



Routledge Studies in Crime and Society

VIOLENCE

**SITUATION, SPECIALITY, POLITICS,
AND STORYTELLING**

David Wästerfors



“Brimming with novel insights, Wästerfors lays out a vast array of new paths for research as he masterfully reviews a generation of research on violence”.

Jack Katz, *Emeritus Professor of Sociology, UCLA*



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Violence

This book considers how the concept of violence has been interpreted, used, defined, and explored by social researchers and thinkers. It does not provide a final answer to the question of what violence is or how it should be explained (or prevented), and instead offers a variety of useful ways of thinking about and theorising the phenomenon, mainly from a sociological standpoint.

It outlines four ways of understanding violence:

- Violence as situation: the tension that exists between category-driven and situational explanations.
- Violence as speciality: the study of particularly violent actors, and how they may be understood by reference to childhood histories, technologies, institutions, culture, class, and gender.
- Violence as politics: political violence and violent politics.
- Violence as storytelling: representations of violence from a narrative perspective.

Concluding with reflections on possible convergences between the four approaches and new directions for research, this book offers a unique and experimental approach to discussing and reconstructing the concept of violence. It is essential reading for criminologists, sociologists, and philosophers alike.

David Wästerfors is Professor of Sociology at Lund University, Sweden.

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Storytelling

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Imagine . . .

Imagine a day at secondary school. You are walking to class with your books when you notice that Nancy is blocking the passage between the lockers and the coat rack. Nancy is an expert at giving you a shove when nobody will notice. No one else is there; it's just you and her.

She takes her books from her locker, deliberately slowly. You try to walk past. Then she suddenly takes a step back, almost throwing herself backwards, propelling you into the coat hooks. You feel them pressing into your back.

As you trudge off towards the classroom, you feel small and feeble and your back is hurting. But Nancy saunters along the corridor smiling, her head held high.

*

Imagine a burger bar, just after midnight. On your way home from a night-club, you've bought a coke and some fries. It's summer and there are people everywhere. You are eating and drinking on the street when you realise that there's an argument going on beside you.

A number of boys and girls have formed into two antagonistic groups. They are shouting and gesticulating at one another, "You fucking idiot!", "Fuck you!" A boy from one of the groups rushes forwards and is met by a boy from the other group. They begin shoving one another, and then one is kicked so hard that he falls down in the middle of the street.

A buzz goes through the crowd. Everyone moves back towards the side of the street. The boy who was kicked picks himself up and staggers off with his friends. It all happens so fast that you hardly have time to understand what's going on.

As you continue to walk home, you not only feel shaken but also very alert. When you get home, it takes you a long time to fall asleep.

*

Now imagine that you're on a demonstration. You are committed and believe in what you're doing, and it feels like the crowd is becoming bigger

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even though no one new is joining the demo. You are walking towards the police, who are standing in line a little way away. “We are many, we are powerful, we cannot be stopped!” That’s how it feels when you observe the faces around you.

Everyone appears to move more quickly. You feel the pressure to increase your own tempo – an unarticulated demand from nobody in particular; it comes from everyone and no one. Your stroll along the rain-soaked cobbles becomes a brisk walk and then almost a run.

You jog together towards the police, closely pressed together, silent. The police look apprehensive.

*

Imagine something completely different: an evening in an apartment among friends. The table is covered in maps, dice, and candles. You are drinking tea and eating biscuits, playing a role-play game. You are a wizard, leading a group of adventurers on a quest to find a holy book in a ruined monastery. You are attacked by bandits on a path through a forest.

The game-master attempts to orchestrate the ensuing battle. First round, what will you do? Each of you draws their weapon, takes aim, and strikes; the bandits take aim at each of you, and some of you are struck. The dice roll. Yes, you succeed! No, you got hit!

Each time a strike lands, hit points are deducted from the boxes on the character sheets. But how long can that bandit in the tree go on firing arrows from his bow? And can you both dodge and parry with a magic staff in the same round?

Tables are consulted and rules are read aloud. Each phase takes several minutes. Sometimes the players protest and the game-master squirms. “I don’t know”, he says, “We can say that you also have time to dodge”.

After an hour or so, the bandits have been defeated. You are bored and have almost forgotten what the quest was actually about. The attack that had at first seemed so exciting has become dull and wooden as a result of the endless detail.

*

Finally, imagine a lecture at a political association. The speaker’s voice is seething with indignation. She is talking about an oppressed people whose opposition to majority rule is manifesting itself in suicide attacks, raids, and hostage taking. We cannot moralise about their struggle, says the speaker, we have to understand it in the light of the symbolic violence to which this people has been subject: the cover-ups, subjugation, and discrimination.

An elderly man in the audience gets to his feet. “Mahatma Gandhi did things differently”, he says, “And he succeeded”. A younger man also objects. “What have you got to say about the sexual violence of the guerrilla fighters?”

You feel torn between the two viewpoints. Later in the evening you are finally able to let the subject go and relax in front of the TV.

First you watch a superhero film almost to the end, skipping only the predictable final battle. Then you switch over to another film. One vampire receives a stake through the heart, and another is surprised by the sun coming up and dissolves in a desperate scream.

*

It may seem like I have chosen these examples¹ in order to show that violence is an everyday and ever-present phenomenon, that “violence permeates the whole of society”, and that “we are continuously being exposed to violence”.

This is not the point I am making, however.

On the contrary, as a rule, physical violence is unusual. Usually there is no violence, despite the fact that society is characterised by antagonism and conflict, tensions and distinctions, inequalities and anger, and force and the exercise of power, by the cultural romanticisation of violence and by arguments for the use of violence.

My examples are chosen not to illustrate the extent of violence in society, but rather other things. Violence may be based on intricate patterns of interaction between victims and perpetrators, as is the case in institutions in which a victim has little or no opportunity for evasion or escape. Prisons constitute one such institution, schools another. Even a marriage, a civil partnership, or a sibling relationship can function as an isolated world – as can (switching to a different scale) an entire country and a political regime.

Violence may occur when an argument escalates, when people attempt to outdo one another in their insults and gestures, and when an audience provides support for escalation, as in the case of a fight among a group of partygoers out on the town on a Friday night. Those who observe a physical conflict with fascination, and who know one of the participants, may play a greater role in the manifestation of violence than might at first appear. By contrast, those who do not identify with the participants tend to back away.

Violence is emotionally intense and attracts attention. One of the most effective ways of getting people to stop, look, and listen is to display or manifest violence – irrespective of whether this is achieved with fists and kicks, words and gestures or pictures, stories, and theories.

The collective nature of violence can perhaps be seen most clearly in cases where individuals allow themselves to be swallowed by a crowd and are drawn into a violent confrontation. In practice, violence is often hurried, difficult to describe, and nowhere near as prolonged as popular culture would have us believe. Depictions of violence in films, books, or games may be so technical and harrowing that it appears to be a completely central

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part of people's thoughts and actions, which can serve to rob violence of its exceptional quality.

But appearances are deceptive. Or more correctly: violence *may* be a central part of people's thoughts and actions, but if it is, then it is probably at an implicit or fictive level. The violence seen in films and books, and that portrayed in myths and legends, is big and broad – the violence that is actually practised is small and narrow. It is only rarely that violence becomes pervasive and widespread; violence is a speciality only for a few.

On the other hand, as a linguistic, theoretical, historical, and ideological phenomenon, violence is far from unobtrusive. Violence is not only a tried and tested means of changing the course of history – through war, terror, revolutions, purges, and tyranny – but is also a powerful word that may be used to analyse, criticise, or accuse a social order characterised by injustice, discrimination, oppression, and misrule. Placing an adjective in front of this word allows us to name a long list of dreadful or deplorable phenomena: sexual violence, psychological violence, racist violence, homophobic violence, emotional violence, economic violence, indirect violence, systematic violence, and everyday violence (see, e.g., Ray 2011; Listerborn, Molina & Mulinari 2011: 12–13).

The *word* violence adds power to the speaker's agenda. It invigorates public debate, radicalises analysis, and serves as provocation to opponents. As a *phenomenon*, violence contravenes the ways in which people spontaneously interact with one another and compels them into other forms of interaction.

There are many cultural ideas and ideologies that serve to legitimise violence, and people are continuously talking about violence. When unfortunate circumstances arise, these ideas are turned into action.

Violence as an idea and compelling invocation is not to be taken lightly, not to be played with.

But hold on, this is exactly what people do, and probably precisely for this reason.

*

This book is a sociological essay on how the concept of violence has been interpreted, used, defined, and illustrated by a number of social researchers and thinkers. It does not provide a final answer to the question of what violence is or how it should be explained (or stopped), but it does attempt to provide a number of pointers that may help along the way.

The book is far from exhaustive. It has been written with the intention of broadening our theoretical and analytical horizons, of training the eye to scan an expansive landscape, not of directing its focus at a particular point. As a result, the book may seem a little disorderly, personal, and

experimental. While the majority of the text focuses on physical violence,² I also touch upon other forms and ramifications.

Violence may, for example, function as a *background expectancy*³ in an authoritarian political regime, as a self-evident fact of life. Violence may be *represented and symbolised*, inter alia by means of threats, shouting, gestures, and vandalism. In what is often referred to as the code of the street, violence is *implicit*, located behind a noisy and brash exterior within a particular street culture. It may very well be made explicit (realised), but it usually remains latent.

Violence can be organised and monopolised, systematised, and woven into the social fabric of society (Edling & Rostami 2016). Violence can reinforce men's power over women – and over other men. Violence is a masculine-coded instrument within a large number of different relations: political and economic, intimate and institutional, direct and mediated, and lawful and unlawful.

Fictional violence – in books, plays, films, and games, or in playful interactions between people – constitutes a special case of symbolised violence, that as a rule makes no attempt to be threatening. In these cases, people play with violence (or with depictions of violence) and in doing so produce both social cohesion and entertainment.

We find *institutionalised* violence in the military and in colonialism, *sexualised* violence in patriarchal power systems, and *structural* violence in historically embedded oppression and inequality. Infant mortality, infectious disease, shortened life spans, unemployment, and job insecurity – the “violence” that social structures produce are as plentiful as the indicators of an unjust society. With Johan Galtung's view of structural violence – as Ray (2011: 9–10) points out – conditions of hunger, sickness, and destitution become violence.

What Pierre Bourdieu (1999: 11, 47–48, 55–56) labels *symbolic violence* is performed through communication and knowledge, through disregard and recognition in social relations. Bourdieu argues that male dominance in society is maintained by this “gentle”, imperceptible violence that is “invisible even to its victims”, and that reproduces and naturalises the gendered order of society, for example in the form of normative perceptions of masculinity and femininity within families, churches, schools, and the state.

Thus, in the spirit of Bourdieu, the term violence may be used to describe mechanisms that operate in the continuous reproduction of the social structure of an entire society. In this case, it might be translated to coercion, domination, oppression, and subjugation.

Several of the sections in this book focus less on violence as a noun, and more on violence as an adjective, that is on violent aspects of society or historical events: violent politics, violent social change, violent instruments,

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violent settings and cultures, and violent biographies. The focus is directed not only at people's brutality, rage, and more or less uncontrolled attacks on one another but also at *politically indicative violence*, that is the violence through which – selectively and implicitly – regimes manifest power.

At the same time as I label violence in these various ways, definitions of violence are subject to limitations and ambiguities. Who gets to say what violence *is*? The victim, a judge, or an observer? Which type of violence is worst?

As Joel Best (1999: 9, 26–27) notes in a constructionist analysis of so-called random violence, the vocabulary is constantly changing. The term “random violence” has been a rhetorically effective means of awakening an intense interest in certain perspectives and certain types of incident (such as uncontrolled shooting on a motorway) while at the same time dampening the interest in others. Calling violence “random” diverts the attention away from the fact that violence generally follows social patterns and is in fact not particularly arbitrary (Ray 2011: 63–82, 126–147). Thus, our choice of words has consequences. When these words are used again and again, they eventually become self-evident and constitutive of reality.

Times then change and with them our vocabulary. When the *category* violence is expanded or contracted, reformulated or multiplied, we observe social changes (cf. Silverman 2010: 69, inspired by Harvey Sacks). For example, today we categorise many more types of incidents as “unlawful violence” than was the case during the 19th century (von Hofer 2008: 54–55). This category has thus expanded. Levels of tolerance towards violence have declined. Can we even say that all those things that happened during the 19th century, and that are now – retrospectively – classified as violence *were* violence?

Against this background, I would ask the reader to bear (at least) two things in mind simultaneously. On the one hand, we can study society by identifying the forms of violence – variations, processes, and systems of embeddedness (social, cultural, and historical foundations). On the other, we can focus attention on how people, as members of society, approach the task of defining “violence” and reconstructing its contents in a variety of ways, that is on how people themselves label, moralise, and explain.

This latter is also something that researchers and thinkers do. In this sense, we can never escape the constructionist aspect. Our gaze wanders through a definitional landscape in which virtually nothing remains completely stationary.

*

In the next four chapters, I discuss violence as situation, violence as speciality, violence as politics, and violence as storytelling.

The discussion of *Violence as situation* proceeds from the tension that exists between category-driven and situational explanations, and is largely

a long and detailed comment on Randall Collins' research. I describe the difficulties people experience in becoming violent and how these difficulties may be circumvented, and I discuss violence myths, institutional, and organisational means of sustaining violence and so-called forward panic.

Men's intimate partner violence against women serves as one example, as does the "code of the street", that is violent posturing in (primarily) American inner-city environments.

I return to Collins' theory as a point of reference at several places in the book. A distinctive image of violence-as-situation may serve to clarify contrasting views, I think, such as when violence is seen as having been systematised, or as hanging in the air or rumbling in the cultural background. Indeed, Collins' work has been an important starting point for my writing, but throughout the book I also indicate how his situational approach needs to be supplemented with an eye for cultures, settings, structures, and personal (although socially created) dispositions.

In *Violence as speciality*, I describe and discuss the study of particularly violent actors, primarily on the basis of Lonnie Athens' work. I show how such actors may be understood in reference not only to their childhood histories but also to technologies, institutions, and collectives, as well as masculinities and femininities. Violence often (but not always) appears to be a masculine speciality.

Violence as politics focuses on political violence and violent politics. Here the discussion proceeds from Hannah Arendt's analysis of power and violence, and uses the situation in Eastern Central Europe after World War II as the principal example. I not only discuss Anne Applebaum's depiction of the Soviet remoulding of East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, but I also refer to examples from Nazi Germany. On the basis of the work of Frantz Fanon and Hannah Arendt, I discuss so-called liberating violence, primarily in relation to the struggle against colonialism.

In *Violence as storytelling*, the focus is directed at representations of violence. I describe the narrative logics that Lois Presser argues promote violence and I explain Amartya Sen's theory of violence-promoting identifications. I discuss media narratives on the "rising level of violence" in Sweden as an example, including objections and counter-narratives. A clear contrast emerges when sensationalist media coverage is compared with criminological studies of statistical trends in violence over time. Otherwise, the representations described in this chapter cover a broad spectrum, from eating meat and genocide to cartoons and Astrid Lindgren's *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*.

In the final chapter, I list possible and partly new areas of study in which themes from the preceding chapters converge. I begin with *provocation and nostalgia* and conclude with the *dark look*. In this way, I briefly discuss,

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among other things, the metaphors and ethics of the initiation of violence, fictional violence and violence as entertainment, mental illness and violence, intoxication and violence, and competition among the victims of violence.

Finally, I present a case description from my studies of violent events in Swedish youth detention homes (Wästerfors 2019b), in which I try to weave together the book's four perspectives and show how they can all be relevant in analyses – and how they are relevant for the involved people themselves, the “members” of a violent event.

I have chosen to alternate between presenting research and discussing it. This means that I at times “enter into” and describe research findings, while at other times I take a step back and discuss, criticise, or compare.

I often exemplify empirical fields and types of data with the help of research literature, which means that I sometimes examine a perspective or concept through these examples rather than the very field or data as such.

When I, for instance, present Ann Applebaum's (2012) history of Eastern Central Europe after World War II to highlight *violence as politics* in Chapter 3, I stick to a quite specific picture – Applebaum's picture. There are, of course, many other sources for those interested in the history of Eastern Central Europe after World War II. Similarly, when I discuss decolonisation and violence with the help of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* my choice of author and book is part of my essayistic writing on violence, not an attempt to present a complete picture of decolonisation and how it can be described. And when I focus on Lois Presser's narrative analysis of violence in Chapter 4, I do not want to say that Presser is the only representative of this type of analysis. I simply want to start discussing violence as storytelling.

In short, I hope the reader can stand a bit of eclecticism. This is an essay on physical violence, not a book on Eastern Central Europe, colonialism, narrative analysis, and so forth. My choices are guided by analytical and stylistic considerations, not by efforts to provide readers with the whole content or the central debates of this or that.

Rather than presenting a novel theory on violence or an extensive research review, I try to outline a couple of perspectives that I find exciting and promising. The intention is to encourage the reader's imagination and curiosity, to challenge some preconceptions and, hopefully, to inspire new studies.

All in all, I situate the book within sociology and social psychology, which means that readers with an appetite for research from other disciplines – psychiatry and psychology, biology⁴ and medicine, economy and law, geography and demography, and so on – will probably be disappointed. Trained as sociologist myself (and specialised in qualitative methods), I cannot aspire to be something else. Still, the book sometimes comes close to other disciplines

and borrows findings from them. Also criminology, certainly highly relevant for this field, is looked upon from the standpoint of a sociologist.

With that said, I'm pretty sure some sociologists will be disappointed, too, since this spacious discipline harbours quite a few theories not considered in this book.

