

Sociology and its role in current theoretical discourses on violence

In the last three decades, research on violence has become rather fashionable; there is no longer a lack of theoretical and empirical literature on this topic. Scholars within the humanities — ethnology, literary studies, historiography, and many other disciplines — have produced an enormous amount of work that often also demonstrates the fruitfulness of interdisciplinary cooperation.¹ The impressive range of results, however, makes it more and more difficult to get a clear overview of new tendencies and theoretical twists within the research on violence, such that any attempt to summarise the debate seems to be an almost hopeless task. Therefore, and especially with respect to the aforementioned interdisciplinary features of research on violence, it might seem somewhat pretentious to enter the debate from the narrow point of view of a particular discipline, in this case sociology. But although sociology is certainly not the leading discipline within the research field on violence, it should be possible to justify my rather parochial approach by emphasising two points. First, theoretical developments within sociology are still influential with respect to the humanities in general: in-depth knowledge about sociological research on violence will provide at least some insights into related trends within sociology's neighbouring disciplines. Second, and more importantly, one could claim that the sociological discourse on violence contains a clearly detectable logic in its sequence of theoretical arguments, a logic which, at least in a rudimentary way, might be found in other disciplines as well. If this is so, then information on the history of sociological thinking about violence could help scholars to better understand the peculiar strengths and weaknesses of theoretical turns in their own disciplines.

It is exactly this logic in the sequence of sociological arguments that I will focus on in the main part of my paper. In Section One I will present a short outline of 'traditional' sociological research on violence before I sketch the contours of

¹ See for example *Internationales Handbuch der Gewaltforschung*, ed. by W. Heitmeyer, J. Hagan, Wiesbaden 2002.

the new ‘phenomenological’ approach to violence that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Section Two). I will then discuss particular problems of this new approach, especially the attempts to link analyses of violence on the micro level to macrostructures (Section Three). The last section (Four) will make a suggestion about how the micro–macro problem could and should be dealt with within the research on violence.

I

Founded at the end of the nineteenth century, sociology from the very beginning of its history as a discipline showed considerable interest in phenomena of violence in general and macro violence in particular. Wars always played a prominent role in the writings of German sociologists and social scientists such as Max Weber and Werner Sombart in their theories on the emergence of the state’s monopoly of legitimate violence (see Weber²) or their search for causal factors explaining the rise of Western capitalism (see Sombart³). As interesting as their perspectives are, however, it is obvious that they mostly focus on macro violence as a phenomenon of the past, before the emergence of stable nation states undermined and destroyed the originally strong position of powers such as cities and estates, allowing this ‘monopoly of legitimate violence’ to take hold. The war–prone period of European absolutism is what made the dynamics of modern capitalism possible.

The consequence of this kind of historical–sociological reasoning is that war, this peculiar phenomenon of macro violence, is only used as an explanatory device and not seen as something that might be interesting in itself. War was important for these ‘founding fathers’ of sociology, no doubt about that. But it was primarily important in order to explain the more durable and peaceful contemporary social structures and phenomena, which meant that the peculiar dynamics and brutality of war, which were at least on the agenda of military theorists such as Carl von Clausewitz,⁴ were more or less neglected or considered insignificant. Moreover, even this one–sided interest in war was lost in the decades following the foundational period of sociology. War received comparatively little study in the era between the 1950s and the 1980s in particular, since many sociologists strongly believed in the peaceful character of modernity and the pacifying effects

² M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*, 5th rev. edn, Tübingen 1985, pp. 815ff.

³ W. Sombart, *Krieg und Kapitalismus*, Munich–Leipzig 1913.

⁴ C. von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, Vollständige Ausgabe im Urtext mit völlig überarbeiteter und erweiterter historisch–kritischer Würdigung von Dr. W. Hahlweg, 18th edn, Bonn 1973.

of modernisation and thus thought that there was no longer any need to deal with such seemingly archaic phenomena.⁵

