German culture, irreducible to Hitler's Nazism, which would explain the German public's favorable reception of and consent to the measures of the Nazi regime from the 1930s onward (the Nuremberg Laws, the 1938 Kristallnacht

pogroms, the death camps). In this way, Goldhagen comes to the conclusion that “ordinary Germans” participated “spontaneously” in the violence of Kristallnacht, thereby refuting other works stating the contrary, such as those of Ian Kershaw on public opinion in Bavaria, which had certain reservations regarding the events of Kristallnacht. Goldhagen presents the pogroms as the product of the spontaneous and savage outburst of an irrational crowd, and the Final Solution as the natural outcome of this eliminationist ideology.

Surprisingly, Goldhagen quickly embodied the so-called “processual” approach at the same time as he essentialized the German nation and deconstructed Browning’s thesis on ordinary men and Arendt’s on the banality of evil, as well as brushing aside other work by Holocaust historians. Browning’s thesis, by contrast, supported the so-called “situational” approach: the thesis of the ordinary perpetrator is opposed to the idea of dehumanization or negative antecedent attitudes and beliefs. However, by closely examining Browning’s theses, Omar McDoom shows that, while the analysis of situational forces strengthens the idea that prior ideological radicalization is not necessary, psychosocial mechanisms arise in the moment due to the violent act in progress, modifying it in return. While maintaining the central idea that the ideological dehumanization of Jews was not necessary among the police officers of Reserve Battalion 101, he also suggests that the initial motives such as social pressure, conformity, or obedience to authority evolved and gave way to a more deliberate and cruel violence, making brutalization not a cause but an effect of the behavior of these men.

Faced with this large and somewhat artificial division, several contributors to this special theme share more or less the same view on the basis of their case studies and thus contribute to strengthening another position, which has emerged in recent years: the idea that the intentions of actors to perpetrate violence are evolutive and developmental rather than determined beforehand. This more functionalist or pragmatic vision seems to be developing in the face of the more intentionalist theories that have preceded it, and it is found in several contributions to this issue. Although there are heterogeneous factors surrounding violent acts, change takes place as the action unfolds, reinforcing the already stated idea that there is no predetermination of the violent act. McDoom supports the idea, found in Browning’s work, of a changing dynamism induced by the violent act, leading him to view radicalization as both “cause and consequence of violence in genocides and mass killings.” For example, he shows how, in the case of the Rwandan genocide, a killer’s method of execution became more cruel over time. Attitudes are heterogeneous, but the author emphasizes here that the change in attitudes occurs as a result of the perpetration of violence itself, while at the same time modifying the violent act: for instance, imitating one’s neighbor can trigger the feeling of hatred that is suddenly produced “by killing.” Jan Reinermann and Timothy Williams show how motivations change during the course of the action by following a process of adaptation that transforms the hierarchy of needs of the acting individual: for example, security in the face of danger, moral integrity, social belonging, and better living conditions are all basic needs that induce motivations such as avoiding coercive acts of killing, conformity to the group, and economic opportunism, which, respectively, respond to these needs. While also taking into account the diversity of individual personalities and contexts, these motivations may change in their order of priority during the course of the violent action itself (hierarchy re-ordering) with one or the other being more salient at a given moment, and new motivations may emerge and be added during the course of the action (motivation addition) or, by contrast, disappear (motivation removal): for example, the need for social or professional advancement may have pushed people in Rwanda or Cambodia to participate in the genocide in order to reach a better position in the chain of opportunities. Few studies to date have precisely defined the needs and motivations for perpetrating violence in order to show how one moves from one position to another through an effort to model

the patterns of the dynamics of understanding. This both processual and situational perspective can refer to the microprocesses of violence that Collins discusses. It is not based on psychological analyses, although the influence of psychoanalysis and psychology is undeniable. In fact, there is nothing contradictory in analyzing the perpetration of violence from an interactionist point of view, or on the microsociological scale of observation, while at the same time taking into account institutionalized situations, sociopolitical contexts, social movements, and political developments. The authors gathered for this special theme have opted for methods and proposed points of reference ranging from the interactionist approach focused on the individual to the analysis of more systemic political, state, or paramilitary violence. Here, a great deal of attention is paid to the concern to theorize from several disciplines about “processes of social transformation that act upon themselves” (Welzer, 2007: 18).

The work on genocides is also cast in a different light by a reading of this special theme. Studies generally emphasize the central role of ideology, which has often accompanied the organizational capacity of a repressive state, relying on the media and local leaders to call for destruction in order to save the nation. To cite just one example, from the Indonesian context, the film *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer, 2012) is revealing: the “gangsters” (free men) and paramilitaries of the Pancasila Youth were responsible for the death of more than a million communists between 1965 and 1966. They remained in power and continued to persecute their opponents. The murderers not only boast of their actions but agree to reenact them so that history is written by themselves rather than by others, especially the children of communists. The film shows scenes of torture played out with an astonishing levity, in which the perpetrators invent killing techniques that avoid spilling too much blood. The Indonesian case is one of those situations in which ideology plays a fundamental role in creating a political enemy that must be eliminated, where the perpetrators obey commands and become heroes, in a context in which perpetrating violence becomes a legitimate and preventive action to protect oneself and one’s group.