Most people have an established view on violence. This is another of its characteristics. If you say something about violence, someone will immediately strike back (pardon the expression). This book focuses on a field that leaves hardly anyone unmoved.⁵

Notes

- 1 All of these examples, with the exception of the third (in which the demonstrators confront the police) are based on my own experiences, although details have been changed. The third example is based on a modified version of Buford's (1990/1991: 200–202) participant observations among violent football supporters.
- 2 Unless otherwise stated, the term violence is used to refer to physical violence in this book. For a description of the still broad range of phenomena that are included within this definition, see Ray (2011) and Edling & Rostami (2016).
- 3 *Background expectancies* is a phenomenological term used by social scientists to describe the things that are taken for granted in everyday interactions, things that are rarely acknowledged even when they are observed. A background expectancy is most easily identified by a stranger or by those who have been a bit alienated; it is only then that the self-evident becomes apparent. See Garfinkel (1967: 35–37), with references to Alfred Schütz; cf. also Scott & Lyman (1968: 53).
- 4 When it comes to the evolutionary context of violence, I join Ray in his argument that evolutionary explanations of contemporary domination, aggression, and violence seem flawed. “. . . like any other form of human behaviour”, Ray (2011: 26) writes, “violence derives its meaning from prevalent forms of social organization, culture and language”. Violence is so embedded in social and cultural relationships that we hardly gain anything but very general notions from seeking out a deep “reason” in an evolutionary respect (Ray 2011: 21–22).
- 5 I have received very helpful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript from a number of very knowledgeable colleagues, and would like to express my sincere thanks to Malin Åkerström, Goran Basic, Veronika Burcar Alm, Lisa Flower, Cecilia Björk Tengå, Mats Börjesson, Klas Gustavsson, Erik Hamnerz, Johan Lindgren, Steve Nyberg, Mikael Sandgren, David Shannon, and Peter Söderholm. David Shannon has translated the first draft of the manuscript from a Swedish original, published by Liber with the title *Väld*. I'm equally grateful for the critique and comments I received from the anonymous reviewers of Routledge.

1 Violence as situation

In the social sciences, violence tends to trigger the use of a customary categorisation, primarily in terms of gender, class, age, and ethnicity. And this categorisation does not lack relevance. The use of violence – at least of physical, interpersonal, non-state sanctioned violence – is not evenly distributed in the population; instead it is more common among young men from the less privileged segments of society (Athens 1992: 10; Ellis 2016: 2–3; von Hofer 2008: 47; Ray 2011: 63–82, 126–147). Even within these categories, however, violence is still very uncommon. If we were to choose at random a young man from a marginalised residential area in a European country, for example, it is very unlikely that he would be violent. And if he was violent, he would not be violent all the time. “. . . the majority of men from lower-class backgrounds”, as Ellis (2016: 29) writes, “are not violent”.

Conversely, violence may be practised by individuals who belong to categories that are rarely, if ever, mentioned when such categorisations are made or invoked, such as middle-class youths at a student club, ice-hockey players during an ice-hockey match, soldiers on the front line, and police officers responding to an emergency. Violence can also be practised by nursing home residents suffering from dementia, children in pre-school, academics at a pub, or girls at an after-school club.

Furthermore, violence manifests itself in very different forms. A slap, a push, an assault, a war – no category-driven study can be expected to explain everything at one and the same time. If all violence is clumped together into a contourless mass and is then associated with certain segments of the population, it becomes difficult to visualise what we are talking about. Violence then becomes more or less anything and everything and can be practiced anywhere and at any time, as long as it is possible to statistically locate it within certain categories.

The easiest option is to imagine that violence is always of the kind presented in the tabloids (murder and manslaughter, assault or rape) and that the perpetrators are always from the most marginal groups in society. However,

doing so results in a threatening view of society that is likely to further exacerbate the reputation of groups that are often already viewed as deviant or dangerous (and that sometimes also want to be viewed in this way): the poor, youth, the macho men, political discontents, and the socially, culturally, and economically marginalised.

The situational challenge

One way of attempting to resolve or circumvent these problems is – at least to begin with – to bracket categorical descriptions of individuals and backgrounds and to instead study violent situations. In his book *Violence*, the sociologist Randall Collins (2008) proceeds on the basis of what I would like to call *the situational challenge*. This is in turn based on the work of Collins' colleague Jack Katz (1988), who formulated this issue in the same way, but in relation to crime in general (and not exclusively in relation to violent crime).

The situational challenge involves focusing attention on social situations and not (only) on the individual and the categories to which he or she belongs.

One argument for embracing this challenge relates to the lack of precision that characterises category-driven analysis. Not all young men are violent. Middle-aged men and women may also be violent in certain situations. Violence may be practised by rich, well-educated individuals from families that never use violence to discipline their children. Children may be violent, siblings may hit one another, and children may hit their parents without necessarily growing up to become systematically violent as adults.

Thus, the fact that violence may be statistically associated with recurring categories is not sufficient to explain it (Ray 2011: 193). We know that violence occurs outside of these associations, and we know that people in the designated categories are in no way always (or even ever) violent.

The second argument for studying situations is that category-driven analysis restricts the focus of what is to be explained. In such analyses, the focus is directed only at a certain form of violence, that is violence which is “bad” (or “evil”), easily identified or somewhat expected. It can be relatively easy to imagine how poverty and ignorance, the frustrations of the class system, violent parenting and poor childhood conditions might explain street violence among youths in connection with crime or disorder, for example, but how do we deal with police violence, military violence, the violence of liberation movements, violence in sport, violence in institutions, violence at work, and intimate partner violence?

Randall Collins and Jack Katz have argued that social scientists tend to explain what is bad or problematic by reference to *something else* that is bad or problematic (crime is explained by poverty, violence by a difficult

childhood, etc.). Many social scientists are also quick to declare their opposition towards a social problem – any social problem – *by means of* a posited connection between the problem in question and crime and violence, since for many people making this connection lends weight to their declaration of opposition. Thinking conventionally, in terms of conventional categories, serves to obstruct analytical originality.¹ (People also forget that it is reasonable to be very concerned about poverty and poor childhood conditions, for instance, even if they do not always result in criminality or violence. Poverty and deprivation can be seen as social problems in themselves.)

If we instead focus our attention on situations – a youth who knocks another down on the street on New Year's Eve, two pupils who grab each other's throats in the schoolyard, and a police officer who chases and then knocks down a suspect, and so on – the researcher is able to identify patterns in these interactions that extend beyond the categories to which the involved individuals belong. Violence then emerges more clearly as a social phenomenon, and explanations can become more exact and less reliant on clichés.

A situational approach may also facilitate a form of reappearance of categories, but ethnographic and cultural categories rather than statistical ones: soldiers' violence, police officers' violence, street violence among youths, children's violence, threatening situations experienced by teachers and car-park attendants, and so on. Categorical affiliations are opened up and examined rather than presupposed. It becomes possible to analyse the place that violence occupies in people's biographies, settings, groups and everyday identifications, in their class identities and gender identities, in their work cultures, and their neighbourhoods.

Situational analysis produces different and more empirically grounded categories.

A third and final argument for embracing the situational challenge relates to the essentialising tendency that is associated with category-driven analysis. Once analysts believe they have identified which type of individual should be regarded as violent, the individual in question is, in principle, defined as *constantly* being violent, despite the fact that this is quite unreasonable. He quite simply *is* a violent individual. Violence is given the appearance of having emanated from the individual's innermost nature or essence.

Collins (2008: 2–3) has noted that when we talk about a violent individual, we are perhaps thinking of a convicted murderer or of someone who has been involved in a large number of violent fights, who has been in knife fights, shot people, or wrestled them to the ground. But even this type of person spends most of his time *not* being violent. He gets up in the morning, eats breakfast, goes to school or work (or engages in crime),

walks around town, goes shopping, amuses himself in various ways, meets friends, all without being violent. When someone calls his name, he doesn't answer by shooting them. Even in neighbourhoods that are very violent in statistical terms, interpersonal encounters are most often characterised by non-violence.

Even serial killers – who are extremely rare – wait for the “right” moment to strike. They are not continuously or indiscriminately violent (Collins 2008: 3; Hickey 2002: 12–13).

It seems much more reasonable to suppose that some people have acquired violent abilities or skills that may be triggered or used *at certain times*.

Using violence *indiscriminately and continuously*, that is *being* violent in the context of social interaction does not appear to work, at least not in a society or culture that is predominantly characterised by a non-violent social order. The effort, tension, and confrontational drama associated with violence in fact constitute something extraordinary.

Violence is often demanding

Randall Collins' work includes video recordings and photographs, interviews and field notes, studies of military history and ethnographies – in short both new and existing data from a wide range of contexts and sources.

He attempts to explain when and in what ways violence *develops* and notes that as a rule violence follows a set of pathways around confrontational tension and fear in social situations. He argues that whenever people find themselves in a serious confrontation, a social barrier emerges between them in the form of tension and fear. Violence then constitutes a range of different patterns that form a means of circumventing this barrier (Collins 2008: 8).

These patterns are interactional, and thus social, since they comprise interactions between people that are formed in specific ways in the society. One of the most prominent of these patterns involves finding a weak victim and directing one's attacks against this individual, as in the case of intimate partner violence. During an argument, for example, confrontational tension builds up and is then transformed into a furious attack. Collins (2008: 9) describes a version in which the one partner in a relationship begins by appearing threatening and frustrating, and then collapses and appears weak and helpless, which may make it easier for the other (usually the man) to “release” his feelings in the form of violence. From the perpetrator's perspective, the victim's manifested weakness serves as it were as an invitation to a physical attack.²

Another pattern involves the influence of an audience, in cases where violence takes place in front of others, on the street for example. An

audience who provides support and encouragement may “help” the perpetrator of violence across the barrier and provide him or her with emotional dominance in relation to the victim. When the same individuals meet in the absence of an audience, they might pass one another by without caring. A confrontationally engaged audience provides a basis for and contributes to this type of violence, whereas the absence of such an audience mollifies and subdues the individuals concerned. It is easier to engage in violence when you have the support of others.

For Collins, then, what is central is the tension and fear in the confrontation that must be *circumvented or overcome* for violence to be performed. Violent interaction cuts against the grain, or the inner structure or texture, of ordinary interaction, which typically does not involve violence in any way (Collins 2008: 20). Violent action is at cross purposes with ordinary interaction.

Thus violence is far from natural or easy. Engaging in violence requires effort and is demanding and difficult – socially difficult – because it cuts against the most common and recurrent ways in which people interact, socially and culturally. We are usually accommodating and go along with one another, even if we do not agree. We do not usually replace speech with a punch in the face or stop others’ actions by grabbing hold of them and pushing them away. We have other ways of showing dissatisfaction, indignation, protest, and differences of opinion, ways that are more consistent with human interaction and its socially and culturally constituted background expectancies. We may grimace, raise our eyebrows, become silent, leave, become annoyed, object, present arguments, shout and gesticulate, or decide never to meet the person in question again. We can gossip about people, get our own back, and so on.

Collins argues that the situations that promote violence contain patterns or interactional pathways that circumvent the tension and fear that usually prevent violence. Individuals who are good at violence have found a range of reliable means of circumventing this tension and fear, and have in addition often *trained themselves* in the use of these means. In these cases, violence becomes relatively easy – despite the fact that, typically, social interaction makes it demanding.

In this, Collins’ theory stands in contrast to many others, which instead assume that engaging in violence is easy and that violence is practised quite freely. For example, those who explain violence exclusively in terms of background factors (poverty, childhood conditions, class, gender, ethnicity, etc.) appear to assume that violence will occur whenever this or that factor is present (Collins 2008: 20). In principle, nothing else is required; if the factor is present, all we have to do is wait for violence to manifest itself.

Collins argues instead that violence is difficult *even in (statistically) favourable conditions*. Being “good” at circumventing or overcoming confrontational tension and fear specifically through the use of violence (and thus at exploiting the confrontation for personal gain) requires either a special type of situation – for example, a weak victim or a supportive audience – or considerable practice, and sometimes both.

Several of today’s scholarly commentators of Collins accept at least parts of his argument. Ray (2011) develops another and more conventional view, in which he finds socio-economic geographies of violence and stresses how violence is spatially differentiated and linked to multiple inequalities, both within nations and globally. Still he argues that even though the relationship between deprivation and violent crime is well established, “we cannot simply read off the behaviour and meanings of actors from objective data such as unemployment and deprivation” (Ray 2011: 193). The dynamics and the humiliation of this class segmentation have to be understood situationally, as well.

Violence myths

According to Randall Collins, most interpersonal confrontations in society stop at people shouting and screaming at each other (which he calls *bluster*) or with the individuals concerned finding other ways out of the confrontational situation, ways that are either humiliating for them, or that instead serve to preserve their pride.

One antagonist might, for example, promise to beat the other up another day and then walk away. This gives a tougher impression than merely running away. However, an antagonist might in fact run away, or simply slouch off, perhaps after making a few choice remarks. According to Collins, this is more common than we might think.

Collins writes about violence myths and attempts to dispel them one after another. One myth is that violence is contagious, as seen in the saloon bar brawls in Westerns. First two people begin to fight, after which an increasing number are drawn in, and in the end the entire saloon is brawling. Collins (2008: 11) argues that violence does not work like this. The exception is a situation in which a crowd is divided on the basis of antagonistic identities to begin with. On the terraces of sporting arenas, for example, or outside a stadium, violence may actually become contagious if rival groups are present, and in the same way, ethnically legitimised violence may spread if one of the groups involved has already defined itself as antagonistic towards the other.

Even in such cases, however, people tend to invent excuses to *avoid* participating in the violence. In bars, as a rule, there are no clear or

“predetermined” groups present when a fight breaks out. What actually happens is that those present tend to back away rather than throwing themselves into the fray. Mythologising violence involves emphasising one’s courage and experience of violence. In the same way that popular culture likes to exaggerate violence and present it as habitual and widespread, individual heroes tend to inflate their experiences, embroider their stories and exaggerate the drama. This is probably the basis of the myth of violence as contagious.

Another myth is that fights are long. As a rule, they are in fact brief and compressed. A violent confrontation lasting 30 seconds may take seven minutes when it is portrayed in a film (Collins 2008: 14). We expect violence to be depicted in this kind of detail because it does not occur in our everyday lives. If you happen to find yourself in close proximity to violence, you often fail to register the details, the sequence of events, and the twists and turns, because everything happens so quickly. In films, books, and games, the reverse is the case: the narrative pauses, zooms in, and time is instead extended.

Collins is careful to note exceptions, however. A massacre or a violent punishment may very well be prolonged and protracted, even though such events – strictly speaking – are not fights or battles but are rather characterised by the one party’s overwhelming dominance of the other.

A further myth is that of the smiling, joking killer or villain. In fact, Collins argues, the laughing villain is extremely unusual but is perfectly suited to the culturally habituated way in which we often construct violence. A grisly, macabre image is more entertaining. Ray (2011: 73) refers to Collins when he writes that the joy of combat is rare and most evident as pre-battle elation – passion and excitement might appear more in *talk* about violence than in really enacting it. The depiction of sadistic and hedonistic violence functions to camouflage the characteristics that are actually central: tension and fear.

The fear that Collins writes about is not the same as the fear of being injured, however. Collins shows that people are not as afraid of pain or physical injury as they are of the confrontation itself. It is distressing to find oneself in a confrontation that is so serious that it becomes, or may become, violent – this is what produces the fear, argues Collins, not the possibility of getting hurt. The distress is due to the fact that engaging in violence contradicts our fundamental predisposition to follow the non-violent rhythm of human social interaction: to fall into the expected form of interaction and its implicit, understated solidarity in society (Collins 2008: 82).

The most fundamental myth that Collins dispels relates to the idea that violence is easy. Almost everybody appears to think that violence is easy to perform, writes Collins (2008: 24): those who brag about it, those who fear it, and those who strive to eradicate it. But we might also raise an objection

to Collins on this point. There are in fact popular perceptions about violence being difficult, about how we are usually prevented from becoming violent. “He’s got no self-control”, is something we sometimes say about a person who is violent, “You have to watch out for him”, which implies that the majority of people do control their behaviour and thus rarely, if ever, act in a violent way. The difference here in relation to Collins is that references to self-control exclusively locate violence within the person, in the individual’s presumed essence. Collins’ research instead locates the barriers to violence *between* people, in the social interaction – as it usually unfolds in our society and culture. The barrier formed by tension and fear that Collins writes about is a result of the confrontation itself, that is, of the interaction. It is here that we feel the aversion to violence, not only inside ourselves.

Collins argues that our nature is to reciprocate and support one another’s actions, however commonplace these actions are. If someone calls, we tend to answer; if someone is having difficulty opening a door or lifting a bag, we tend to help; if we want to say something (including something confrontational or aggressive), we tend to slip it in at an appropriate juncture. If we accidentally push or bump into someone, we are usually quick to apologise. Humans typically act in solidarity with one another and they are drawn to interactional entrainment (Ray 2011: 30).

Against this social background, it becomes quite easy to understand the tension and fear that emerge during a violent or near-violent confrontation.

The low self-control objection

Let me digress a bit on what we might call *the low self-control objection* that I touched upon above. As in everyday life, low self-control is often invoked in criminological discussions when violence is to be explained – and sometimes crime in general. Criminology often associates this explanation with Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi’s (1990) *A General Theory of Crime*.³

In fact, low self-control *is* these authors’ general theory of crime – and they are careful to define the nature of crime so that it suits their theory.

Crimes are governed by short-term pleasures (or relief from irritation), Gottfredson and Hirschi argue, and in their view, crimes belong to the actions that typically require little foresight, planning, or effort. Crimes are short-lived, often immediately gratifying, easy to accomplish and exciting (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990: 12–14, 83). The skill required to complete a general run of crime is minimal, the authors write: “a gun, a club, or a knife is often sufficient”, or “superior strength” (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990: 18).

What they see as crucial is people’s intrinsic tendency to fall prey to the opportunities they are presented with. People “differ in the extent to which

they are vulnerable to the temptations of the moment". (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990: 87).

Self-control is Gottfredson and Hirschi's suggestion of what lies behind this differential tendency among people, that is the tendency to avoid criminal acts "whatever the circumstances". This means that low self-control – the lack of restraint of a person – could explain "almost any deviant, criminal, exciting or dangerous act" (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990: 87–88). High self-control effectively reduces the possibility of crime "at all periods of life", they write (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990: 89), whereas low self-control is conceptualised as a sort of residual in their imaginary of the human being. It originates in shortages and failures in child-rearing, as they see it, which could produce these differences in restraint and discipline in people.