Something similar can be said about sociology's perspective on micro violence. The sociology of crime and deviance has been a sub-discipline since the 1920s at the earliest.⁶ Individual violence was certainly not neglected within this research field, but again the focus of most sociologists was a rather peculiar one: the causes of crime and violence, to aid in the formulation of etiological theories emphasising factors such as poverty, social inequality and sometimes ethnic tensions between different groups. Whatever the merits of this kind of research, which certainly remains one of the standard approaches within sociology and criminology today, it was quite clear that this perspective was not developed in order to allow a close look at the phenomenon of violence itself. In particular, past and present research that attempts to find correlations or even causal relationships between poverty or social inequality on the one side and violent behaviour on the other has always been more interested in the complexity of the independent variable than in the form of the dependent one, not least because in big data sets violent crime is always predefined by the police, the public prosecutor, or the coroner. In this sociological research tradition, violence becomes a kind of black box: sociologists can talk about it but often don't know what it actually is, what it looks like, or how it happens in particular situations, because abstract factors such as poverty or social inequality are rarely part of the violent act itself. To put it more metaphorically, poverty and social inequality have always been too far away from the situation of violence to give any meaningful insight into the processes and dynamics of violent behaviour, so these violent processes have rarely been the focus of this particular kind of sociological research.

II

The situation began to change in the 1980s, when new issues came up with respect to both macro and micro violence. On the topic of macro violence, one could probably claim that this somewhat new interest in violence had to do with the then much-discussed *problématique* of modernity and postmodernity. At a time when many intellectuals increasingly began to believe that Western modernity was in crisis, its institutions dysfunctional and its principles no longer valid, sociologists, too, started to reflect on the specific contours of the recent past. An

⁵ For an overview see H. Joas, W. Knöbl, *War in Social Thought: Hobbes to the Present*, Princeton 2012.

⁶ This was one of the strengths of early sociology in the United States. See F.M. Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*, Chicago 1927, and W.F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*, Chicago–London 1955 [1943].

intriguing question emerged during this process: If we cannot claim that modernity is basically an enlightened and peaceful age in which atrocities have to be regarded as exceptions or the remnants of former archaic periods, does this mean that the institutions and principles of modernity are directly linked to mass violence, world wars and even the Holocaust? Whatever the answer to such a disturbing question, it became clear that an increasing number of prominent sociologists could no longer believe in the peaceful character of modernity, so it was only logical that they also began to take a stronger interest in the morphology of mass violence and its interpretation.

In 1989, Polish–British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman published *Modernity and the Holocaust*⁷, a book that tried to link racism and genocide to the very modern and utopian idea of a perfect society that could and even should be built from scratch. The Holocaust in particular was interpreted by Bauman as a by–product of modernity made possible by the existence of an efficient bureaucracy. According to Bauman, the Holocaust was an atrocity to be attributed not only to Germany and the Germans, but to modern civilisation in general, because the specific contours of modernity were what had made even the unthinkable possible. Bauman’s argument was certainly highly influential within the discipline of sociology, and fruitful for its further development insofar as it generated real interest in the existence of certain types of mass violence for the first time, be they genocides or wars or even the interlinkage between the two.⁸ But it was also clear that Bauman’s interpretation did not answer all of the questions that should be asked with respect to violence. What’s more, his arguments could be misleading. For example, was it really true that the Holocaust was mainly a bureaucratised act of industrialised killing, as the name of Auschwitz seems to suggest? Or was the Holocaust not also the bloody slaughtering and shooting of millions of Jews by ‘ordinary men’, by ‘butchers on the spot’?⁹ If this was the case, critics argued, Bauman’s analysis was another distraction from the analysis of violence, since it focused only on the sterile factories of death and not the bloodshed all over Europe caused by those who shot, tortured and mutilated with their own hands. In short: a focus on the logic of modernity tends to neglect the perpetrators and their bloody deeds, to again disguise the dynamics and morphology of violence.¹⁰

One of the first scholars to try to avoid this trap was German sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky, who opened the debate in a creative way. His *The order of*

⁷ Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca 1989.

⁸ M. Shaw, *War and Genocide: Organized Killing in Modern Society*, Cambridge 2003.

⁹ C.R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York 1992.