By contrast, whereas dehumanization is one of the elements generally reinforced by ideology to facilitate the perpetration of violence in genocides, Nicolas Mariot develops an analysis of the direct interactions between Nazi perpetrators and Jewish victims in order to deconstruct the idea that perpetrators’ dehumanization of their victims is necessary for perpetrating violence. He analyzes three types of situations: where the parties are acquainted; where victims directly address perpetrators for various reasons; and where empathy is shown. Returning to the routine and pragmatic forms of the production of violence, Mariot rereads existing sources to question the idea that perpetrators are cold, unemotional, and cruel. Dehumanization would therefore not be a necessary step for perpetrating violence. Moreover, the empathy of the perpetrators toward the victims, especially women and children, was not only present, but it in no way prevented their killing, overturning the idea that cruelty and dehumanization must prevail in order for the perpetrator to kill. This thesis sheds light on other cases and partly explains why, in the Rwandan case, although there was not so much forward planning, the genocide still took place at an astonishing speed, without necessarily requiring dehumanization of the adversary or adherence to the ideology of hatred.

Finally, one of the major keys to understanding the phenomenon of perpetrating violence is the temporal dimension and its dynamic nature. As I have already said, several contributions in this special theme aim to overcome the dichotomy that too often opposes the processual and situational approaches: motivations evolve and in turn modify situations, in a dynamic process that does not rigidly determine the outcome of a situation. These elements, in the same way as individual and collective engagement, turn the perpetration of violence into what Olivier Fillieule described in 2001:

“A variable phenomenon, both in intensity and in duration, which evolves according to contextual and situational variables, whether social or individual.” Randall Collins’ pioneering and radical interactionist approach has played a key role in the analysis of what he calls “forward panic,” the confrontational tension that both gives way to and paves the way for violence, through a runaway and “spiral” effect of dynamic violence. His contribution places temporality at the heart of the analysis in order to understand why violence happens at one moment and not at another. These moments of perpetration of violent acts are turning points that are intimately linked to scales of violence: the growth of a conflict, the number of people involved in it, their organization, and, one might add, the relationship between popular uprisings, armed civil movements, and state violence, which alters what Weber called the “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force.”

Resisting the perpetration of violent acts and limiting violence

This last aspect, perhaps underdeveloped in the contributions, is generally understudied in works on extreme violence, although it deserves special attention, if only, paradoxically, because it would make it possible to better identify the conditions in which violence emerges. The aim here is not to go back over the vast literature on post-conflict, demobilization programs, transitional justice, or memory policies (FMSH, 2019: 90–153), but rather to approach the subject of this special theme through its counterpoint, as Adam Baird (2012) does in his study of neighborhood youth in Colombia, which shows how some did not become gang members: Why, in a context of generalized violence, do “certain” individuals or groups not act out? How can there be both scenarios of escalating violence and situations of moderation of violence?

Resistance to genocide has been included in the *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence* precisely because this perspective completes our understanding of perpetrators and those who participate in genocide, and therefore of the perpetration of violence. Some resist engaging in violence, sometimes even despite being radicalized, while others consent to, understand, and even adhere to the violence of armed groups, but are unable or unwilling to practice it themselves. Others still, however, proclaim non-violence, sometimes while supporting the violent action of others. We find elements of resistance to generalized violence, or even of assumed non-violence, often due to religious observance (Melenotte, 2014; Roisin, 2017), in studies of massacres or genocidal dynamics. Although they represent a minority, this allows us to nuance the idea that “all” actors participated in extreme and mass violence. If one accepts the dynamic and changing nature of the act as analyzed by the authors of this collection, it is then possible to envisage how a Hutu can kill a Tutsi one day and, conversely, spare another one the next day. To this end, it may be pertinent to recall that Welzer has previously called for a more complex analysis of the individual behaviors of perpetrators, avoiding generalities in order to “describe how the perpetrators perceived themselves in their comments on their murders and in what interpretative framework they were able to situate their acts” (2007: 16).

The temporal dimension is again an important element noted by the contributors that helps us to understand the limitation of violence. Just as violence can “take hold” quickly, it can also be extinguished quickly, as Randall Collins shows with respect to small-scale violent interactions (involving face-to-face confrontations, or small groups of individuals). Taking into account the pace and intensity of a demobilization, defection, or violent conflict is again fundamental to understanding both the causes of engagement and the perpetration of violence itself, which involves integrating the long-term perspective into the analysis of engagement and of the context of the perpetration of violence itself.

Reflecting on the factors that promote or accelerate extreme or mass violence also allows us to reflect on those that curb and moderate it. In his comparative study, Scott Straus (2015) shows

that situations can contain all the ingredients for genocide without ultimately leading to it. A comparison between the Holocaust, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Cambodia generally reveals factors common to genocides: poverty, ethnic division, political crisis of the state, and so on. However, genocidal situations share many characteristics with other countries where the escalation of violence can be extreme without leading to genocide: civil war, armed conflict, political and economic instability, transition from a single-party to a multi-party system, economic inequalities, social disparities, ethnic divisions and racial discrimination, vehicles for propaganda, “intermediaries of violence,” and so on. Thus, genocide can resemble a counterinsurgency strategy in defeating the enemies of war. For example, Côte d’Ivoire shares many characteristics with Rwanda (a culture of patriotism, discrimination against Muslims, hatred promoted by the media, the ideology of *ivoirité*), but, despite this, violence has been limited in comparison with Rwanda and Sudan. In Mali, despite the Tuareg rebellion against the state, political unrest, political transition, and the violence of the 1960s, the state opted to negotiate with the violent actors and thus limited violence. Straus reintroduces multiple elements into his analysis of the perpetration of violent acts: the system of levels to be taken into account while looking at the coordination of violent actors, entangled between local and state dynamics, the founding narratives that produce ideology, but also the underlying state of war, or its absence.

I hope that the reader will discover the following pages with interest and emotion. Sometimes it may even be difficult for them to read the details of certain instances of violent actions. This special report is an appeal to human complexity and an admission of the need for humility in the face of such a subject that puts us in uncomfortable positions with regard to our approaches and processes of understanding. It must be noted that the authors of this special theme have brilliantly and intelligently taken up many of these challenges by providing their own light to help guide us out of the heart of darkness.

Author biography

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