By formulating this general theory, Gottfredson and Hirschi try to sweep away almost all other criminological alternatives: socialisation and learning theories, theories of culture and labelling, biological and psychological theories, and so on. Central is their depiction of crime as "invented instantly" (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990: 151), incompatible with the pursuit of long-term and cooperative relationships, rarely organised or systematised, along with their depiction of "differential child-rearing practices" as a criminogenic origin. They argue that low self-control is caused by a failed upbringing.

I will come back to what I see as a more multifaceted and dynamic theory of how people may turn violent in their lives in Chapter 2, where I present Lonnie Athens' (1992) symbolic interactionist perspective on interview data. In his view, there are tangible exit possibilities also in people's violent life trajectories, and there are fewer one-dimensional cause-effect relations. What I would like to stress here are the differences between Collins' sociological view and Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory of low self-control.

First, the self-control explanation is – as I mentioned earlier – placed within people, not between them. To explain violence turns into a matter of inferring, since we cannot detect directly what goes on in people's minds (nor in their childhood) – or we will have to rely on how people themselves rate their levels of self-control. (For a methodological critique, see Burt 2020.) Collins' approach offers an empirically more accessible route, since it relies on what can be documented – ethnographically, visually, or otherwise. In Collins' data, for instance, violent crime is far from pleasurable, as Gottfredson and Hirschi assume; it does not operate as gratifying or easy, but as hard to accomplish and basically as an object of spontaneous (unrestrained) avoidance. To overcome the social barriers of violence is the thing to explain in Collins' view, not how certain actors simply cannot restrain themselves from engaging in it. Circumstances as well as life situations matter. A gun, a club, a knife, or superior strength, to borrow Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990: 18) expressions, are far from sufficient according to

Collins' data, even though they might help. People do not slide into violence as easily as they accept another drink or joint.

Second, Collins' view lends itself more easily to cultural and organisational contextualisations, as I will come back to in this book. It opens up for (rather than delimits) novel empirical investigations and theorisations. Whereas Collins, for instance, analyses the circumstances for violent bullying in closed settings such as schools and prisons, highlighting the importance of an emotionally supporting and distinct audience, Gottfredson and Hirschi silently surf above both culture and organisation, careful to not get a more complicated picture of people's mundane and patterned interactions. Self-control almost turns acultural and universal in their perspective, as if the expectations to restrain oneself would be the same for, say, the soldiers on the battlefield and the teachers in the classroom, the drug dealers in a teenage gang and the police officer watching them. A situational analysis, on the other hand, pays attention to the fact that being self-controlled *means different things in different contexts*, depending on towards what and whom one controls oneself, and when. Such an analysis takes into account various contingencies that mould and sustain both violent confrontations and the ways people keep away from them.

And third, Gottfredson and Hirschi's idea that crime is closely tied to the pursuit of self-interest is hard to maintain in relation to observations of violence. This idea does not equip us with concepts to understand people who engage in violence in the (perceived) defence of others: the group, the profession, the platoon, the family, the general honour, and so on. Gottfredson and Hirschi's allegedly universal explanation seems crafted around a seemingly emblematic but decontextualised anecdote in the beginning of their book: the teenager smoking marijuana after school instead of doing homework (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990: 12). Marijuana-smoking is easier, simpler, more exciting, and more immediately gratifying than homework – and only people with low self-control, the authors, presume, will lapse into it.

But does such an example cover the strain and distress of physical violence? My answer is no.⁴

In many ways, then, the low self-control objection clarifies contrasting sociological approaches, especially one like Collins' and Katz', with its distinct eye for social circumstances and patterns.

And a theory equating violence with insufficient control will have a hard time accounting for violence produced by the opposite: increased control.

Sustaining violence

Randall Collins uses studies from the field of military history to show how different societies have attempted to organise and enhance the efficiency of violence (Collins 2008: 28 pp.). In Ancient Greece and Rome, soldiers could

fight for a day; in the Napoleonic Wars, it was more like three days. During the protracted world wars of the 20th century, the violence was backed up by a massive bureaucracy that mobilised, motivated, systematised, and prolonged it.

Organisation is crucial when someone wants to produce violence in situations where those lower down the hierarchy, who are required to perform the violence, do not feel it is necessary, or at least do not feel it is necessary precisely when it is required (also, see Malešević 2010, 2017). Soldiers are formed into columns and set to march, and their fighting spirit is built up by means of force and passionate speeches, threats and promises, medals and distinctions, and dreams and utopias. Desertion is punished.

Collins argues that the capacity to perform violence increases with the degree of organisation. The more organised a society becomes, the greater this capacity. In this regard too, Collins turns habitual perceptions on their head. We often think that civilisation serves to curb violence, since violence is viewed as representing the untamed but natural condition of interpersonal interactions. Collins argues for the opposite view, however. A civilisation or culture may just as easily organise violence and make it more effective. The natural condition of human beings is not a Hobbesian war of all against all, which the state – referred to by Hobbes as the *Leviathan* – then subjugates. The state may just as easily facilitate violence, and thus subjugate non-violence.

It is a question not only of coordinating soldiers but also of developing and disseminating technologies of violence. According to Collins, the most effective means of performing violence are those that may be used at a distance: pistols, rifles, machine guns, cannons, drones, or bombs. Not having to look the enemy in the eye means that you avoid confronting him or her directly, which makes it relatively easier to circumvent the spontaneous fear and tension that arise in a confrontation. Violence becomes a bit more like a game or a technical task. It is much easier to get yourself to push a button in a control room than to attack someone with a knife, and it is easier to fire a shot at a distant figure through a telescopic gun-sight than it is to physically throw someone out of a window. The tension experienced by the person performing the violent act is reduced. However, as Collins argues (2008: 59), there is probably at least a *trace* of emotional tension in all types of violent contexts – even in those in which technologies allow anonymity and the performance of violence at a great distance. Even the person who pushes the button in a bomber will as a rule feel the sense of confrontation.

Collins (2008: 39–56) describes a number of empirical findings that provide support for his argument. One of these relates to the small proportion of soldiers who actually fire their weapons in modern wars. Of the American soldiers who participated in World War II, an average of only 15 percent

of those who had served on the front line reported that they had fired their weapons in battle. In the most effective units, this proportion increased to 25 percent (Marshall 1947; Collins 2008: 44). The soldiers might urinate and defecate on themselves, vomit and break out in cold sweats – the majority were actually incapable of fully participating in battles when it became necessary. Many shots were of course fired, and very many died, but it was only a small proportion of the troops who did the shooting.

Thus Collins notes that the macho image of the brave, competent, and effective soldier does not fit the facts. There are of course many combative and effective soldiers, not least snipers and flying aces. But in major wars that involve mass conscription, these constitute a minority. And the perception that soldiers become increasingly resolute and emotionally detached over time seems also incorrect. During World War II, the peak of effectiveness appears to have passed after 10–30 days in combat. After that, the soldiers often became emotionally exhausted and needed to be replaced.

It then becomes comprehensible that generals and war ideologies strive to use all available means to maintain discipline among combat troops. Soldiers must be induced not to flee or lose their motivation, and they are therefore drilled in close order. “Attention! Present arms!” The tension and fear of confrontation have to be counterbalanced by collective organisation and collective rhythm. Aversion is checked and hidden within this organisation.

The strongest means of achieving this is perhaps the uniform – which makes everyone look the same. It depersonalises and levels out differences, and gives people an alibi for behaving in a way that they would not behave otherwise.

Collins notes that although technologies have become increasingly sophisticated over time, their mean level of effectiveness has remained low. Improved weapons have for the most part facilitated a greater volume of wild and inaccurate shooting. More than half of the soldiers who served in World War II reported that they had never actually killed anyone (Collins 2008: 58; Holmes 1985: 376). “This is no doubt true”, Collins writes, “indeed, most of those who claim they have killed were probably exaggerating”.

Collins also refers to “panic-firing”, which involves soldiers shooting firing wildly in every direction, as an aggressive and self-protective action, in many ways similar to people shouting and screaming when they feel trapped. Soldiers may become hyperactive as a result of being in the front-line for a long period. But from the perspective of military strategy, this does not make them particularly effective. As a rule, more are killed by artillery fire than by the shots fired by individual soldiers, and firing artillery is easier emotionally as a result of the greater distance to the enemy.

Siniša Malešević (2010: 4, 2017), a sociologist of war continuing along the lines of Collins, argues that organisational capacity is crucial for the existence of warfare, since violence “does not come naturally and automatically to humans”. To make people apply violence on a mass scale requires highly developed social control. In addition, ideologically doctrines are also needed to justify such action. “Although modern self-reflecting men and women are socialised to revere human life much more than any of their predecessors”, Malešević (2010: 83) writes, “they also possess more powerful narratives for the justification of mass slaughter – that is, ideological doctrines”.

So, the core for Malešević’s (2010: 83) analysis of warfare can be placed within the situational challenge: that violence “goes against the grain of ordinary human socialisation”. Military organisations and ideologies – they all have to address this core.

Forward panic

Randall Collins (2008: 82) uses the term *forward panic* to describe one example of a situation that is conducive to violence. For me, this is Collins’ most original concept.

The clearest example is found in the police use of excessive force. Imagine that the police are called to a building to arrest a known criminal who is hiding there and threatening those around him. The police investigate the place, creep around, manage to enter the building, and then search it room by room. The tension rises. The search is prolonged and nervous. When the police suddenly find the individual they are looking for, on the toilet – unarmed and surprised – they shoot at him wildly and without thinking: shooting far too many times, and killing him. They appear to freak out and panic but this panic is not directed “backwards” (as in the case of flight) but “forwards”. As Collins (2008: 85) writes, they “rush forward”, towards the enemy.

Collins describes *forward panic* as comprising a prolonged period of tension that culminates in dramatic violent action. The individual “flees”, so to speak, toward the front, or target, in an exaggerated attack. The prolonged hunt or search has made the individuals involved nervous and agitated in a self-reinforcing process. The tension builds step by step until it is suddenly released in response to an apparently threatening detail. The hunted individual may perhaps peek out, reach for something in his pocket, refuse to give himself up, or something similar. Figuratively speaking, the searching and tense actors then disappear into a “tunnel” of violence and become capable of acting in a way that they would never do otherwise. This tunnel only leads forwards, argues Collins, and it excludes all other alternatives.

The result is uncontrolled shooting or some other form of frenzied attack that shocks the wider community.

Randall Collins (2008: 88, 128–129) writes that the police violence against Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1991 constitutes an example of forward panic. In this case, there was a prolonged car chase, with 21 police officers being called in to participate, a refusal to obey police orders on the part of Rodney King, and finally an 80-second savage beating with police night sticks. A witness filmed the incident and protests were quick to follow. A not-guilty verdict the following year – from a white jury (Rodney King was black) – triggered the extensive and widely reported 1992 Los Angeles riots. The police were described as racists and the city residents, who participated in protest and looting, were interpreted as desperate, oppressed, and marginalised. Both these circumstances can be true; still, the forward panic was most likely there.

The use of excessive force by police officers is not the only example of forward panic. Collins argues that the phenomenon is responsible for many of the most spectacular violent incidents in wars, riots, and demonstrations. However, when Collins concludes his book with practical advice, *inter alia* on *forward panic*, he focuses specifically on those who come into contact with the police. “Be aware of their [the police officers’] potential to go into a forward panic”, he writes, “It is your task [as a citizen] to reduce their confrontational tension” (Collins 2008: 464). If we take de-escalation (and cooperation) as an ideal, people should not do things that prolong the work of the police officers, things that make them chase people or to doubt others’ intentions, or things that increase the anxiety of police officers and result in them calling in colleagues. If your efforts at de-escalation involve a loss of personal dignity, Collins continues, remind yourself that you are taking charge of the situation emotionally. And be particularly aware of the problem as the number of police at the scene increases.

Collins addresses the same advice directly to police officers: “Be aware that the more officers called to the scene, the greater the chance of a forward panic”.

Forward panic constitutes a clear example of a phenomenon that can be identified by means of situational analysis. On the one hand, the phenomenon is linked to police officers and other agents of control, and on the other, it is sufficiently general to be found in other contexts as well. Conditions that may lead to forward panic are not restricted to policing contexts, but police officers more often experience the gradually increasing tension that may produce it. Forward panic may therefore be used to analyse police violence, but its field of application is not limited to policing.

As has been noted, Collins argues that we should direct our focus at the situation rather than at categorical affiliations. This does not however mean

that we cannot then *return our attention to categories*, at least categories that may be put together on the basis of field observations, too, rather than merely public sector statistics. The difference is that we are now aware of a type of situation that the members of such a category often experience and contribute to.

In this sense the situational challenge may primarily involve an *initial* bracketing of categorical affiliations, followed by – step by step, and guided closely by empirical analysis – an examination and redefinition of their contents and conditions. When all is said and done, forward panic says something about conditions that are experienced specifically by police officers in today's society.

Bluster and the conflict scale

The fact that violence typically is unusual, socially difficult, and onerous means that human conflicts often cease long before they might result in violence. It is easy to think that we should try to stifle or stop every argument or disagreement in order to avoid violence, but this is not in fact necessary. Randall Collins (2008: 338 pp.) shows that it is more common for people who find themselves in some form of confrontation to engage in social rituals that merely *represent* or *symbolise* violence.

Most disputes tend quite simply to stop at angry outbursts. People restrict themselves to verbal spite or shouting.

Collins construct a form of scale for interpersonal conflicts. The first point on the scale is *gripping*, that is people complaining about a third person who is not present. Rather than being violent, gripping is for the most part entertaining and generates solidarity.

After gripping comes *whining*, which happens when someone who is part of the interaction becomes the object of the complaining. The person who whines at someone in principle leaves the possibility of escalation to the object of their whining, as with children in relation to adults (Collins 2008: 343). The child whines and whines until the adult, perhaps, explodes. Whining is also a marker of weakness or wretchedness (“the only thing I can do is whine”), which strangely enough may provoke violence in the other, since attacking a weaker party constitutes one of the pathways by which Collins argues that the interaction-based barrier to violence may be circumvented. And this, of course, requires that someone has shown themselves to be weak. It is still unusual, however, for someone to respond to whining with a direct physical attack. As a rule, this requires repetitive whining and a longer process of agitation.

The next stage on Collins' scale, after whining, is *arguing*, that is an explicit verbal conflict, which may escalate into serious *quarrelling*. Collins

argues that an argument is “objective” in tone and limited to a certain topic, whereas a quarrel can easily expand to focus on the participants’ relationship in more general terms. “You always . . . !”, “Why do you always say . . . ?!” In this way, the quarrel stakes a claim to a level of generality that is far more provocative than the relatively delimited topic that characterises an argument.

The situation is now fairly delicate, but even this need not necessarily lead to violence. The quarrel rolls back and forth. One of the participants may have an outburst, and then apologise, attempt to make up, or rely on a tacit agreement to simply ignore what has just happened. On the basis of conversational analysis, Collins argues that quarrels are often quite repetitive in terms of both form and content. And people are as a rule more polite to strangers (whom we tend to avoid quarrelling with) than to family members and partners. In a romantic relationship, for example, quarrelling may be something of a permanent expectation, something that a couple accepts will happen more or less frequently.

A little further up the scale we find *boasting*, which Collins describes as a macho way of asserting oneself. Here the participants praise themselves as the dispute continues. They exaggerate their own significance and attempt to put the other down. In this situation, Collins argues, we are relatively close to violence, but a final step still remains before we get there, which takes the form of *bluster*. Here the antagonists engage in serious shouting, screaming or loud threats. They exaggerate their threats towards one another by (often at a safe distance) barking verbal insults and gesticulating.

Unlike the previous stages, *bluster* involves really trying to frighten the other by *promising* violence, and thereby getting him or her to back down. Successful *bluster* presents the one as being braver and more competent at violence than the other. It constitutes a form of violent posturing.

In practice, however, even bluster most commonly involves idle threats. Violent posturing is one thing, actually using violence another. The majority of situations in which people shout at one another in the way Collins refers to as bluster go no further, because the situation becomes so repetitive. The one antagonist shouts at the other, who shouts back, but nothing else happens. Escalation requires that the one attempts to outdo the other, that he or she refuses to allow the other the opportunity to respond, that he or she interrupts and attempts to outdo the other’s insults. The first punch can then be thrown.

This means that one possible way of avoiding violence is to keep the interaction at the repetitive level, that is to repeat and respond with bluster to the bluster of the other rather than attempting to outdo it. Repetition is de-escalatory (Collins 2008: 369) because the tension is soon replaced by boredom. Nothing new happens, it doesn’t lead anywhere. By contrast, if

you insist on having the last word at any price, refuse the other the opportunity to respond, really force the other into a corner, violence becomes more likely.

Once again, the role of the audience is central. *Bluster* may be likely to lead to a fight, argues Collins, *if* one party views himself as stronger than the other (which, interestingly, may be determined by the shouting and yelling as such) and *if* the audience is interested in the conflict. For example, when one of the antagonists is well known to the audience, it becomes more important for that individual to defend his reputation or status, and the social cost of backing down and leaving with a mutter becomes very much greater.

As a result of this, *bluster* may be less dangerous without an audience than with one, at least if the audience is likely to sympathise with one or other of the antagonists.

Small-scale contexts generally have a de-escalatory influence in relation to conflicts and arguments. For example, it is no coincidence that treatment assistants at youth detention homes tend to “remove” wild and agitating youths from the company of others, take them aside and attempt to calm them by talking with them individually (Wästerfors 2009: 42). Acting in this way separates the actor from the audience and diminishes the pride and “face” that is at stake, to use Erving Goffman’s terminology. It becomes easier to back down and bury the hatchet if nobody significant is watching what happens.