¹⁰ Such a critique obviously could also be directed towards Hannah Arendt’s famous and highly influential interpretation, which made the bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann the emblematic figure of the Holocaust, see H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: On the Banality of Evil*, London 2006 [1963].

terror: The concentration camp is a kind of ethnographic account, a detailed description of a particular site of Nazi violence.¹¹ By describing the spatial details of the terror regime in the concentration camp, Sofsky moved in the direction of a phenomenological perspective on violence: for the first time, the descriptions of violent acts included the smell, the flesh and the bones of the victims, as well as details of the bloody art of torturing and killing by the perpetrators.¹² Sofsky in fact used methods that were already well known within the historical profession; in *The Face of Battle* (1976),¹³ written almost two decades earlier, John Keegan had described the ruthless and chaotic violence at three historic battlefields in a similar way.¹⁴

Sofsky's new approach hit a nerve, at least within German sociology, and he became one of the most important proponents of the new 'phenomenological' approach to the study of violence that would go on to affect research into both macro and micro phenomena.¹⁵ Despite all their theoretical differences, an increasing number of prominent scholars began to influence the sociological discourse on violence in a peculiar way, starting in the late 1990s: German sociologists such as Heinrich Popitz, Birgitta Nedelmann and Trutz von Trotha, as well as literary critics such as Jan-Philipp Reemtsma¹⁶ were united by their aim to move away from the mainly etiological focus on violence that had previously dominated the discourse and concentrate on the phenomenon itself. Heinrich Popitz's differentiation between various forms of power became particularly influential in this respect: once the distinction was made between instrumental and authoritative power, between power as data compilation and power that physically

¹¹ W. Sofsky, *The Order of Terror. The Concentration Camp*, Princeton 1997 [1993].

¹² It should be added here that the use of the term 'phenomenological' does not mean that authors within this research tradition necessarily base their arguments on philosophical methods developed by Edmund Husserl and his followers. Although some of the scholars writing on violence are certainly influenced by Husserl, this is not the case for all of them. The reason they are often described as belonging to the phenomenological camp has only to do with the fact that all of them are somehow prepared to follow Husserl's advice to go back *zu den Sachen selbst* (return to the things themselves), i.e., to have a close look at the forms and dynamics of violence.

¹³ J. Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme*, London 1976.

¹⁴ See also M. Geyer, *Eine Kriegsgeschichte, die vom Tode spricht*, [in:] *Physische Gewalt: Studien zur Geschichte der Neuzeit*, ed. by T. Lindenberger, A. Lüdtke, Frankfurt am Main 1995, pp. 136–161.

¹⁵ This phenomenological tradition of research could also build upon influential journalistic accounts of violence; see, for example, B. Buford, *Among the Thugs*, London 1991.

¹⁶ H. Popitz, *Phänomene der Macht*, 2nd expanded edn, Tübingen 1992; B. Nedelmann, *Gewaltsoziologie am Scheideweg: Die Auseinandersetzung in der gegenwärtigen und Wege der künftigen Gewaltforschung*, [in:] *Soziologie der Gewalt*, ed. by T. von Trotha, Wiesbaden 1997, pp. 59–85; T. von Trotha, *Koloniale Herrschaft: Zur soziologischen Theorie der Staatsentstehung am Beispiel des 'Schutzgebietes Togo'*, Tübingen 1994; J.-P. Reemtsma, *Trust and Power: An Essay on a Modern Relationship*, Princeton 2012.

damages and hurts the victim, research on violence newly focused on the latter (*Verletzungsmacht*, in German). In this context, many new and interesting insights have emerged with respect to the peculiarities and morphology of violence, insights which were often based on action–theoretical reflections. Since the debate on action theory was and is an international debate, it is no wonder that this new phenomenological approach to violence spread to Anglo–American sociological circles as well. The three major results of this type of research are therefore based on a survey of an international research field rather than one limited to Germany. They are as follows:

1. A close focus on violence has demonstrated that it often does not make much sense to try to grasp violent deeds under the premise of purposive–rational and teleological action. True, there are violent actions that might be described as highly rational insofar as the perpetrators do indeed have a clear goal. This is something one has in mind when one talks about, for example, cold–blooded murder or industrialised killing. But these cases certainly do not represent the majority of violent acts, which often follow a completely different logic than that assumed by aficionados of rational–choice theory. In most circumstances, the use of violence is not a choice like preferring Coca–Cola to Pepsi. As has been pointed out already in the early 1990s by authors such as Jack Katz¹⁷ in his analysis of gang–related crime, violent acts are rarely explained by the instrumentality of violence, by a kind of utilitarian calculus in the minds of violence–prone actors. Of course — and to repeat it again — people sometimes do mutilate and kill for the sake of money or other utilitarian concerns. But it is strong emotions, not the utilitarian motive, that usually shape the act of killing. Dangerous and violent situations are often sought out because of a certain ‘fascination with tempting fate’;¹⁸ a crime with a potentially violent result often occurs because of the ‘powerful attractions of sneaky thrills’; violent acts are often part of a ‘seductive play’¹⁹ attractive to perpetrators. Katz reminded his fellow sociologists that a highly rationalist approach to violence is often misleading and only reflects the prejudices of progressive reformers who believe that crime is always a rational response to bad social conditions. According to Katz, terms like ‘thrill’ or ‘kick’ are usually much more appropriate when analysing situations of violence than a search for rational motives. This also means that violence can be seen as an end in itself, which is why