This phenomenon is also familiar to those who have tried various ways of calming an angry child, for instance at a party. Method 1: A loud proclamation, in front of everyone, about how badly the child is behaving. Method 2: Taking the child to one side and having a discrete “corrective” conversation, speaking quietly one-to-one. Perhaps not surprisingly, Method 2 tends to be far more successful than Method 1. Method 1 is clearly focused on the regulator’s face work. The individual is attempting to save face (in relation to other adults) by showing him- or herself to be determined and to take parenting seriously. The child, on the other hand, loses face. By contrast, Method 2 is face saving for the child and gives children the chance to explain themselves and to change their behaviour out of sight of others. The adult might appear less principled to other adults, since the conflict management takes place out of sight, but may in return be successful in de-escalating or preventing violence.

Collins (2008: 369) writes in a similar way about the audience “goldfish bowl” in schools, prisons, and similar institutions, in which it is easy for everyone (or at least large numbers of people) to come together and observe what happens. The density of social relations, in combination with this direct observation, may promote the emergence of violent conflicts, which leads the members of such institutions to develop accountable techniques to

avoid and disperse audiences, or at least to separate them from one another (Wästerfors 2019a: 251–252). In principle, everyone is at the centre of everyone's attention, and is thus at risk of having every little gesture scrutinised and decoded. The audience is the same day after day, week after week. Many dramatic events will be discussed and remembered, sometimes even filmed, recorded in writing and archived. In a goldfish bowl, the tiniest ripple gets noticed.

The point of Collins' bluster and conflict scale is to direct attention at the interaction between people who are in conflict with one another, and at how this interaction can develop a dynamic of its own. Violence can happen irrespective of people's intentions. They can be drawn into the interaction and induced to do things they had no intention of doing. They may be taken by surprise by their own rage and blinded by the provocations of others.

But even our hostile interactions are usually characterised by a form of inherent safeguard against violence. Human disputes have a tendency to go no further than the ritual and symbolic level, to stay at the level of verbal conflict and gesturing.

The code of the street

An abstract conflict scale is one thing, the real world quite another. Not everyone whines, quarrels, boasts and shouts in the same way in every situation, regardless of context and culture. Boasting, for example, is something that usually lies beyond the more polite and controlled rituals of the middle class in Western cultures, at least in face-to-face interactions. Collins (2008: 345) argues that boasting in the context of direct confrontations is more generally found in the lower social strata and predominantly in the context of relations characterised by hegemonic masculinity.

Bluster can also manifest itself in a wide variety of ways. In military contexts, it might take the form of firing to frighten the enemy rather than kill them; in a bar it might involve breaking glasses or bottles. The essence of bluster is to exaggerate the threat one poses in a way that forces the other to back down, and is not necessarily a final preparation for actually using violence. Bluster gives the *appearance* that the adversary is ready: hard, unafraid, and capable of violence. Taking the step to actual violence may then prove unnecessary.

In marginalised urban environments – such as black inner-city neighbourhoods in the United States – this logic may be raised to the status of a norm. Elijah Anderson (1999) has argued that such areas are governed by the *code of the street*, since the police do not care enough about maintaining order. A set of unwritten rules on how public spaces can and should be inhabited produces both a sense of security and identity. In the absence of

employment and against the backdrop of the racist stigmatisation imposed by mainstream society, the code of the street becomes a guiding principle. Each individual becomes largely responsible for looking after himself and his security by manifesting and performing a willingness to use violence. This willingness is reproduced by poverty, racist discrimination and an attitude of alienation in relation to the rest of society.

Collins (2008: 348, 360) views the code of the street an *institutionalised bluster* (and to some extent boasting). Most people in a marginalised and run-down neighbourhood want to live what they themselves think of as normal lives, with jobs, family, friends, and the respect of conventional society. They view themselves as *decent*, that is respectable and well-mannered. But a minority of those in the neighbourhood are more *street* than decent, that is more uncompromising and criminal, and it is these who set the tone. In order to survive in this setting, it is therefore important to be able to shift between the one and the other, that is to and from the code of the street. Appearing cocky and cool, offensive and controlled becomes a form of front stage behaviour, to borrow Erving Goffman's terminology. Back stage it is possible to behave differently and more conventionally.

Anderson (1999: 105) has shown that people can identify with the code of the street to a varying extent, but everyone accepts that it requires an audience and a particular form of cultural performance: a certain style, with certain types of accessories, a certain way of talking (teasing, joking and boasting), and presenting oneself in a certain way. You have to appear to be willing to use violence.

Thus, bluster can characterise the atmosphere of local public spaces. It may be a part of the ways in which people demand respect, and interestingly, it can also serve to curb violence, since it stabilises interactions at a level that are only *almost* violent. Sometimes these interactions may tip over into violence, but this is surprisingly uncommon, particularly given the way in which the harsh tone of the arguments and the stylised arrogance project a substantial amount of potential violence.

In fact, Collins argues (2008: 360), with support from Anderson, the code of the street is a good example of how bluster can replace violence. It is only when the code is performed badly – or instead is performed too well – that its implicit violence becomes explicit.

A fight may, for example, happen if one individual feels that he or she has not received the respect of the other, but has rather been "*dissed*", or disrespected (Collins 2008: 355). The fight is then less about winning, and more about re-establishing this respect and showing that you are as good as your word, that is that you really are prepared to use violence. At the same time, the code of the street may also be used to attack someone who has not mastered the code, for example a student who is performing "too well"

at school, and who is thereby identifying with the middle class. Such individuals do not give the impression of wanting to spend their future in the “urban ghetto”, and do not always adopt the code of the street. In such cases an individual becomes an additional type of “easy victim”, using Collins’ (2008: 355) terminology.

The code of the street may also be used by individuals who themselves seek out and create the opportunity to react to (purported) disrespect, that is such individuals *make themselves (temporarily) oversensitive*. The individual can then exploit the situational dominance that is provided by mastering the code of the street in this way, and can pump up sufficient energy and power to single-handedly cross the line into violence. “What you looking at?” “Nothing”. “You calling me nothing?!”

Thus, people who are intent on doing so may use the code of the street and its inherent bluster to enable themselves to step beyond the tension and fear of the confrontation situation. The code of the street becomes a resource for the violent person, since it provides those who have learned to manipulate it with a set of tactics.

Certain actors in marginalised urban areas strive to ensure that all situations become street-situations, because these are situations in which they can always excel. They may have no job or education, little financial capital and limited opportunities to receive the acknowledgement of others in society at large, and they may frequently encounter police officers looking at them through the lens of ethnic or racial profiling. But the street belongs to them. Allowing a shift from the code of the street to a more ordinary and decent style of interaction, to borrow Anderson’s terminology, would marginalise them even further. For them, the code of the street must always prevail.

Once again it becomes clear that a situational analysis can complete the circle, so to speak. The analysis begins by – approximately – specifying a general scale for interpersonal conflicts. The material for this is drawn from a range of very different contexts. With the help of ethnographic material – in Elijah Anderson’s (1999) case from American inner-city environments – the analysis of certain points on the scale can then be deepened. The analyst then returns to one of the categories that is often identified as being statistically correlated with violence – marginalised and often racialised young men – but keeps an eye on the situation. It becomes possible to avoid making sweeping statements. A situational analysis contributes to a category-sensitive analysis.

Even in an environment governed by the code of the street, it is not correct to say that violence can erupt anywhere and at any time. The code of the street may appear to be violent to the core, and those who use the code may wish to maintain precisely this impression. In fact, Anderson and Collins argue, this behavioural code is a stabilising, non-violent practice in areas

culturally characterised by low social control. It provides people with a different situational point of departure in comparison to the rest of society, but it is in no way something that must always lead to violence.

To quote “As Collins (2008: 136) points out: Poor and discriminated persons need pathways around the obstacles to violence as much as anyone else”. Their category in itself cannot be the sole explanation.

Men’s intimate partner violence against women

Men’s violence against women in intimate relationships represents another complex example. Clearly, gender has to be included in an explanation of this type of violence – and gender is often viewed as a strong background factor. Men’s violence against women is recurrent, widespread, and has been the subject of continuous debate, at least since the women’s and gender equality movements began to direct serious attention at the phenomenon from the 1970s onwards (Ray 2011: 104–125; Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015: 34; Burcar 2008: 9, 12). While terms such as “domestic violence”, “family violence”, and “marital conflict” direct attention away from the gendered character of this violence, researchers and commentators are usually careful to reintroduce this aspect, for example by speaking about violence against women, sexualised violence and gender power relations. “Men’s dominant position in society is based on power and control. Men’s use of violence is regarded as an important part of the perpetuation of men’s position in society” (Burcar 2008: 21).

Men’s intimate partner violence against women ought therefore to have the potential to throw the situational challenge overboard. Surely there can be no need to focus on violent situations here, since the explanation of this violence lies in the gendered order of society in general – and the patriarchal power structures embedded therein?

But anyone who takes a closer look at empirical studies and research reviews will soon realise that the reality is in fact more complicated. Even when looking at men’s violence against women, there is good reason to attend to different patterns in situations and interactions (and institutions), which in turn in no way excludes a focus on the concepts of gender and power. As Veronika Burcar (2008: 21) shows in a Swedish research review, the majority of researchers agree that gender and power are “fundamental factors in any understanding of men’s violence against women”, but this does not mean that men’s violence against women can be explained once and for all. In a country like Sweden, where scholars and politicians have quite a long record of fighting men’s violence against women, both researchers and public authorities emphasise the importance of a multitude of theoretical approaches (Burcar 2008: 30, 42–43). If we fail to focus our attention on

gender and power, we lose the ability to explain the fact that it is specifically the men who are committing the violence – and that this violence is happening in societies in which men in many respects occupy a dominant position in relation to women. If we fail to attend to interactions and situations, on the other hand, we lose the ability to explain women’s resistance and men’s non-violence, that is all those cases that involve conflicts in heterosexual relationships that do not fit into the dichotomy “the woman is the victim, the man the perpetrator”. It also becomes difficult to explain women’s violence against men, and violence in same-sex relationships.

In this respect, the example of men’s intimate partner violence may be particularly clarifying. First, the gender power perspective on violence might sometimes be in need of a dose of interactionism, and vice versa (cf. Holmberg & Enander 2004). Second, gender (and power) may also be viewed as a situational creation, and thus a question of not merely background but also foreground (Ray 2011: 88, 115). We can study how *violence does gender*.

Burcar compares two perspectives: on the one hand gender power and on the other interaction. The gender power perspective (which in Sweden has been primarily associated with the sociologist and theologian Eva Lundgren) is opposed to explanations in terms of social and psychological abnormalities, such as alcoholism or mental illness. A man does not hit a woman merely as a result of being drunk or experiencing personal difficulties, and neither victims nor perpetrators can be sorted into different “types”. This *objection to deviant types* is an essential part of feminist research (Lundgren 2004: 16, 93 pp.). The violence of *ordinary men* must be exposed. The men who assault and rape women “are characterised . . . precisely by the fact that they do not have any particular characteristics” (Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015: 76).⁵ Instead, the gender power perspective argues that the violence is due to the gender order in society. Men’s dominance is reproduced every day in innumerable ways, and the use of violence is part of this reproduction process. Thus, violence is regarded as one of many means of control used by men, alongside economic control, for example, and sexual harassment (Burcar 2008: 22–23). Men’s intimate partner violence against women is thus understood as an expression of society’s gendered power structure. It is a means of social control and maintaining patriarchy (Ray 2011: 113).

Ray (2011: 113) lists the factors that feminist researchers often emphasise when explaining intimate partner violence: (1) the historically subordinate position of women within marriage, (2) women’s general responsibility for childcare, and consequently their exclusion from the labour market and their weak economic position in the households, (3) the general patriarchal reproduction of male power and female dependence at social, cultural, and economic levels, and (4) the machismo cultures and the tacit or explicit approval of male violence.

The gender power perspective includes the concept of the normalisation of violence (Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015: 56). Since violence is not regarded as being particularly abnormal or deviant – part of people’s image of what constitutes “a real man” (the hegemonic masculinity) is that he at least has the potential to engage in violence – it is quite logical that this perspective also includes the argument that violence is perceived as normal within the relationship, or that this is what happen over time. Lundgren, who bases her model on studies of violence against women in free-church environments in Norway (Lundgren 1985), argues that violence can become “a natural part of everyday life” in a heterosexual relationship (Burcar 2008: 23). The man – in Lundgren’s original studies backed up by a certain type of Christian theology – “disciplines” the woman by means of violence as soon as she shows signs of not meeting his expectations of what a “real” woman should be. These expectations become increasingly demanding, the woman’s freedom and independence are successively reduced, and in the end she is completely subjugated. The assaults are described as a gendered and gender-constitutive process, in which the man is the subject and the woman the object (Lundgren 2004: 15, 24, 44; Burcar 2008: 24). The contents of the man’s role slide from leadership into threats, coercion, terror, and violence (Lundgren 1985: 16, 2004: 9).

Violence becomes normal, but it does not occur continuously; on the contrary, the man alternates between tenderness and violence in a tortuous relationship that is utterly controlled by the man (Lundgren 2004: 57). The woman is induced to adopt the man’s perspective and this perspective legitimises violence. She internalises the man’s worldview and “views herself as the problem, as sharing the blame as a result of her ‘inappropriate’ behaviour” (Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015: 56; Lundgren 2004: 60). Talking about a process of normalisation thus becomes the researcher’s analytical tool for understanding what is happening in the relationship. It is not intended to represent a direct description of the reality, but rather a theoretical model that simplifies, reveals, and explains (Lundgren 2004: 21–22; Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015: 56; Burcar 2008: 26).

But how much does this view actually explain? As was mentioned earlier, Burcar also presents the work of researchers who focus on resistance and break-up as a contrast or complement to the gender power perspective. Not all men and women act in the way seen in the Norwegian Christian contexts described by Lundgren (in which the framework of sin, guilt and punishment in “God’s name” were absolutely fundamental; see Lundgren 1985: 15) – on the contrary, the majority appear to act quite differently. While these researchers are also interested in gender and power, they use these concepts in a more complicated and diversified way. Attention is directed at the strength and power of *women*, and the victim label is called

into question. An interactionist perspective is able to capture the interaction between men and women, and a related constructionist perspective is able to grasp the social definitions of “normalisation”, “victim”, and the “battered woman” – as she has commonly come to be perceived (Agevall 2012: 159–160).

Burcar (2008: 32–36) highlights the studies of another Swedish researcher, Margareta Hydén, which complicate the gender power perspective and its normalisation process. (A similar comparison is presented by Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015: 59–62.) On the basis of interviews with women and men who have been subject to assault, Hydén is critical of presentations of women as passive and powerless victims of men’s violence. Calling someone a “victim” is not a neutral description; it rather involves a specific kind of articulation and dramatisation (Walklate 2006: 28; Åkerström & Sahlin 2001). Victimhood implies not only injury and suffering but also vulnerability, respectability, and the absence of responsibility. An “ideal” victim – to use Nils Christie’s (2001: 48) term – is someone who is weak (or seen as weak) and at the same time engaged in a respectable project (or seen as being so), which means that the victim label can obscure the view of the analyst. It is much more difficult to label a woman who shows courage and strength, and who perhaps participates energetically and aggressively in a conflict or a fight, as a victim of violence. As Hydén shows, there are many cases in which women who are assaulted do not appear to be ideal victims in any way. The act of violence itself is preceded by a history, such as a quarrel, in which the woman’s agency becomes clear, and her resistance to the man’s violence is continuously present in the relationship. She is not always “weak”, respectable or detached from the man, but is nonetheless every bit as affected by being subjected to violence.

In other words, the process that Hydén (2001: 98–113) describes is not about a normalisation of violence, but rather about resistance and breaking-up. While leaving a violent man could certainly be described as a turning point and as involving a dramatic insight (the woman starts viewing the man as being weak, like a child, or sick and dangerous, and the hope of a better relationship is extinguished, etc.) but it is nonetheless preceded by a long period of *thinking* about leaving – a form of subtle, prolonged, indirect resistance.⁶ The woman may withdraw, bide her time, dream of change and create an inner space and an internal monologue in order to be left alone and liberate herself from the man’s claims to power. Hydén’s informants did not regard violence as normal and the women found it difficult to identify themselves as “battered women”, with all that this can entail in the form of the expectations of public authorities and support organisations. Agevall (2012: 160) speaks of a risk of the *otherification* of women who are subject to violence.

Burcar (2008: 36) emphasises that Hydén also regards men's intimate partner violence as an issue of power and control. It is rooted in the male dominance of society and the subordination of women. In this sense, the gender power perspective is not excluded. But a large number of complications are introduced: women show agency and offer resistance, they are not objects in a gender-constitutive process (on the contrary, they become subjects) and they do not describe the violence as normal. The victim role is not perceived as something comfortable but rather as something that causes problems for individuals, public authorities, and organisations, at least as long as it is restricted to so-called ideal victims.

Police officers who process assault reports, for example, may perceive complainants who are defiant and “un-victimlike” as problematic (Jacobsson 1997) and find it difficult to put together a strong case on the basis of the information they provide (Lundberg 1998, 2001). Society in general may reserve its sympathy and engagement for allegedly “worthy” victims, which means that a large number of other women are disregarded: the homeless, drug users, prostitutes, those with disabilities, and sometimes even the elderly (Burcar 2008: 48 pp.; see also the report *Världens sämsta brottsoffer* [*The world's worst crime victims*] 2003). Women from ethnic minorities do not necessarily describe this type of violence as normal or acceptable either (Lundberg & Andersson 2000) and thus express opposition towards the culturalisation of intimate partner violence, that is arguments of the kind “he is violent because he comes from a different culture” (see further Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015: 127–146).

A fixed perpetrator role also causes problems, as is shown by Susanne Boethius (2015: 226). In an analysis of reports from men who have sought treatment for intimate partner violence in Sweden, Boethius draws a parallel to the problems described by Hydén. Practitioners and professionals who work with violence against women should expand their image of the “battered woman” (beyond the theory of the normalisation process) so that more abused women are able to identify with it, and will therefore feel less hesitant about seeking help – and in the corresponding way, the image of the violent man should also be expanded. “A changed definition”, writes Boethius (2015: 226), “would in this way also be able to include men who have used violence and who do not define themselves as violent men, so they too will be able to seek treatment and avoid the winding road that emerges in their stories”.

Lucas Gottzén (2012: 150, 155) presents a similar argument in his analysis of men's depictions of violence against women, in which they “attempt to avoid the shadowy figure” that the “woman batterer” has become. “Is that me?” asks Filip, a 26-year-old student who has been violent towards his girlfriend. He likens this insight about actually starting to view himself as a woman batterer to “looking over a precipice”.

The example of men's intimate partner violence against women in Swedish research and culture thus appears to provide a range of arguments for what I would like to label a *pluralisation* of the analytical focus. Power, gender, act, and victimhood should be perceived in plural, not in the singular, or we risk oversimplifying our image of this phenomenon so much that undesirable consequences can easily arise, such as fixed idealisations: "the battered woman" and the man as "woman batterer". This involves a risk of excluding experiences and oversimplifying the processes involved. We should talk about masculinities and femininities rather than only about gender, and we should talk about power techniques and power practices rather than only about power.

And when we do so, we will also be talking about situations, interactions *and* the gendered power that is embedded in them.

It then becomes an empirical question whether or not the relationship really is one of complete tyranny, in which the man controls and beats and the woman is subjugated (in the way described by Lundgren). One could think in terms of Georg Simmel's (1950: 9–10) *crystallisations* of interactions: one or two interactional relationships *may* crystallise into definable, consistent structures that are perceived as being almost impossible to disrupt.

The ethnographer and interactionist Robert M. Emerson (2015: 194–195), for example, uses the term *patriarchal terrorism* – taken from Michael P. Johnson (1995) – to describe those cases in which the man in a family regularly uses threats and physical violence, and where the woman never hits back or quickly gives up any attempt to offer any physical resistance.⁷ Emerson argues that this kind of patriarchal or "intimate" terrorism reminds us of the fact that people are nonetheless able to find ways to pass the obstacles to using violence and coercion that are usually present in intimate relationships – or according to Collins in virtually all relationships.

People are usually expected not to act unilaterally and violently but rather peacefully and with some degree of reciprocity. But a man who is "trained" in violence can get around this behind closed doors in a patriarchal society. In such cases, we may well see the crystallisation of the unequivocal male power and its associated tyranny that is otherwise for the most part an extreme that we only see glimpses of in empirical data or in captivating rhetoric.

Notes

- 1 David Silverman (2010: 119) speaks of *explanatory orthodoxy* in roughly the same terms: the explanations provided by social science are too often based on reducing human behaviour to superficial variables.

- 2 There is a long history in both social debate and research of regarding women as “inviting” this form of victimisation in an essentialist way, as if they were in some way morally culpable for the violence to which they are subjected (Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015: 34–35). The point Collins is making is different however: induced and manifested weakness in one of the parties to a confrontational interaction may play a part in the emotional process that constitutes the other party’s violence, irrespective of gender.
- 3 About two decades earlier, Travis Hirschi had formulated another control theory that in many respects is incompatible or competing with the theory of 1990. Hirschi’s (1969) original theory of *social bonds* is distinctively sociological and argues that control is sustained by continuing relationships with the conventional society. With the help of bonds to family, school, work, everyday activities, and beliefs, individuals are thought to be restrained from committing crimes. Whereas Gottfredson and Hirschi’s later theory stressed internal control, this previous theory stressed external. The quality of bonds to the non-criminal society is defined as crucial for keeping an individual law-abiding. For an overview and discussion of the two control theories, see for instance Lilly, Cullen & Ball (2007: 99–112).
- 4 See Lilly, Cullen and Ball (2007: 108–111), for an assessment of Gottfredson and Hirschi’s theory. There are plenty of studies confirming that self-control is an important predictor of crime, but also plenty of studies claiming that self-control theory is overstated. Researchers, for instance, object to the idea that the theory cannot be combined with other theories, such as learning theory, and they object to the idea that self-control always remains stable across the life course, never changing. Lilly, Cullen, and Ball also point out objections to the thesis that failure of parents’ socialisation would be the chief source of low self-control. Studies show that schools, neighbourhoods, genes, social classes, etc., also have an impact. Also see Burt (2020) for an assessment of self-control theory and an effort to move beyond its very definition of self-control. Burt (2020: 53) argues that rapid responses in, for instance, threatening situations typically occur outside the power of our self-control, “. . . when people drink heavily, are under extreme and chronic distress, and/or perceiving serious threat – all situations when irrational and/or short-sighted behaviours disproportionately occur – they are often operating without the full use of their self-control facilities.”
- 5 For a contrasting picture, see Ray (2011: 114) and his summary of research (Dobash & Dobash 1998) that argues that men who perpetrate violence against women do share specific personality characteristics.
- 6 A further complication, on the other hand, relates to how this resistance should be interpreted. The woman’s resistance gives her a sense of control and independence, and in doing so may function so that she remains in the relationship, which may in practice lead to the power of the man’s violence becoming intensified. As is noted by Nilsson and Lövkrona (2015: 60–61), a careful analysis shows that there are both similarities and dissimilarities between the respective theories of Lundgren and Hydén.
- 7 See Ray (2011: 119–120) for a discussion of Johnson’s terms “common couple violence” and “patriarchal terrorism”.

2 Violence as specialty

Some people tend to be more willing to resort to violence, and to be better at violence than others. When they act violently – for one reason or another – the results can be worse than they would otherwise be. Certain violent crimes are particularly abhorrent.

There are two common explanations: nature and nurture, that is biological and social environmental explanations. The sociologist and criminologist Lonnie Athens (1992) points to subcultural theories as examples of the latter and argues that these theories view biological or physiological factors as having no significance. A violent subculture – a criminal and mafia-like biker gang, a group of militant football supporters, a notorious group of riot police, and so on – constitutes the purest example of the nurture or environmental explanation, since it is assumed that the relevant subcultural practices and values make the subculture's members violent.

There is no guarantee, however, that every member of a subculture that advocates violence will become violent, and particularly not violent in a lasting or extreme way. The relationship between individuals and their environment is complex and continuous. According to Athens (1992: 14), it is, in principle, impossible to determine what contributes to what.

Another common solution is to combine nature and nurture in a multi-disciplinary approach, but Athens (1992: 15) is not particularly impressed by this strategy. Adopting such approaches risks stripping down both the environment and the human body into more and more minute parts, since each researcher can only contribute knowledge about a small part of human behaviour, namely that part that is covered by the individual's research discipline.

In this way, Athens argues (1992: 15), the adoption of a holistic approach is deferred. Human behaviour is understood in terms of smaller and smaller components that are assumed in some intangible, mystical way to be connected to one another. But we never arrive at the synthesis.

Athens attempts to circumvent these problems, not by combining extremes but rather by avoiding differentiating between them to begin with, that is by not divorcing the human organism from its context. For Athens (1992: 14), it is important to approach the phenomenon in such a way that nature and nurture, the bio-physiological and the social environmental, are integrated rather than segregated.

This approach draws its inspiration from the work of the American pragmatists John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, who argued that experiences are formed by the interaction between people and their environment – and that as a rule, for human beings, the environment means *other people* – a *social* (and cultural) environment. People are what they are as a result of the social experiences they have acquired over the course of their lives (Athens 1992: 17). And in particular their most significant experiences: those that are profound and unforgettable.

It could be said that Athens attempts to study those durable and formative interactions between people and their environment that are, at least partly, violent.

The field of biology distinguishes between genotype and phenotype, that is to say individuals' innate genetic characteristics and their external form, that is their observable, unfolded characteristics. The phenotype is not merely an expression of the genotype but is rather also an expression of the interaction between the individual and the environment. One and the same biological individual, for example a pine tree, can develop different characteristics depending on where it grows. In a forest, the pine tree becomes tall and slender, on a windswept mountain top it becomes crooked, squat, and compact (Curtis & Barnes 1989: 993–994). The genotype is the same, but the phenotype different. In a similar vein, Athens argues that the experiences individuals have while they are growing up will determine their developed character in adulthood. It is these experiences that mould the innate material into what a person becomes, as Athens sees it.

For people, the environment is social – we live in societies – but it is always the physiological individual that has experiences, that is the flesh-and-blood human being.

In this sense, Athens incorporates the body into his studies, while at the same time working within a sociological school whose physiological base is often forgotten, namely the school of what came to be called symbolic interactionism. He merely guides this school back to its point of departure, which is often no longer mentioned: the interaction between individuals and their environment (Mead 1934/1967: 128–130).

I believe that we need this hands-on picture of people in interaction with their environment in order to understand Athens' project. When Athens speaks of the experiences of violent individuals, he is not referring to abstract,

diffuse or discursive experiences such as “a feeling of. . .” or “an identity as. . .” He is instead referring to concrete persons and concrete events that violent individuals have known, heard, seen, and interpreted in specific ways during their childhood – at least if we are to believe their stories.

By repeatedly interviewing convicted violent offenders in the USA, Athens believes he has been able to distinguish a process of experiences that lead individuals into a life as dangerous violent criminals. The number of individuals that start this process is most likely greater than the number who complete it (Athens 1992: 21). It is possible to turn aside from this process at any stage, argues Athens, but it is not possible to “progress” along the path without having gone through the preceding stages.

In this sense Athens’ theory is both immutable and flexible. Each stage constitutes a chamber in which it is possible to stay, but which an individual has to pass through in order to continue the progression. An individual who continues through all of the phases will have qualified as ultra-violent and dangerous.

Brutalisation

The first stage, which Athens labels *brutalisation*, may in turn be broken down into three parts: violent subjugation, personal horrification, and violent coaching. Athens (1992: 27 pp.) is primarily referring to situations in which an authority figure in the interview subject’s primary group (usually a male in the family) has used violence to subject him or her. The individual in question has thus learned how it feels to be physically punished and forced to show respect for the adult’s authority. At the same time, however, Athens also refers to having witnessed violent subjugation of this kind, most commonly within the same primary group – a situation in which a mother, sister, brother, or intimate friend has been exposed to the same treatment, with this having produced feelings of terror in the individual him or herself.

This type of experience is both personal and traumatic, argues Athens (1992: 39), in a similar way to the death of a loved one. In such a situation, individuals experience a sense of powerlessness and direct their rage at themselves, as if the inability to stop the violence makes them responsible. They feel shame at not having stood up for themselves and those closest to them. As described by Athens’ interview subjects, their personal inability to stop what they have witnessed becomes shameful.

Brutalisation also involves being coached by someone the individual has a close relationship with, and usually someone who is older. All of Athens’ interview subjects felt that they had at some point during their childhood been taught how they should behave in the context of a conflict. Using violence is being defined as a personal responsibility that one should not try

to avoid (Athens 1992: 47), even if one has not learned exactly how to use violence (e.g. in the form of various violent techniques). The individual is taught to act in a powerful, dominant, and physical way, not to back down in the face of provocation, but to have the courage to physically attack the other; not to call for help or run away, but to be brave enough to use violence.

In certain cases, violence is described in glorified terms – as an act of heroism – in others it is compared to non-violent solutions, which are ridiculed. The coach creates a dilemma and forces it upon the individual in question: you either become brave enough to attack your enemies or face being ridiculed and portrayed as weak and cowardly by your coach.

Certain coaches coerce their “students” into using violence. They may also combine coercion and bragging about their own violent abilities with derisive comments about non-violence.

My mother and grandmother didn’t believe in letting people run over them, but believed in standing up for yourself and fighting even if you were a woman. They didn’t believe in letting anyone insult, bully, or threaten them. My mother and grandmother just wouldn’t stand for people messing with them. They were bold women and would fight a man or a woman.

If they both told me once, they told me a hundred times that I better learn to stand up for myself. They said, “You can’t depend upon a man, a man is not always going to take up for you and may try to hurt you, so you better learn to take up for yourself. A woman has to act, not just react, when people mess with her.” My mother and grandmother told me this over and over again from the time I was nine years old until I left their house.

(Athens 1992: 54)

Belligerency and violent performances

The process of brutalisation can take weeks, months, or years, argues Athens (1992: 56). The majority of those included in Athens’ sample, and particularly the men, appear to have completed this stage at the beginning of their teenage years. The second stage could then begin, *belligerency*. This stage involves working through the brutalisation one has experienced.

If someone has used violence to subjugate both me and others, it is easy to imagine that it will happen again. In other words, the experience is generalised. I have myself been beaten, and have seen others being beaten. Why didn’t I resist? What can I do to prevent this happening in the future? This was roughly the reasoning employed by the violent individuals interviewed by Athens (1992: 57–59). They became convinced of the importance of

being able to fight back when provoked, and this became a means of dealing with the experience of brutalisation.

The beatings I took from my older brother set sparks off in me. What my father told me about not letting people run over me set off more sparks. Seeing people I cared a lot for get hurt set off still more sparks. All these things sparked me off, ignited a fire in me that wouldn't go out.

I got to the point that I wasn't going to let people run over me. I had taken, seen, and heard enough. The beatings I saw and took demonstrated to me in black and white the truth of what my father had been saying: you need to be violent sometimes. There was no more room in my life for people talking crazy and hurting me any more. I was going to stand up and stop people one way or another from doing that to me. Whatever it took, I was going to do it. I wasn't going to be down on myself any more for not having guts enough to show people they can't mess with me like that and get away with it. No one has a right to talk crazy or hurt me, no one.

(Athens 1992: 62)

This conclusion begins to influence the individual's behaviour, argues Athens (1992: 62). It creates a biographically grounded willingness to act as violently as one's former coach, whenever this may appear necessary. At the same time, Athens (1992: 63) emphasises – in the same way as Randall Collins – that it requires more than courage to cross the line into violent behaviour. By physically attacking other people individuals are risking their safety, freedom, and well-being, and this is the case even for belligerent individuals who have experienced a brutalising childhood. Thus, the step into the next stage, *violent performances*, is not a given.

As has already been noted, the progression through Athens' different stages is not inevitable at any point. An individual may leave the process behind as early as the brutalisation stage. An individual might, for example, revolt against his or her oppressor, or oppressors may themselves realise that their methods will not work and may themselves stop the process. There is no determinism in Athens' theory, but rather a series of contingencies. The one conditions the other. Experiences are acquired in the form of a cumulative learning process, which provides opportunities for dropping out, but never for short-cuts.

One possibility for dropping out – once an individual has started acting violently – may be conditional on repeated experiences of defeat. Athens (1992: 68) argues that individuals who have become brutalised and belligerent may leave the process and become non-violent if their violence

is unsuccessful. Paradoxically, the same outcome can be interpreted in the opposite way: as a reason for becoming even more convinced of the importance of violence. Rather than acting as a check on an individual's belligerency, being defeated in a fight may lead to an individual becoming even more belligerent.

At the same time, Athens' material shows that nothing strengthens an individual's conviction to be violent as much as the *successful performance of violence* (Athens 1992: 71). Showing oneself to be successful at violence becomes a confirmation to others and oneself that one is competent and that it is right to use violence. Athens argues that at least *one* violent exploit – one “successful” experience of performing violence – is necessary if an individual is to move on to the next stage.

The power of hate

The final stage described by Lonnie Athens is called *virulency*, a term he uses to refer to a malicious and hateful sense of strength and power. Individuals who reached this stage are described (even by those closest to them) as unbalanced, crazy, as *madmen*.

These labels may be expressed in a half-admiring, half-fearful way. In the circles in which the violent individual now moves – which are often peopled by other criminals – others may feel that while the violence performed by the individual in question is both legitimate and justifiable (“they deserved it”), it is nonetheless too much. The violence becomes exaggerated, overzealous, uncontrolled, and excessive.

Such individuals develop a reputation for being dangerous and others start to view them with trepidation, like ticking time bombs. The surrounding environment becomes cautious about anything that might provoke them. A sense of dread surrounds these individuals – they achieve notoriety (Athens 1992: 73–74).

At this stage, violent individuals have acquired a substantial amount of power. They are happy to accept the fear and status ascribed to them by others, not least because these contrast so powerfully with the individuals' earlier childhood experiences of impotence and inadequacy. Back then, they were forced to observe their own and others' violent subjugation without being able to intervene. Intervening – with violence – has now instead become habitual and routine.

Athens argues that such individuals have gone full circle, from having been hopeless victims to becoming ruthless perpetrators of violence. Violence no longer requires any form of pronounced provocation. “Solutions” involving unremitting, unadulterated violence may be employed in relation to basically any type of problem. Violence is no longer difficult.

The majority of the cases examined by Athens involved men, but he is careful not to exclude women. In fact, he argues, the experiential process he describes may occur irrespective of an individual's class, gender, age, or ethnicity. His explanation is exclusively process-based, but its contents probably include just as many references to social categories as other studies in the social sciences. It is simply that categorical affiliations are not a distinguishing or driving factor in the material he studies. Instead, the dominant categories – which comprise young men from the lower strata of society – constitute a background.

The background acquires greater significance once the violent individual has been “produced”. Athens argues that individuals who have gone through the process of violentisation may be elevated to the norm in certain high-crime neighbourhoods in the USA. Such areas are in principle persistent war zones, with unceasing violent crime that serves to determine the nature of various local relations of dominance (Athens 1998: 682). In such a context the trained perpetrator of violence can flourish. But the same person in a more controlled and affluent neighbourhood is instead seen as deviant or deranged. Specialists in violence thus have a tendency to be attracted to and to acquire positions of importance in certain settings rather than others.

The words, body, and person of a violent actor

At this point it may be wise to take a step back from the theorising of Lonnie Athens. Athens' work makes substantial explanatory claims, and his material is not always well-suited to the research question examined. How, for example, can Athens know about the dread and notoriety that is said to surround the interviewed individuals who had reached the final stage of the violentisation process purely on the basis of the stories they told in interviews? Viewed more strictly, the material contains narratively formed feelings and rumours rather than observations made by a researcher.

In a subsequent work, Athens (1997: 30, 108–109) presents data based on observations, but these relate to his experiences of acts of violence *per se*: the firing of a gun, someone being stabbed in the eye with a can-opener, different types of fights, and so on. For the most part he relies on the self-presentations depicted by the individuals in his interviews. If Athens had accompanied these individuals in their everyday lives, he might very well have witnessed other, less grandiose, portraits.