¹⁷ J. Katz, *Criminals’ Passions and the Progressive’s Dilemma*, [in:] *America at Century’s end*, ed. by A. Wolfe, Berkeley 1991, pp. 396–417. See also J. Katz, *Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions of Doing Evil*, New York 1988; J. Katz, *Le Droit de Tuer*, “Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales”, vol. CXX, 1997, pp. 45–59. For a more recent ethnographic account of violence, see the comparative study by B. Paullie, *Coming Hard: The Primacy of Embodied Stress Responses in High Poverty Schools*, “European Journal of Sociology”, vol. LV, 2014, pp. 83–106.

¹⁸ J. Katz, *Criminals’ Passions*, p. 402.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 403.

authors such as Reemtsma have introduced typologies²⁰ of violence that carefully distinguish between cases such as ‘raptive violence’, which uses the body of the victim in order to allow the perpetrator some forms of (mostly sexual) behaviour, and ‘autotelic violence’, which is exclusively focused on inflicting damage to the body of the victim in order to destroy it. Autotelic violence has no meaning and motive outside of itself: violent actions are committed for the sake of violence alone. If this is so, then theoretical approaches that assume the rationality of violent action are indeed rather unhelpful in highlighting and understanding the dynamics of many forms of violence.

2. Jack Katz and others have also shown that the attraction of violence is not something biological or psychopathological. It can only be explained in situations of interactions that take place in a particular cultural setting. The attraction of violence, this seduction of crime, is related to cultural pictures and symbolic frameworks of power and domination. Katz has pointed this out with respect to youth gangs in the United States: gangs do have ‘a mass appeal of the fascistic spirit’.²¹ The feeling of being able to dominate the streets or a certain neighbourhood via one’s own physical strength or the superiority of one’s own weapons is a most attractive emotion — an emotion, however, that is framed by culturally specific icons and narratives. One might think here of the experience of violence as something being close to sovereignty, to unrestrained freedom or a somewhat godlike state of superiority over others that in fact makes plausible the relationship between violence and emotions — emotions which are actively sought by perpetrators, and certainly not only by those in the inner-city United States.²² It should be added here that even the instrumental use of violence is something which could and maybe should be analysed with the aid of a culture-sensitive theoretical framework. Even if cold-blooded murder rarely happens in the same way as its perpetrators have imagined, since interaction effects (the situation!) always intersect the original evil plan, this alleged detachment in the process of committing a violent crime is not a natural thing but something learned in a cultural setting. Rationality, cold-bloodedness and disinterest in the further consequences of one’s own evil deeds is not an indication of no emotion, but a part of the emotional order of a particular culture or milieu.

²⁰ J.-P. Reemtsma, *Trust and Power*, pp. 54–66.

²¹ J. Katz, *Criminals’ Passions*, p. 406.

²² See also the somewhat different approach by F. Suttlerlütty, *Intrinsische Gewaltmotive bei jugendlichen Tätern*, “Handlung Kultur Interpretation: Zeitschrift für Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaften”, vol. XI, 2002, pp. 242–260.

3. Drawing in part on insights from Katz and from psychologists and experts on military violence,²³ Randall Collins has convincingly argued²⁴ that the use of violence is in fact a difficult thing, i.e., that violence is rarely something conveniently at hand, even if actors in principle do have the will to resort to it. Most people, regardless of their culture, refrain from using violence and prefer to avoid violent confrontations; many of these violent actions — if and when they happen — do not last very long. If this is the case, a core focus on the particular motives of perpetrators or on their somehow awkward cultural background will not help our analysis. As Collins argues, we all have violent motives and fantasies, but not all of us are using violence. This makes it necessary to focus less on motives and more on interactions, situations and situated microprocesses of violence. It is this interactionist account of violence that has been one of the most fruitful avenues of research on violence in the past two decades, especially since Collins was able to convincingly demonstrate, with many examples, how outbreaks of mass violence such as massacres can be understood as a kind of forward panic, in which a rush into extremely violent behaviour should somehow dissolve the tensions in a situation, even though the motives for killing did not exist before this forward panic. ‘In forward panic, the pathway is a rapid emotional flow during a discrete local episode, beginning with the tension of the fight itself, transformed into a sudden rush of frenzied overkill in an atmosphere of hysterical entrainment. It is like an altered state of consciousness, from which the perpetrators often emerge at the end as if returning from an alien self’.²⁵ This point is used by Collins to again claim that motives and cultural norms rarely explain violent acts; the decisive trigger is the situated interaction. Any teleological explanation of violent acts, such as a search for motives, is therefore highly misleading most of the time.

Taking these three theoretical insights into consideration — and it would certainly be possible to name many more — we can argue quite plausibly that a successful research paradigm has been established to which many now subscribe, especially those from a younger generation of sociologists who are enthusiastically following the paths shown to them by the authors mentioned above. This new approach is not without problems, however. These have to do with the question of whether this particular paradigm can be elaborated any further, since most of the interesting action-theoretical questions — see above — have already been brought up. What then can be gained by further studies on war, colonial and ethnic violence, pogroms, street fighting, violence between couples and other incidences

²³ S.L.A. Marshall, *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle in Command in Future War*, New York 1947; D. Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Boston 1995; D. Grossman, B.K. Siddle, *Psychological Effects of Combat*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict*, vol. III: Po–Z, San Diego [etc.] 1999, pp. 139–149.

²⁴ R. Collins, *Violence: A Micro–Sociological Theory*, Princeton 2008.

²⁵ R. Collins, *Violence*, p. 100.

of violence? Of course, all these forms of violence can be analysed and described in ever more detail. Perhaps this is a valuable thing in itself, because it increases our knowledge in one way or another of various forms of violence. But there are dangers and traps as well, and at least two of them should be mentioned: First, there is the danger of a kind of pornography of violence. Looking at violent acts does have a certain attraction that is not too dissimilar from that of watching sexual behaviour, and certainly not all authors within the phenomenological research tradition have kept a sufficient distance from this pornographic seduction. Second, there is the trap of positivism, which can be highlighted by asking the famous question, ‘Knowledge for what?’, i.e., what is the purpose of collecting all this data on violence and seeking the recollections of persons who have experienced violence in the past if none of it leads to new theoretical insights?²⁶

These two traps and dangers have been noticed by at least some of the scholars working within the phenomenological research paradigm and by some of those influenced by it. They have realized that the attempt to focus on violence itself has pushed macro questions into the background, that descriptions of violent acts have become more and more detached from the larger social and political context. In fact, wars and massacres tend to look pretty much the same from a micro perspective, and sometimes those violent acts have been described as if a kind of anthropological condition of humankind were at stake here, since violent acts can be found all over the world. But such a position is highly problematic, and therefore it is most welcome that there are now serious attempts to return to the macro level. The next part of my paper, however, argues that although we can and should return to the macro level, attempts to do so often run into problems because of their use of macro concepts that are not sufficiently historicised or contextualised. This brings me to terms and theorems such as ‘spaces of violence’ (*Gewalträume*), ‘markets of violence’ (*Gewaltmärkte*) and ‘cultures of violence’ (*Gewaltkulturen*) that have recently gained currency.