Athens uses interviews on the basis of what Alasuutari (1995: 47 ff.) has labelled a *factist perspective*, which means that he views his interview transcripts as a relatively direct link to social reality and the interview subjects' interpretations of this reality. Another perspective might have

ascribed more weight to *how* the interview subjects spoke, including their self-presentations in and through their stories, and not only to what they spoke about.

A narrative about a brutalising childhood could just as easily be interpreted as an example of a *sad tale*, in the sense described by Goffman (1961/1990: 67) and Scott and Lyman (1968: 52), that is as a means of describing one's current situation in terms of an unhappy past (see also Boethius 2015: 124–127). People who are in prison at the time they are interviewed, serving sentences for violent crime, can make this situation comprehensible by describing their childhood as having been particularly violent (or as having been violent in a particular way). Telling such a story itself serves as a means of absolving the offender of responsibility and accounting for the present. Such narratives are also often related to neutralisation techniques (Sykes & Matza 1957) which in a similar way enable offenders to circumvent societal norms (while at the same time expressing respect for these norms). Athens' interview subjects appear to ascribe a large part of the responsibility for their actions to childhood oppressors and coaches, rather than accepting responsibility themselves.

When talking about capturing and analysing experiences – as in the case of Athens' work – there is a tendency to remove the linguistic costume that envelops the empirical observations, as if it were irrelevant. However, a verbally formulated experience does not emerge directly from the individual's meeting with an event, as a sort of unmediated voice from the person's life. Such statements are instead highly discursively regulated (Sacks 1992, Vol. II: 248; Silverman 1998: 13). Only certain events – those which have been witnessed – are usually acknowledged as experiences by an interested listener, a listener who then asks additional questions, nods, and gives encouragement – but who is not visible in Athens' study. The interaction that plays such a central role in Athens' theory appears to be of no significance when it comes to Athens' own interactions.

There are thus grounds for a certain scepticism towards Athens' claims.¹

Having said this, however, Athens nonetheless presents a picture of how first-class violent offenders *might* be produced. He argues that even though people's current behaviour may exceed what they have previously shown – people can always become much more violent than they have been to date, or vice versa – their pasts and their socially produced image of themselves form a kind of store of experiences and interpretative matrices that constitute a necessary foundation for their violence (Athens 1992: 82). People do not become extremely violent and dangerous *in the absence of some kind of process*.

And in no way everything that Athens' interview subjects said can be interpreted as being to their advantage, so there is probably more to

their descriptions than *sad tales*, neutralisation techniques and grandiose self-portraits.

It is also conceivable that *sad tales* and neutralisation techniques are actually a necessary part of the violentisation process, that is that they may in themselves contribute to the development and maintenance of a self-image as a dangerous and violent individual (despite the fact that Athens, perhaps strangely, does not refer to them in this way). A certain type of autobiographical and partially exculpatory narrative could be part of the stages that spur the individual on towards *virulency*.

Anyhow, Athens' study has the advantage of constituting a highly original basis for critiquing competing theories (Athens 1992: 85–88; see also Twersky Glasner 2013). First, Athens criticises psychological theories for their focus on attempting to identify simple underlying characteristics, such as low self-control or low self-confidence. Individuals may well have low self-confidence in the early stages of the violentisation process, but at the end of the process, the opposite is rather the case. The competent practitioner of violence is bursting with self-confidence.

Second, Athens criticises the use of simplified views of negative childhood conditions as an explanation for violence in adulthood (physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect on the part of parents). Athens' description of brutalisation should *not* be understood as a unidirectional effect of the environment on the individual, but of the interaction between the two. Brutalisation involves some degree of *response* from the individual, a specific interpretation of what has happened, such as when the individual decides to deal with the brutalisation experience by becoming good at hitting back. It is not only about being victimised; it is also about how the individual responds to this victimisation. In addition, brutalisation need not only take place within a primary group (a family), even though this is where it takes place for the most part in Athens' interview material.

Thirdly, Athens criticises labelling theory,² from the field of criminology, which he argues cannot explain why people first start to behave violently. Labelling theorists are unable to deal with the fact that individuals may have come a long way in the process towards becoming competent performers of violence *before* they are identified and labelled by various authorities or agencies, that is before they are given a self-reinforcing stigma.

Athens (1992: 19) saves his most acidic criticism for statisticians who lack the courage to meet the violent individuals whom they study. They prefer instead to break them down and reduce them to variables or well-defined units that can easily be translated into numbers, he writes. But life is not like that. It is not numbers and variables that interact and become violent. It is people of flesh and blood – people who observe, become horrified, remember, make decisions, and explain themselves.

How does Athens' approach relate to Collins' theory of violence and the situational challenge? At first sight they might perhaps appear to be completely different. Athens does not direct his interest at the immediate situation in which violence occurs, but instead attempts to describe particularly violent individuals and how they came to be violent. Thus, the violence performed by those who are not counted among these particularly violent individuals – on an occasional basis or as a direct result of particular circumstances – lies beyond the boundaries of Athens' work. He is only interested in the extreme cases. On closer inspection, however, Collins' theory may also be applied in a way that includes Athens' work in the sense that the violentisation process described by Athens may be understood as a series of distinctive situations. *Earlier* situations, of a profound kind that serve to form our identities, have formed certain individuals into people who find it relatively easy to interpret various situations in a way that leads them to use violence.³ Collins (2004) speaks of the individual precisely in terms of a chain of interactions, as a kind of situational accumulation. One situation lays the foundation for the next – individuals' personalities are constituted by a sequence of experiences.

However, we cannot predict whether or not the individual will then in fact become violent on a given occasion. Nor is a person who has reached the stage of *virulency* incessantly violent, which means that we need a theory focused on situations even for the violent specialist. The really explosive combination occurs when individuals who have completed Athens' violentisation process *also* find themselves in (or seek out) the type of violence-generating situations described by Collins. This is roughly where we end up if we combine the work of Athens and Collins.

Athen's work serves as a sharp critique of any approach aiming at distinguishing *types of people*, not types of life histories, types of activities, types of interpretations (of stress and danger, for example), or patterns and variations in biographical processes.⁴ Still, his theory manage to give us a reasonable account of the specialty of violence among certain actors.

Technology, institution, and collective

Violence as a specialty can also be explained in other ways, beyond a focus on having grown up in a violent environment. One conceivable explanation (or at least partial explanation) could be found in technology in the form of weapons, vehicles and other forms of equipment that can make people more effective in their use of violence, irrespective of their biological constitution or life history. Another possible explanation might be found in institutional environments, that is in institutions which generate violence that would be virtually impossible in other contexts. And these two explanations can

of course be combined. A further possible explanation is somewhat more abstract. Not everyone *can* be extremely violent because violent individuals are dependent on the fact that they deviate from and also obtain support from the broader mass of individuals. From this perspective, acting with extreme violence always also means being *one of the few* – belonging to a select group, a violent elite.

Randall Collins' (2008) studies can once again be used to provide an illustration. The wartime sniper, lying concealed and absorbed in his rifle, constitutes one example of *technology-driven violent specialisation*. How is it that a sniper can become so effective?

Collins (2008: 381 pp.) brings together information from previous research, primarily from the historical studies of Martin Pegler (2001). This research shows that the effectiveness of the sniper has tended to be heroised by zooming in on the very best. Two Finnish snipers, who were active during the Russian invasion of Finland in 1939–1940, top the list, with over 500 and 400 kills, respectively. They were active behind Russian lines and were more or less invisible in the snow-covered landscape in their winter-camouflage. During World War II, two German snipers managed to kill over 300 individuals on the Eastern Front, while a Russian sniper – a woman – managed 309 kills. These individuals naturally constitute the sniper elite, but Collins argues (on the basis of Pegler's material) that *even the average sniper* is more effective than ordinary soldiers.

In addition, snipers are disliked by other troops. They are more or less viewed as sinister beings, who then become the object of mythologising. They are perceived as being emotionally distant, reserved, and introverted. Their cool and self-absorbed approach to shooting easily leads to their developing a reputation as cold-blooded killers (Collins 2008: 384).

And being a covert sniper really is a cold, calculating activity, as Collins writes. The technique itself makes it possible to work at a distance from one's target, slowly and with great patience. On an emotional level, it becomes relatively easy to kill. The level of interaction with the target is extremely low or non-existent. Few targets succeed in returning fire at a sniper who is lying concealed on a roof or behind a bush; few even see where the shots are coming from. Those who are shot at by snipers never see the sniper's face or eyes, and vice versa. In this sense, Collins notes, the basic features of everyday interaction are lacking, and with them the tendency to fall into a shared focus of attention and mood, that is the tendency that people who use violence have to resist and overcome. The sniper's technique generates a form of violent specialism, or at least favourable conditions for such a specialism. Snipers do not find themselves in an emotionally charged confrontation in the same way as many other people who fight, where the air itself is almost set aquiver by the combatants' wills, enmities,

and fears. Snipers are able to calmly make their plans and then wait for the “right” moment to realise them.

The sniper emerges as an isolated figure who works with the help of an intense focus (Collins 2008: 385–386). “I was concentrating so hard”, says a British sniper serving in Iraq in 2003, “that I didn’t have time to think about him [the target] as a person or the fact that I was just about to kill him. He was just a distant shape magnified ten times in the telescopic lens”⁵ (Pegler 2004: 316).

A similar form of dehumanisation may sometimes also occur in institutional environments in which people – in contrast – know one another well or come very close to one another. Violence as specialty may then emerge in an *institutionalised* form. Bullying (with elements of violence) is typical of institutions such as schools and prisons, for example (Collins 2008: 158).⁶ In schools, there are a range of recurring patterns, at least in the American context. Bullying appears to be most common in the early teenage years and in places outside large cities. Suburbs and rural areas, and relatively young students – what is it that characterises these conditions? The answer is a relatively closed environment. The students are relatively highly exposed to one another and may sometimes completely lack any contacts outside school.

As Collins (2008: 172) notes, the idea that bullying thrives in prosperous suburbs is counterintuitive, since we usually associate problems with inner-city schools with high proportions of ethnic-minority students (so-called “problem schools”). But the problem is in fact less common in these areas, if we are to believe Collins’ data. In large cities, and among older teenagers, students have more contacts with people outside school; the students often participate in sports and cultural activities away from their classmates. This makes them less susceptible to potential bullies, whose activities require a more closed environment.

Thus for Collins, institutional environments that the members cannot simply leave (or that they feel they cannot leave) exert a pressure that promotes violence. Bullying is dependent on the bully identifying a “weak” target, a sensitised person whose status is defined as low or on the decline and who sees no chance of escape. Such environments are reminiscent of Erving Goffman’s (1961) *total institutions* – prisons, secure care departments, residential homes for the elderly, monasteries, and the like. Collins does not mean that every school at which bullying occurs *is* a total institution but rather that bullying finds sustenance in those schools that are *most like* total institutions for various reasons (such as their geographical position, the students’ age, and social networks).

Boarding schools are one prominent example. These institutions rarely provide a breeding ground for violence, with the specific exceptions of bullying and so-called *hazing*. When the students leave these schools, they are

rarely drawn into street violence or other similar forms of violence. The violence instead appears to be restricted to the boarding school itself (cf. Sandgren 2015).

Further, bullies who meet their victims outside school or once they have left school as a rule find it difficult to resume their harassment – the bullying seems to live first and foremost in school. Bullies are reliant on the closed nature of the setting to be able to amplify their own significance and to make their victims weak. The victims of bullying, argues Collins, do *not* usually become bullies themselves, as is often claimed. No, bullying is determined by the institutional context (Collins 2008: 173).

These cases can thus be contrasted with Athens' work. Here the analyses are not focused on brutalising childhood experiences to which the individual responds with belligerence and violent behaviour, and that may eventually produce a specialist in violence. Here violence as specialty is instead produced or fashioned by technical and institutional circumstances. Combinations of these conditions are of course possible. Institutions may brutalise, and violent behaviours that confirm the presence of brutalisation experiences may be intensified by means of technology, and so on. My point is that an explanation of particularly serious violence need not always be firmly grounded in Athens' developmental (and biographical) sociology since social environments *here and now* (in relation to the violence at issue) should also be taken into consideration. Athens' primary interest is of course directed at the social environment of the past.

Finally, *the violent elite*. Collins (2008: 370–374) devotes considerable space to a detailed description of the fact that only a small proportion of a given population engage in persistent serious violence. This pattern is found in innumerable contexts, among others within the police and the military, and among criminals and young people. One study (published in 1991) found that 7.8 percent of the police officers in Los Angeles had ever been involved in shooting, and only 0.2 percent had fired their weapons in three or more shootings. "Use of routine force", Collins (2008: 371) writes "was fairly widespread; 70 percent of the LAPD had been involved in at least one use-of-force report . . . but it is concentrated: the top 5 percent of officers produced 20 percent of the force incidents; the top 10 percent of the cops produced 33 percent of the incidents". Another study from the 1970s showed that 15 percent of the US population had committed 84 percent of the country's violent offences. Persistent and recurrent violence only appears to occur among a small number of people, that is among a society's (or a certain group's) violent elite.

One exception is found in young children, who usually behave in a more indiscriminately violent manner, but they are on the other hand not particularly successful. For example, eight percent of young children attack their

siblings physically, but the injuries caused are in no way comparable to those found in the adult world. Collins argues that the violence of children is spontaneous and ineffective. As children grow up, they develop a greater sensitivity in relation to the people around them and their violence declines. (See, however, Uhnoo (2011), Chapter 9, for oral descriptions of sibling conflicts at age 15–21.)

However, if persistent and lethal violence is restricted to a small number of people, why don't officers, Mafia bosses and pro-violent politicians attempt to *spread* this specialty and engage larger numbers of people? Why not create an army comprised exclusively of snipers?

According to Collins (2008: 413), such arrangements are virtually impossible for structural reasons. The violent few need the emotional, and sometimes also practical, support of the broader group. Violent specialisation functions in the same way as a crowd in a riot situation. A small number stand at the front and engage in the most extreme acts, while other shout slogans or are simply present in the crowd. In the same way, terrorists need to be backed up by their associates – and terrorists or “violent soloists” who completely *lack* a collective will as a rule try to create or conjure up such a collective, “radicalising” themselves with the help of a supportive ideology.

In Norway, Anders Behring Breivik – the far-right terrorist who shot dead 69 participants of a political summer camp on an island in 2011 – published a manifesto that gives the impression of his being involved in a major ideological struggle that would justify his killing. The serial firearm killer Peter Mangs in Malmö, Sweden, invented a similar ideological-racist explanation that placed his shootings in a broader context as a means of providing a firmer basis for what was in practice an extremely solitary project (Palmkvist 2015: 227–228, 332). “While Breivik built himself up in advance with his ideological cutting and pasting [at his computer] prior to his terrorist acts”, the crime reporter Joakim Palmkvist (2015: 228) writes in his book on Peter Mangs, “Peter Mangs instead justified himself after the event in order to cope with what he had done”. The historian of religion Mattias Gardell (2015), on the other hand, describes Mangs as having been inspired early by other “race warriors”, as a focused racist. Thus the details of these descriptions vary, but the common denominator appears to be the actors’ search for grandiose backup. The few need the support of others in order to account for and carry out their violent practices. They need at least to *give the appearance of having* or to *believe themselves to have* the support of others. As Ray (2011: 163) points out, “perpetrators’ racist views are shared by a community to which they belong”, which “provide a source of reinforcement and justification”.

Thus, although violent techniques could be passed on to more people, there are reasons why large segments of society do not start behaving

violently. Both “hot”, emotional violence (such as that seen in a conflict during a political demonstration) and “cool”, technical violence, have social and cultural foundations (Collins 2008: 449). A *hitman* minimises the interaction with his victims and may in this way maintain his cool, but behind and around him there will be some form of collective to provide encouragement (Collins 2008: 432–439).

Collins makes a comparison with a society’s intellectuals, who also lay claim to the status of an elite. The most celebrated intellectuals – the avant-garde – are located at the centre of a rumour-based network. (“Have you read X? So original!”) For this reason, there can never be very many of them. If their number became too great, their status would dissipate and their splendour would fade. The available amount of attention in the intellectual field would be insufficient to motivate and stimulate people to refresh their departures from more standard work if a substantial number started to achieve these feats – and without collective support, feats would not be there to begin with.

Sociologically speaking, the majority’s relative lack of achievement is itself an important part of any achievement. For the same reasons, *the violent few* must continue to be few.

Masculinities and femininities

The violent specialisation studied by Athens (1992: 10) is almost exclusively the reserve of men – and primarily young men from the ethnic and racialised minorities found among the lower classes in the USA. The association between masculinity and violence can be found throughout this field of research (Ray 2011: 83). Violence is viewed as a masculine specialty, non-violence as a feminine specialty. We basically find the same pattern in all countries. Males “have been over-represented in all major violent crime categories since the collection of crime statistics began” (Ray 2011: 83). When Steven Pinker (2011) attempts to explain a global decline in violence from the Middle Ages to the present – the frequency of violence has declined across virtually all areas of statistics (but see Malešević 2017: 100–101, for objections) – he therefore emphasises a *tempering of masculinity* as an important factor. *Feminisation reduces violence*, argues Pinker. (His other explanations are the strong state, the expansion of commerce and cosmopolitanism and the escalating application of rational thought to human affairs. I only give a glimpse of his studies here.)

Pinker’s argument is – when it comes to this detail in his work – roughly as follows. Violence is for the most part exercised by men (Ray 2011: 83–103; Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015: 7, 15). Men often grow up in, and are influenced by, a context of cultural patterns that promote violence. They

play more violently, they have more violent fantasies, they consume more cultural expressions of violence and they get more pleasure from inflicting violent punishment or engaging in violent acts of revenge. They are more reckless in their risk-taking in aggressive attacks and they more often vote for belligerent policies and “hawkish” leaders. Men are responsible for the conduct of virtually all wars and acts of genocide (Pinker 2011: 684–685; cf. Bourdieu 1999: 63–67). Suicide is also most common among men (Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015: 19).

If society then moves away from a masculine culture that celebrates male (easily offended) honour and that “hardens” young boys into men who are tolerant of violence, then violence should decline.