III

I will be very brief with respect to the last of these concepts, ‘cultures of violence’. This term is actually quite old, but in the last two decades has experienced a rather surprising revival. It is difficult to define, however, and at least some of the attempts to use the concept as an explanatory device in order to make sense of particularly high levels of violence have turned out to be rather disappointing, at least within sociological research. In this context it might be

²⁶ Both criticisms have been directed at the more recent work of Wolfgang Sofsky, insofar as it was asked whether and how his all-too-detailed descriptions of violent acts could be linked to sociological arguments at all (see W. Sofsky, *Violence: Terrorism, Genocide, War*, London 2004).

interesting to mention the debate on the high murder rates in the American South. Scholars in the late 1960s and early 1970s tried to argue that there was a ‘regional culture of violence’ here and thus a historical tradition originating in the times of slavery, which might explain why the South was much more violent than, say, New England.²⁷ The narrative usually involved an aristocratic tradition of slave owners defending their honour, which inclined them to use violence rather easily — in contrast to the gentlemen of New England — and affected not only the behaviour of masters, but also that of slaves. As plausible as such an interpretation might look at first sight, it was also criticised very harshly and convincingly, not least for methodological reasons: as can be demonstrated, the explanatory effect of such a ‘culture of violence’ disappears rather quickly if one takes into account the specific rates of poverty, inequality, etc. in the American South, which means that the explanatory power of such structural factors is indeed much stronger than any Southern cultural peculiarities.²⁸ This little story of the history of sociology does not prove that historical or sociological accounts of violence based on the concept of a ‘culture of violence’ are useless per se, of course. One cannot and should not rule out that such cultures did and still do exist. But we must at least take into consideration that there is always the danger of false deductive reasoning, for example that if the specific levels of violence in a society cannot be explained, then they must simply be attributed to a specific ‘culture of violence’. Thus, the ‘culture of violence’ argument is always at risk of becoming a mere substitute for explanations that have failed in the past. In addition, the question of what the term ‘culture of violence’ actually means is difficult to answer. Does it mean that *all* persons within a particular culture are inclined to use violence? If this is not the case, how then to explain the differences among different people within the same culture? Has it got something to do with culture as well, or with other, non-cultural factors, such as structural ones?

It is an open question whether the difficulties just mentioned in using the concept of a culture of violence to analyse American society will haunt historical and sociological research on other parts of the world as well. Is it really beyond doubt, for example, that Russian peasants who fled to the cities before and after the Russian Revolution of 1917 caused the enormous level of urban violence because they brought with them a ‘culture of violence’ originally found in traditional Russian villages?²⁹ Maybe, but maybe not! Time — and further historical and sociological research — will tell. But one should be aware that there is a history

²⁷ S. Hackney, *Southern Violence*, “American Historical Review”, vol. LXXIV, 1968/1969, pp. 906–925; R.D. Gastil, *Homicide and a Regional Culture of Violence*, “American Sociological Review”, vol. XXXVI, 1971, pp. 412–427.

²⁸ K.D. Harries, *Serious Violence: Patterns of Homicide and Assault in America*, Springfield (Ill.) 1990, chap. 4.

²⁹ J. Baberowski, *Verbrannte Erde: Stalins Herrschaft der Gewalt*, Munich 2012, p. 40.

of failed attempts to push culture arguments in order to explain social phenomena. The social sciences have invented many so-called cultures, among them the once famous ‘culture of poverty’, an invention of American anthropology in the 1960s³⁰ that rapidly lost plausibility after devastating criticism. We would do well to be sceptical of whether the concept of a ‘culture of violence’ will do much better.

The two terms ‘markets of violence’ and ‘spaces of violence’ should be treated together, since they share a common history. German anthropologist Georg Elwert argued in the mid 1990s³¹ that recurring periods of war and violence in many parts of our contemporary world and in much of Africa in particular can only be explained by a certain constellation: he claimed that ‘spaces open to violence’ (*gewaltoffene Räume*) in which there is no state monopoly of violence might lead to a spiral of violence propelled by the economic motivations of the actors involved. In such spaces, where regular economic transactions have often completely disappeared and looting and plundering have become the only meaningful activities to gain resources, collective and individual actors are able to use violence in a rational way and thus establish long-lasting ‘markets of violence’, in which they make a living by regularly using violence in order to create income. Elwert’s analysis³² was obviously very much based on principles of rational choice and was also heavily criticised for exactly that reason. As German sociologist Hartmann Tyrell³³ argued in an essay in 1999, it is highly doubtful whether the violence of rival individuals and groups — in contrast to the competition of economic actors — can really be organised in such a rational and stable way as Elwert suggested when he introduced the term ‘market’ into the analysis of violent interactions. The unintended consequences of the use of violence are simply much too great (for the victims as well as the perpetrators!) to allow the establishment of durable social structures, of ‘markets’ exclusively based on violence. This point is further emphasised in the aforementioned observation that violence cannot and perhaps should not be explained by motives, but rather by situated interactions and thus by dynamic processes that neither follow the plans of actors nor are coherent enough to create market-like structures.

Similar problems can be detected when the term ‘spaces of violence’ is used, because this concept is often based on the rather dubious Hobbesian hypothesis

³⁰ O. Lewis, *The Culture of Poverty*, “Scientific American”, vol. CCXV, 1966, pp. 19–25.

³¹ G. Elwert, *Gewaltmärkte: Beobachtungen zur Zweckrationalität der Gewalt*, [in:] *Soziologie der Gewalt*, ed. by T. von Trotha, pp. 86–101.

³² The concept was quickly used to characterize other world regions and historical periods as well; see, for example, M. Riekenberg, ‘Mikroethnien’, ‘Gewaltmärkte’, *Frontiers: Ethnische Kriege in Lateinamerika im 19. Jahrhundert*, [in:] *Politische und ethnische Gewalt in Südosteuropa und Lateinamerika*, ed. by W. Höpken, M. Riekenberg, Cologne–Weimar–Vienna 2001, pp. 109–130.

³³ H. Tyrell, *Physische Gewalt, gewaltsamer Konflikt und ‘der Staat’: Überlegungen zu neuerer Literatur*, “Berliner Journal für Soziologie”, vol. IX, 1999, pp. 277f.

that in regions without a strong state tradition, anarchy and massive violence must immediately follow. One could claim that at least some of the central arguments in such important studies as Jörg Baberowski's *Verbrannte Erde*, Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands*, or Felix Schnell's *Räume des Schreckens*³⁴ are related to this hypothesis. If so, then these arguments undoubtedly contradict the results of the phenomenological research paradigm presented above, because one of its most important findings was that violence can rarely be explained by pointing to actors rationally choosing the proper use of violent means to achieve their ends. Indeed, when Baberowski is talking about 'spaces of violence' in Soviet Russia, for example, his focus is not space per se, nor even the discretion of rational actors who might exploit the situation in such a spatial setting. Quite the contrary: Baberowski only emphasises that the brutal violence either organised or orchestrated in regions not under strict Soviet control was usually the will of Stalin's bureaucracy. Thus, it is not the *gewalttöfener Raum* that explains the violence, but the actions of a certain type of administration, one that (possibly for lack of other means) ruthlessly tries to implement its goals in a particular situation and in the process often unintentionally creates conditions in which the level of violence reaches enormous heights and conditions of violence emerge that were completely unplanned.

As our discussion of concepts such as 'culture of violence', 'markets of violence' and 'spaces of violence' should demonstrate, it is indeed difficult to link the insights of the phenomenological research tradition of violence (which is primarily directed towards micro phenomena) to theoretical approaches dealing with the meso and/or macro level. The difficulty arises, I strongly believe, because these macro concepts — and this is as true for 'culture' and 'markets' as it is for 'spaces' — misleadingly either claim the status of a dehistoricised and decontextualised variable or tend to be rather metaphorical and thus vague enough that one might ask whether they stand for something else undeclared.

IV

Demands for closing the gap between analyses of micro phenomena on the one hand and macro phenomena on the other are basically as old as the social sciences, and new theoretical attempts have been made again and again to solve this obviously persistent problem. As we all know, none of the solutions so far has turned out to be completely satisfactory; this paper can hardly be expected to overcome the difficulties of such a project. Indeed, this is not my intention. What I will do instead in the remainder of this text is to make some simple suggestions

³⁴ T. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York 2010; F. Schnell, *Räume des Schreckens: Gewalt und Gruppenmilitanz in der Ukraine, 1905–1933*, Hamburg 2012.

with respect to how one should proceed in analysing violence in order to avoid the most obvious mistakes.