Pinker is arguing that this is what is happening today at the global level, but his feminisation concept involves more than this. If men marry, violence declines, because married men become less likely to devote their time to criminal activities. Social environments that are dominated by unmarried men – the mining and cowboy cultures of the wild west, for example – are almost always relatively violent (Pinker 2011: 687). The dissipation of such environments thus has a dampening effect on violence. More girls being born is in itself a further explanation, a result of a decline in, or the elimination of, the abortion of females. It is not mere coincidence, argues Pinker (2011: 687), that countries whose cultures in part reject unborn girls have problems with explosive violence, with examples of this being found in China, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. Societies or social contexts with “too many” men, and too many *young* men, will be relatively violent.

By contrast, if women are given more control over the birth process, violence is reduced for the simple reason that the number of children declines. The proportion of young people in society then becomes smaller, and with it also the proportion of young men. The emancipation of women and their being given the opportunity to exercise power is associated with the global decline in the practice of violence. Areas whose progress is slower in this respect are also lagging behind with regard to declining violence (Pinker 2011: 688).

Thus Pinker’s feminisation concept comprises a number of different components: suppressed masculine culture, an increased social control of young men, fewer young men, and an increase in the power of women. The masculine basis of violence is laid bare, together with its ongoing erosion. If developments continue along the path described by Pinker, society will become more peaceful, and men less masculine, with each passing day.

However, a closer examination shows that parts of Pinker’s arguments are based on rather sweeping simplifications. Masculinity and femininity are defined both statically and in terms of a dichotomy. They are assumed to

constitute opposites whose cultural contents are unchanging, and they are assumed to “underly” people’s behaviour rather than being employed and reproduced by this behaviour. As R. W. Connell has noted in the foreword to James W. Messerschmidt’s (1993: x–xi) *Masculinities and crime*, this is an example of conventional thinking. A behaviour (such as crime) is assumed to manifest, or be caused by, a gender affiliation whose content is taken as completely predetermined. A more original approach – which would also have the potential to cope with more complex empirical observations – would be to view gender as something that is constructed or created also through social action. Connell and Messerschmidt have developed a performative analysis to understanding gender dynamics, violence, and masculinity where gender is done and enacted rather than possessed (Ray 2011: 88).⁷

Crime, or violence, then becomes one of the ways in which gender is produced.

This does not mean that we should reject all of Pinker’s observations. Instead it is a question of sharpening our focus and looking at the details. Not all men are violent, and most men are not extremely violent. Violence as a specialty may very well be a masculine phenomenon, but if so, it is a matter of a *specific* masculinity. Conversely, there are femininities that support violence, so “feminisation” of the kind described by Pinker need not be a guarantee for peace on earth.

Messerschmidt (1993, 2004) argues that people apply themselves to different masculinity and femininity projects – plucked from the surrounding culture – and that these projects are the means by which they manifest and accomplish gender. People *do* femininities and masculinities, and they do them in an *accountable* and *recognisable* way (West & Zimmerman 1987: 135). The project is utterly concrete; it involves how the body is carried and used, how gestures are performed, the appearance given by one’s tone, facial expressions and posture, how the body is clothed, and so on. In different settings and specific situations, people are expected to “do” gender in socially adequate manner. There are substantial variations, but so-called hegemonic masculinity often sets the norm (Messerschmidt 2004: 42). In contemporary society, this one specific form of masculinity has become idealised and somehow floats above all others.

Messerschmidt (2004: 54 pp.) has interviewed ten teenagers (five boys and five girls) who had been incarcerated, sentenced to probation or who were in treatment as a result of violence, and on the basis of these interviews he attempts to find support for some of his hypotheses. Lenny, for example, was found to have been victimised as a result of his body (being short and obese) and had used violence in order to obtain respect. He said that he didn’t want to be a “wimp” anymore. Perry, on the other hand, had been helped by his body, which was more in line with the local ideal, but

had nonetheless become violent both at school and on the street as a means of asserting himself. Unlike Lenny, Perry described having grown up in a violent home.

Tina spoke about her violent stepfather and described using violence towards him to defend her mother. Messerschmidt argued that she made herself into a *bad girl* and developed a *don't mess with me*-reputation at school. Kelly, on the other hand, had also become violent, but had done so with the assistance of her stepfather and with an explicitly masculine style, despite at the same time defining herself as a girl. Kelly had transgressed conventional gender boundaries, writes Messerschmidt, whereas Tina had acquired a *bad girl femininity*, a femininity for “mean” girls or girls with attitude. This project, as well as those of Kelly, Lenny, and Perry, involved the use of violence.

Thus Messerschmidt shows that young women can be violent not only in an explicitly feminine way but also by borrowing masculinity. (Or perhaps more correctly: This was how the girls presented themselves – narrated their identities – in his qualitative interviews.) In all cases, gender was not an underlying factor or force but was rather actively employed and produced. What Messerschmidt wants to show using these examples is that (a) gender can be performed in different (rather than merely two) ways and (b) femininity need in no way always be associated with non-violence.

We immediately find ourselves on another level of complexity than Pinker. We can no longer say that feminisation will inevitably produce a decline in violence. It *may* do so, but this will depend on the specific character of the ways in which gender is articulated and accomplished. What type of femininity? In what context? Situations, organisations, ethnicities, and classes – “feminine” means different things in different social and cultural locations.

As Tove Pettersson (2005) has shown in an analysis of young people’s networks, men undeniably commit violent offences more often than women, but *when* violent crimes are committed, the crimes appear to be used in the same way, irrespective of gender. Violence is primarily used to create hierarchies in relation to others of the same gender, argues Pettersson. Violence makes a statement in relation to another person from the same category. This means that violence can be employed in *both masculinity and femininity projects*, and that women who use violence are not necessarily trying to make themselves “men”.

With the help of Messerschmidt (and Pettersson), we can re-read Athens’ study of how violent specialists are socially produced in order to identify and analyse various masculinity and femininity projects. The following fragment from Athens (1992: 54), for example, is very reminiscent of

what Messerschmidt labels “*bad girl*” femininity and its *don’t mess with me*-attitude:

My mother and grandmother just wouldn’t stand for people messing with them. They were bold women and would fight a man or a woman.

Another example of how Steven Pinker’s coarse-grained gender analysis might be supplemented with a more sophisticated alternative can be drawn from the stories in Édouard Louis’ (2015) autobiographical novel *The End of Eddy*. Eddy Bellegueule grew up in a small industrial settlement in northern France, and was unhappy in this macho and homophobic community. He was completely different from his father, brothers, and the bullies who tormented him at school, who all professed a narrow masculinity from which any deviation was viewed as a threat. A real man should not behave in such a way that he can be called “gay”, “queer”, a “poof”, or a “sissy”. A real man should be able to drink himself senseless, make an idiot of himself when drunk, lose his temper and be able to fight. He should walk in a certain way – all according to the locally accomplished masculinity portrayed in Louis’ book.⁸

Eddy Bellegueule could not do any of this. Why was he crying all the time? Why was he afraid of the dark? Eddy Bellegueule was described as affected and effeminate by others. He was even teased by his own family. His brothers, and to some extent his sisters too, preferred ostensibly hegemonic-masculine pastimes – video games, rap music and football – while he was himself drawn to theatre, popular music and dolls. He never succeeded in fully becoming involved in the boys’ fraternisation and could only repress or hide his developing homosexuality. In the end he found it impossible to remain in the world represented by his parents and his secondary school. He escaped via his admission to an upper secondary school in a different area.

The new school was not characterised by the same view of masculinity as that which Bellegueule had been used to. Instead the men had a more “sensitive” manner, they carried leather briefcases and their clothes were not so loud, more overcoats and woollen cardigans. The men greeted one another with a kiss on the cheek. Throughout his childhood, Bellegueule had attempted in vain to make himself “hard”. Now he was able to abandon this Bellegueule and the masculinity project associated with him.

Édouard Louis’ stories illustrate the analytical ambition of Messerschmidt: to liberate individuals from preordained ties to expected masculinities and femininities in order to instead reveal variations and movements as they occur in society and its cultures. Eddy Bellegueule “is” not masculine, but attempts to make himself masculine in accordance with the local

hegemony. He subsequently flees from this failed project and seeks out different ideals. His project then becomes another, which includes the writing of *The End of Eddy*.

It does not seem reasonable to say that Eddy Bellegueule was feminised when he left the practices of violence behind in the small French industrial community where he had grown up. As we have seen, he had been perceived as being feminine *there*, and had *tried* to make himself (and to pass as) masculine. Eddy Bellegueule was rather feminised in his original masculine environment, and was then masculinised, in an alternative form – an urban middle-class masculinity – in his new class.

An analytical openness to this type of possibilities is highly relevant in the study of gender and violence.

Socio-economically marginalised men

Men are more likely to commit violent crimes and/or be the victim of such crimes with the majority coming from working-class as well as marginalised or somewhat excluded social locations (Ellis 2016: 2–3). It seems to make sense to argue that these socio-economically marginalised men constitute an essential part of *the violent few* today, or at least a considerable part of it.

Whereas groups of elite men are rarely found to use violence, for instance, to repair their reputation when feeling insulted or hindered in various ways, lower-class men seem relatively more ready. From a historical perspective, the ritualised duels between men seem to linger in the lower strata of the society, whereas upper-class men have been pacified. (See the reference to Spierenburg 2008, in Ellis 2016: 3). This change can, in turn, be looked upon as part of a greater historical trend towards the pacification of civil society in general. (See Ray 2011: 43–62 on Norbert Elias' thesis on the civilising process.⁹) Violence has typically come to be seen as a “lower-class” behaviour. It has come to be negatively correlated with social status (Ray 2011: 51).

Still, we cannot say that *all* men in socio-economically marginalised contexts are violent (Ellis 2016: 29). The majority are not. A situational analysis is still relevant. We need to get close to the everyday details around these men (as, of course, we would need if we were to specifically highlight women acting violently). If we do so, we may stumble upon both class and culture combined.

Anthony Ellis' (2016) ethnographic project on men, masculinities and violence does precisely this. By spending time with, and conducting long interviews with, a group of white men in the working class of northern England, Ellis tries to pinpoint why these men, more often than others, behave violently and become involved in violent crimes. He finds a male working-class

culture where there is a general appreciation of violence and a general recognition that yes, violence does exist and needs to happen, at times. To “not take any shit” but “stand up for yourself” and “be a man” in the settings that Ellis covers means an occasional engagement in brawls, threats and fights. In the bars, pubs, nightclubs, streets, and football matches as well as homes and workplaces of these men, physical confrontation is a distinct possibility.

Ellis also finds that men excluded from traditional forms of employment may feel attracted to alternative meaning frames and sources of status in, for instance football “firms” or the consumption of alcohol and drugs, and that such involvement is typically associated with violence. The economic conditions cannot be overlooked. Being socio-economically marginalised can imply a drift into social worlds of alcohol, drugs, and fights.

Still, the stories that Ellis collect are far from materialistic or amoral. As storytellers the men in his study appear to be eager to present their actions – also the violent ones – in accountable ways. “I’ve never started a fight with anybody who hasn’t deserved [it]”, as Darren says, one of Ellis’ (2016: 47) informants. The moral logic of *responding to* experienced humiliation or indignity (rather than initiating this oneself) is repeated in these stories, so that even though Ellis can detect the violence-conducive significance of gendered and socio-economical circumstances in and through his fieldwork, the informants do not use these circumstances as an argument. Economic hardship, rather, belongs to the conditions of this version of working-class culture, along with relatively chaotic lifestyles and strained relationships with significant others (Ellis 2016: 152).

Ellis’ research is a reminder of the importance of not removing violence from its wider socio-economic contexts. As Ray (2011: 63–69) points out, there is a spatial and particularly urban unevenness in the risk and frequency of violent crimes.

Again, in Ellis’ work we encounter a cultural analysis that can complicate and critique the work of Collins – and incorporate the spirit of Athens. (Also see Ray’s (2011: 79) comments on Jock Young’s (2003) criminological combination of relative deprivation and “the energies of humiliation”.) If violence belongs to the culture of this masculine working-class life, for instance in terms of accountable ways to take part in fights considered “honourable” for yourself or your friends and relatives, then we find a sort of basic background expectancy promoting rather than hindering violence, as if the emotionally supporting audience that Collins identifies as crucial in, for instance, street violence is figuratively omnipresent. In the male working-class culture of northern England – as Ellis portrays it – one is not supposed to walk away when threatened, insulted, slighted or humiliated, and when being engaged in such moral projects one tends to say, retrospectively, that “I lost it, “I saw red” (Ellis 2016: 79). Masculine corporeality

is used in confrontations – and there is a cultural support for losing one’s temper (Ellis 2016: 88). This culture seems to work as a pool of violent experiences from which whole biographies can be narrated.

Ellis’ work, thus, exemplifies a fruitful way to weave together several findings and perspectives in what he himself calls an integrated approach (Ellis 2016: 126). Gender, class, and culture are not treated as statistical categories but as lived realities. He takes into account that men in general, and socio-economically marginalised men in particular, are more likely to act violently than others, but he also takes into account that such category-bounded explanations alone are insufficient. We need to get close to the settings in which violence is a concern, and we need to equip ourselves with sensitivities for how a certain class-defined culture – economically conditioned – is set in motion in morally charged situations as well as stories.

All in all, this produces a sort of speciality in violence.

To live within this culture as a man means routinely being close to other men willing to use violence in a range of situations – situations in which violence probably had not been considered or used as rapidly and readily without the presence of this culture, for instance in the football “firm” and outside the pub, as punishment in father-son relationships or as an honourable defence of friends on the street.

The men of northern England that Ellis met draw on such a culture as a resource both when dealing with interpersonal troubles in their lives and when making their lives meaningful in relation to a visiting ethnographer. Even though trauma and humiliation during childhood seem recurring in the biographies of these persistently violent men, the individual must still be subjected to a gendered socialisation that stresses toughness, stoicism and physicality (Ellis, Winlow & Hall 2017: 712).¹⁰ A ready-to-fight persona needs its special setting to be acted out.

Notes

- 1 Twersky Glasner (2013) not only presents an overview of the criticism that has been directed at Athens but also draws attention to the merits of his work. Among other things, she shows that Athens’ findings are similar to, or in line with, those of Jack Katz and Stephen Lyng, who like Athens identify attractions and “kicks” associated with criminal experiences.
- 2 Labelling theory focuses on the way in which society’s reaction to so-called deviant behaviour itself serves to produce and reinforce the behaviour it was intended to combat. The labels, or “stigma”, that are ascribed to offenders have unintended criminogenic consequences. Society’s reaction is viewed as producing a self-fulfilling prophecy as stigmatised individuals themselves adopt the labels applied to them by society and begin to act in accordance with these. See for example Lilly, Cullen and Ball (2007, Chapter 7).

- 3 Athens (1997: 61–68) argues that the self-images of violent individuals are consonant with recurrent forms of interpretations of violent situations. Individuals with a non-violent self-image, for example, restrict their use of violence to situations in which they feel the need to physically defend themselves, whereas an individual with a violent self-image interprets a much larger number of situations as “requiring” a violent response. These self-images are not static, however, but rather socially constructed and open to change.
- 4 Howard S. Becker is a widely cited critic of the types-of-people approach. He argues that in analyses of social phenomena, types of people should be replaced by types of activities, since people do not act consistently in accordance with a posited “nature” but instead adapt their actions on the basis of what they need to do, or what they define as good for them to do (Becker 1998/2008: 56). A focus on types of activities provides a better opportunity to identify variations and changes in social life, and to then treat those cases where circumstances and features are persistent as special ones (Becker 1998/2008: 58).
- 5 “He was just a distant shape . . .” – a discursively oriented analysis of statements of this kind shows how the choice of words serves to neutralise the violence and thus to make it appear comprehensible, as in an interview situation in which soldiers are asked to describe their experiences, but also in social interactions between soldiers. Such statements can thus themselves be included in the phenomenon under study, rather than merely being analysed as a reflection of the phenomenon of interest. I will be returning to interpretations of this kind in the chapter on *Violence as storytelling*.
- 6 For a review and discussion of the research on bullying in prisons, see Wästerfors (2013: 32–40).
- 7 Ray (2011: 87–92) provides an overview and assessment of Connell and Messerschmidt’s theory (they have partly constructed it together), especially in relation to the critique that it seems to play down the significance of economy and class. Nonetheless, Ray (2011: 92) argues that the emphasis on performativity and “doing gender” is an advancement compared to more deterministic gender theories.
- 8 I have read the Swedish translation *Göra sig kvitt Eddy Bellegueule* (2015) and some relevant passages referred here can be found at pages 15, 63, 66, and 169 in this version.
- 9 Ray (2011: 43–62) gives a nuanced and multi-layered account of Elias’ historical view, including the critique Elias has met and also Elias’ own modifications of his theory. In Ray’s assessment, the civilizing process was a gradual, partial, and unplanned process of pacification, which means that we have to be sceptic towards more all-encompassing and simplifying versions.
- 10 Ellis, Winlow, and Hall (2017: 704) suggest a “pathological attachment” to violence in their analysis of these violent men’s life narratives, and they explicitly argue against Collins (2008) and Messerschmidt (1993) in this respect. The traumas they find in these men’s past are causes, they suggest, so that the men are trapped in their key experiences and unable to free themselves from “the repetitive drive” to be violent when feeling threatened. They fight people here and now but unconsciously they attempt to come to terms with their violent upbringing, for instance a violent father. This is, in other words, an alternative view that relies on psychoanalytic interpretations of oral storytelling. Still a social world of masculine performances is required to enact the trauma at issue in violent ways, the authors argue. “The traumatised individual must be encouraged to *value violence*” (Ellis, Winlow, & Hall 2017: 712).