If it is correct that decontextualised and ahistorical macro concepts are highly problematic, as argued above, then the obvious conclusion is to use only such macro theoretical terms as by necessity do have some historical content and which, at the same time, are closely related to actors. I would claim that the idea of ‘institution’ does fulfil these two requirements, so that it seems plausible to look at violence from an institutionalist point of view. To put it somewhat differently: if one wants to preserve the action–theoretical and microsociological insights gleaned by the phenomenological research tradition on violence without losing contact with the larger macro context, then institutionalist thinking is still one of the most convincing solutions at hand. This is so because it is nearly impossible to understand an institution without taking into account the actors within these institutions and the social environment around these institutions, which means at the same time that institutionalist reasoning is the most convenient tool to link micro and meso/macro levels of analysis.³⁵

In the context of research on violence, it can be argued that many (but certainly not all!) of the violent phenomena historians and social scientists are interested in can be grasped by identifying those institutions involved which explicitly have been created in order to use violence, be they armies, police forces, militias, etc.³⁶ This would be the first step. In a second step it might be helpful to isolate the logic of action within these particular institutions, since it is quite obvious that, although all of them use violence in some way, they each bring it into play in a particular way. For example, whereas the military uses massive violence in order to kill as many enemies as possible, police forces obviously have a different agenda of violence because it is their task to survey and control public spaces with a rather economical use of violence.³⁷ Max Weber’s idea of formulating ideal types in order to grasp reality becomes useful at this point. The third step — and this is by necessity again based on Weber’s ideal types — requires that researchers ask how the institutions under investigation actually function and how much each institution deviates from its respective presumed logic of action. If, for example, the differentiation between the military and the police has been blurred for some reason — war, revolution, ideological requirements or other circumstances — then this blurring must be one of the most important focuses of research because in this case not only do the levels of

³⁵ Having said this, it should be clear that within the wide range of institutionalist reasoning, the rational choice brand is the one least suitable for analyzing the complexity of violent interactions.

³⁶ I will obviously not claim that violent macro events are always initiated by institutions close to the state apparatus; see C. Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World*, Cambridge 2010, pp. 282ff.

³⁷ See W. Knöbl, *Polizei und Herrschaft im Modernisierungsprozeß: Staatsbildung und innere Sicherheit in Preußen, England und Amerika, 1700–1914*, Frankfurt am Main 1998, p. 362f., n19.

violence tend to become indiscriminate, but also the targets of violent actions, with often terrible consequences.³⁸ The fourth step brings the micro level of violence into the picture: researchers should look into situations where the dedifferentiation between formally separate institutions often allows actors enormous discretion with respect to their behaviour. This is where decisions happen on the spot, where all the phenomena described so convincingly by Randall Collins and others can be observed: those usually undefined situations that can cause the rush into violence, which can cause massacres, which can make violence an end in itself, engendering phenomena that cannot be grasped by action–theoretical accounts that assume the inherent rationality of social behaviour. In a fifth step, researchers must examine whether and how violent actions on the micro level will have feedback effects on the institutions involved, i.e., whether and how the macro order is changed by processes going on at a lower level of aggregation. This is particularly important because such feedback effects might help to explain why policy measures often become more and more radical and how a spiral of violence is triggered through which the level of violence can reach enormous heights, even if this was not the original intent of those responsible in governments and state institutions.

In sum, it would be my claim that such a step–by–step analysis of violence is still the best way to link micro and macro levels of analysis, as was so marvellously demonstrated some time ago in Gerd Spittler’s and Trutz von Trotha’s analyses of violent forms of domination in (colonial) Africa.³⁹ These groundbreaking studies highlighted the micro dynamics of violence by relying on an institutionalist account of structures of power. Von Trotha, for example, explained the often enormous brutality of the violent actions demanded by German officers and implemented by German troops in order to control Togo not by referring to a particular militarist German culture or by pointing to the possibilities offered by the existence of open spaces, but by a careful investigation of the institutionalist logic of domination in this German colony. One of the major achievements of von Trotha’s ‘Koloniale Herrschaft’ was and remains his demonstration that a phenomenological approach to violence does not preclude institutionalist reasoning but, on the contrary, makes it necessary, in order to avoid the aforementioned gap between micro and macro levels of historical–sociological analysis.

Whether such a link between the different levels of analysis can be visualised in pictures, films, artefacts or other means, as many museum curators hope, remains to be seen.

³⁸ This is the basic theoretical assumption behind Martin Shaw’s thesis of a close relationship between war and genocide; see M. Shaw, *War and Genocide*.

³⁹ G. Spittler, *Herrschaft über Bauern. Die Ausbreitung staatlicher Herrschaft und einer islamisch–urbanen Kultur in Gobir (Niger)*, Frankfurt am Main–New York 1978; T. von Trotha, *Koloniale Herrschaft*.