3 Violence as politics

If you want examples of political violence, you do not have to look very far to find them. I scroll through an old newspaper, clicking on articles from September 2015. Syria is falling apart under Bashar al-Assad's attacks on his own population and the ravages of Islamic State. The flood of refugees is swelling. The eastern Ukraine is in a state of war as a result of Putin's aggression. In Cameroon, hundreds of civilians have been killed following the spread of the armed revolt by the terrorist organisation Boko Haram from Nigeria. In Hungary, extreme right-wing politicians are celebrating in triumph, having resorted to tear gas and water cannon to seal off the border with Serbia.¹

None of this would have happened in the absence of violence. The underlying chains of events are a manifestation of violence, which includes explosions, weapons being fired, and executions. Under the surface – as a motive for flight – the potential for further violence simmers, violence that has not yet occurred but which could very conceivably do so. People see violence, they hear about it, sense or fear it, and they take flight or hide. As a rule, people who believe that approaching violence cannot be stopped want to be as far away from it as possible.

According to Clausewitz, war is the continuation of politics by other means. At the same time, if we are to believe Max Weber (1948/1991), physical force is a means that is “specific” to the state. Without violence there can be no state to begin with. States – and organisations or bodies that decide to act like states or that want to *become* states – rely on violence, even though they do not always need to use it in practice. States not only attempt to obtain a monopoly on violence but also strive to avoid having to use it if this is possible. Politics – the management of, or attempts to manage, the state – instead become a “continuation” or an extension of this state monopoly on violence.

In Max Weber's formulation from 1919:

In the past, the most varied institutions – beginning with the sib – have known the use of physical force as quite normal. Today, however, we have to say that a state is a human community that (successfully) claims *the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory. Note that “territory” is one of the characteristics of the state. Specifically, at the present time, the right to use physical force is ascribed to other institutions or to individuals only to the extent to which the *state* permits it. The state is considered the sole source of the “right” to use violence.

(Weber 1948/1991: 78)

In this sense, all modern politics include an element of violence – even politics which on the surface appear peaceful – for example in the form of knowing that the police and the military *could* be called in to impose the governance that certain citizens might choose to defy. Weber argues that every modern state has emerged thanks to the expropriation of all “material means” (such as the machinery of war) and their having been brought together under the control of the state. In the end there is no one else with an independent right to make use of such means, as was formerly the case in the context of feudal systems.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt (1969/1970: 35) writes in a footnote about Max Weber's violence-based definition of the state that he “seems to have been aware of his agreement with the Left” (i.e. the revolutionaries of Weber's era). Weber cited Trotsky, who argued that “every state is based on violence”. Weber added, “This is indeed true”.

However, Arendt is among those who have attempted to add nuance to this view, in part in the direction outlined by Weber himself. There can be no doubt that violence constitutes a political instrument (for both the right and the left). But how effective is it? Can *lasting* government actually be based on violence – exclusively on violence – and ignore other practices, techniques and institutions? How stable is government that is pervaded by violence? I will return to Arendt in a moment, but would first like to briefly note that she makes a distinction between power and violence. Power is dependent on the support of the many, argues Arendt (1969/1970: 42), whereas violence “up to a point can manage without them [the numbers] because it relies on implements”.

A lone violent individual with a weapon can produce terror in a crowd, and thus appropriate a phenomenal level of obedience. But (1) such obedience rarely lasts very long and (2) this form of autocratic rule requires the majority to comply and thus to indirectly participate.

A less dramatic example: a minority uses violence to disturb a lecture – shouting, verbal attacks, and kicking up a row and – and succeeds in stopping it. But this success, writes Arendt (1969/1970: 42), is dependent on the fact that “the majority clearly refuses to use its power”. They have in effect joined forces with the minority by declining to overpower them.

Even the tyrant needs helpers (Arendt 1969/1970: 41). Tyranny is certainly the form of government that is most inclined to resort to violence, but it is also the weakest form of government, precisely because violence constitutes a relatively shaky foundation.

I will now elaborate somewhat on the nature of this shakiness.

Behind the iron curtain

I have chosen the focus of my first historical case for personal reasons. When the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989 I was – perhaps like many 17-year-olds in Scandinavia – powerfully affected by this rapid collapse of an entire social system at such close proximity to myself. Many western Europeans were astonished by the poverty, oppression, and desire for freedom that were suddenly exposed. Throughout my time in school, the division of Europe into East and West had appeared to be cast in stone; completely solid and undisputed. Suddenly, however, the dams were bursting.

In the summer of that same year I had travelled to Moscow, where Mikhail Gorbachev was still in power and where the GUM department store was run-down, grey, and empty. In order to avoid being fleeced by the Soviet state (which maintained the official exchange rate at an artificially high level), people had to change money on the black market. Black market currency sharks ushered me into cars and I was driven around the city. The drivers looked anxiously over their shoulder, afraid they would be arrested by the police, while colleagues counted banknotes. In Red Square, Lenin lay embalmed in his mausoleum and allowed queueing Russians to observe him as they filed past. He looked much smaller in person than in pictures.

A few years later I was studying in Prague, České Budějovice and Brno in the Czech Republic (separated from Slovakia since 1993), and I also travelled to Warsaw, Gdańsk and Kraków in Poland. I wandered around in the ruins of a totalitarian, or almost totalitarian, system and absorbed a range of impressions.²

Officials and shop assistants were sometimes awkward, brusque, and dismissive in a way that is difficult to describe. In the student café in Brno, a banner from the 1989 velvet revolution was still hanging on the wall, proclaiming “Havel na hrad!” (Havel to the castle!) – Václav Havel was the dissident who was elected first president of the democratic Czech Republic following the fall of communism. Students from the UK, the USA, and West

Germany made jokes about outdated technologies and fashions. A Czech friend of my own age played videos of old propaganda films and laughed at the message they communicated. His parents didn't laugh.

To develop an understanding of the significance of political violence in the former "Eastern Europe",³ we have to go back in time. The historian Anne Applebaum (2012: 15–17) begins her book on the communist seizure of power following World War II with an apparently peripheral example. At the end of the war in 1945, a women's league in Łódź in Poland started providing refugees with assistance in the form of food, medicine, and blankets. This help was provided spontaneously, without pay and had no political agenda.

Only five years later, the Women's League had become something quite different. It now had a centralised governing body, a general secretary and used political, ideological language. It held congresses that had an openly political agenda. In practice, they had become a women's section of the governing Polish Communist Party. The league encouraged its members to follow the party line, to march in the May Day parades, to condemn western imperialism and so on. Those who refused could be kicked out. The provision of practical help to the needy was no longer the principal focus.

Applebaum argues that this transformation of the Polish Women's League between 1945 and 1950 exemplifies the efforts of those in power to create a totalitarian state. Following the Red Army's move into Europe and their defeat of Hitler's forces, a transformation of incredible proportions took place, based on a model provided by the Stalinist Soviet Union: a single political party, a single centrally planned economy, a single unified media, and a single moral code. No grass roots organisations, no private businesses, and no critical thinking about the state.

This form of complete control never actually emerged. The Catholic Church in Poland, for example, was never completely subdued, and there were a series of revolts over the years: in Berlin in 1953, Budapest in 1956, Prague in 1968, and Gdańsk in 1980–1981. But Applebaum shows that the communist leaders in East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland – that is the countries to which she chose to restrict her historical study – *strove* to achieve complete control. The definition of totalitarianism that was first formulated by an opponent of Mussolini (and which Mussolini then enthusiastically adopted) was actually a living ideal: everything within the state, nothing outside the state, and nothing against the state (Applebaum 2012: 17).

By studying archives, and with the help of biographies and interviews, Applebaum describes the process by which totalitarianism was put into practice. A secret police organisation was established, based on experts trained in Moscow. Trusted communists were put in charge of the period's

most important mass media: radio. Civil society organisations were harassed, persecuted, and banned, particularly youth associations (such as scouts, catholic and protestant youth groups and young social democrats). There was ethnic cleansing – with millions of Germans, Poles, Ukrainians, and Hungarians being displaced, with the implicit assistance of the USA and the UK (ethnic cleansing had also been written into the allies’ 1945 Potsdam Agreement).

Art, literature and architecture were subordinated to social realism. The humanities and social sciences were all to be permeated by Marxism (Applebaum 2012: 26–27, Chapter 13).

Violence played an important role in this process. To begin with, the changes emerged from an extremely violent situation. The region that had been occupied by the Red Army was full of burned-out villages and cities that had been razed to the ground. The city of Lwów, for example, had been occupied twice by the Russians and once by the Germans. After the war, it was named Lviv and was no longer in Poland but rather in the western area of the Soviet Republic of Ukraine. The city’s pre-war Polish and Jewish population had been replaced by rural Ukrainians (Applebaum 2012: 41).

Applebaum shows how the society of the time was characterised by brutalisation and an indifference to violence. She cites the poet Czesław Miłosz’s attempt to portray the feelings of the average person:

Once, had he stumbled upon a corpse on the street he [an ordinary person] would have called the police. A crowd would have gathered, and much talk and comment would have ensued. Now he knows he must avoid the dark body lying in the gutter, and refrain from asking unnecessary questions.

(Applebaum 2012: 48)

So the point of departure was in itself violent. There was wave upon wave of plundering, along with thefts and apparently random shootings. “Criminal violence bled into political violence” (Applebaum 2012: 50). Libraries and churches were blown up or set ablaze. A wave of rape crime swept across the region, legitimised by Stalin himself. You have to have some understanding, said Stalin, to a complaining Yugoslavian communist, “if a soldier who has crossed thousands of kilometres through blood and fire and death has fun with a woman or takes some trifle” (Applebaum 2012: 69; cf. Aleksijevitj 2012: 416–417).

In 1948, the widespread rapes in Berlin were discussed in the context of a public debate – albeit in somewhat veiled terms – but silence then descended. But the memories never faded, writes Applebaum (2012: 71): the fear, the shame, and the anger. The rapes and plundering laid the foundations for the

local population's mistrust of the soviet system. At the same time, the fear of this system was inculcated into them.

When interviewed by Applebaum in 2006, the East German journalist and author Elfriede Brüning was only able to talk about her impressions of the rapes in 1945 after a great deal of hesitation. She had met many victims and had herself hidden from the Soviet soldiers, but did not talk about any of this until after a first interview. To begin with, she did not want to mention them at all, nor the mass arrests and looting (Applebaum 2012: 494–495; mass rapes were also committed in occupied Germany by American soldiers, see for instance Eklund 2015).

The strategies employed became harsher once communist parties in the region had lost various elections after the war, and thus realised that not even a rigged and propaganda-impregnated “democracy” would work to their advantage. The opposition was then eliminated by being incorporated into strange “unity parties”, “coalitions”, or “bloc parties”, in which its wings were clipped and it eventually became inactive. In East Germany, for example, both Christian Democrat and Liberal politicians were permitted, but only on paper. In practice, these puppet-politicians published “regime friendly newspapers and magazines, received sinecures and government privileges, and never threatened the hegemony of the communist parties at all” (Applebaum 2012: 288). All politics would subsequently be conducted within a single party.

Generally speaking, the exercise of violence appears to have declined successively. Over the years it became increasingly selective. Large-scale arrests, murders, and deportations primarily occurred during the initial period. Subsequently, the regimes were instead able to rely on a form of implicit violence, at least until the next dissident group emerged, or there was a new revolt or wave of protests. Then the arrests would start once again.

In Applebaum's portrayal, the widespread violence witnessed after the war is presented as a central foundation for the continuing exercise of power and its more focused violence, sometimes in an extremely concrete way. For example, when the mass deportation of Germans was implemented directly after the end of the war – a total of 7.6 million were deported from Poland alone (which had now undergone a geographic shift to the west) – organisations and camps were established that would later be employed in the subsequent terror directed against the native population (Applebaum 2012: 175–179). Camps for German deportees were transformed into prison camps for dissidents. Even Auschwitz was reused – albeit not as an extermination camp, although mortality rates were high in all camps as a result of starvation and disease (Applebaum 2012: 156–157). In Czechoslovakia, the Communist Party established a paramilitary organisation to assist in the

deportations, which then provided a convenient source of help for the party in its 1948 coup d'état.

Thus institutions of force and violence from the end of the war formed an infrastructure for the continued exercise of power. The period of "High Stalinism" came and went. Stalin died in 1953, and his death was followed by a degree of relief. The regimes remained in place, however. The use of violence as a political instrument never disappeared completely until it all came tumbling down in 1989.

Applebaum (2012: 571) argues for the importance of details. At the end of her book, she urges people to remember, and to learn about specific events and individual stories, not "generalisations about the masses". In order to understand how a society has been broken down, and in order to rebuild it, the actors of the past must be viewed as people, "not as black-and-white caricatures, victims, or villains".

One such detail, which captures the totalitarian effort in a nutshell, is found in an event in 1955, which served as the beginning of the end for Stalinism in Poland. A youth and student festival for world peace and friendship took place in Warsaw, and was carefully orchestrated by party functionaries. The visiting foreigners, however – political comrades from Western Europe, Asia, Africa and South America, wearing everything from Mao jackets and striped shirts to flowery skirts – surprised the Poles. The guests were so rich, open and uninhibited. "Young people from the capitalist world were healthy and well-dressed, even though we'd been told that everything there is bad", says Jacek Fedorowicz, who led a cabaret ensemble. It was "a propaganda mistake: without warning, they had let a crowd of multicoloured outsiders into grey Warsaw" (Applebaum 2012: 546). "Particularly shocking, many noted, was the sight of young people kissing in public", writes Applebaum.

Thus during this festival, East met West, with the result that the Polish participants started to complain. Why were their youth leaders so gloomy, stiff, sad, and restrained? It was obviously possible to be progressive and also listen to jazz, wear colourful clothes, have fun, and fall in love. There were complaints about the poor quality of events and the propaganda that flowed from loudspeakers. Spontaneous dancing erupted, and spontaneous jazz, as when Fedorowicz's ensemble departed from the programme and started flirting with the audience.

According to their party comrades, however, all this was wrong. Dance should have a purpose, an important purpose. "In Warsaw, one dances in the name of something, or against something", one party writer had solemnly declared (Applebaum 2012: 547).

A dance in the name of something or against something – there is probably no clearer way to summarise the totalitarian ambition. Every cultural

expression in society is interpreted politically, every dance step. Ideally, nothing spontaneous would be allowed to happen, nothing beyond the state.

What does this have to do with the history of violence? Well, the foreign guests returned home, and the regime reasserted itself once again. The cult of Stalin was certainly on the decline, but the system of one-party rule remained. And there might be informers just about anywhere.

Power and violence

Anne Applebaum sometimes takes issue with Hannah Arendt, who rejected the post-war history of the Soviet Union's European satellite states as being of little interest. Arendt viewed the underlying process as a copy of the October Revolution, while Applebaum (2012: 31–32) emphasises that this was not the case. The new rulers only implemented some of the methods that had previously been employed, methods that they knew had a chance of success – and a written history has to depict the ways in which “human beings react to the imposition of totalitarianism” and not merely to take the transformation of society for granted. It is important to study the details of this process.

Applebaum also discusses Arendt's surprise at the Hungarian revolution of 1956. Arendt had come to believe that totalitarian regimes were almost invincible once they had become established. She was wrong, argues Applebaum, as were the CIA, the KGB and many Russian and American politicians.

People do not acquire a “totalitarian personality” very easily. When people appear to have been bewitched by the cult surrounding a party leader, appearances can be deceptive. And even when they seem to be in complete agreement with the most unreasonable propaganda – when they march in parades, shout slogans, and sing that the party is always right – the enchantment can be broken, suddenly, unexpectedly, and dramatically (Applebaum 2012: 562; cf. Malešević 2010: chapter 7, on war propaganda).

Applebaum argues that “both the memory of recent violence”, during and after the war, and the threat of future violence “hovered constantly in the background”:

If one person in a group of twenty acquaintances was arrested, that might suffice to keep the other nineteen afraid. The secret police's informer network was ever present, and even when it wasn't people thought it might be. The unavoidable, repetitive propaganda in schools, in the media, on the streets, and at all kinds of “apolitical” meetings and events also made the slogans seem inevitable and the system

unavoidable. What was the point of objecting? At the same time, some of the language the authorities used was very appealing.

(Applebaum 2012: 478)

In addition, the regimes were also given the (at least partial) support of western intellectuals, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Pablo Picasso. The “people’s democracies” of Eastern Europe could initially be credited with being at the forefront of societal development.

At the same time, there were protests. According to Applebaum’s description, more or less *every area of society* could be transformed into an arena for dissatisfaction or dissent, because the state was attempting to control *everything*. Work, art, literature, clubs and associations, and music and religion – the slightest deviation might be registered and interpreted as opposition. The Czechs formed jazz bands, the Hungarians discussion groups. The East Germans developed an unofficial peace movement. The Poles organised an underground scouts movement and, in the end, independent trade unions (Applebaum 2012: 566–567).

Secret lectures were organised, secret journals were distributed and there were black markets. Millions of people fled to the West, especially prior to the erection of the Berlin wall in 1961. The omnipotent ambitions of the state could never be completely realised. But all forms of dissent involved substantial risks.

In this respect – in spite of Applebaum’s nuances and objections – there are parallels to Arendt’s philosophy of violence. For Arendt, power is “acting in concert” (Arendt 1969/1970: 44). Somebody “has” power as a result of having been empowered by a group, either explicitly or implicitly, in much the same way as in Max Weber’s (1948/1991) description of different grounds for the legitimate exercise of authority (traditional, charismatic, and legal). If the group were to withdraw its support for some reason, the person loses “his or her” power. By contrast, the nature of violence is instrumental; it is governed by the logic of ends and means (Arendt 1969/1970: 46, 51, 79). According to Arendt (1969/1970: 52), power and violence are often combined, but this does not mean that they are identical. The underlying numbers also determine the extent of the state’s violence-based supremacy. As long as orders are obeyed, as long as the police and the military are ready to use their weapons on behalf of the state, a regime can persist. When this is no longer the case, argues Arendt, a new situation quickly emerges. When power structures lose their legitimacy and crumble, revolutions become possible (Arendt 1969/1970: 48).

So the case of the societies on the other side of the European iron curtain following the end of World War II provides a good illustration of at least some of Arendt’s arguments. There has never been a regime that was

exclusively based on the exercise of violence, but violence may contribute to maximising the numbers who more or less silently *allow* the regime to persist, at least for the moment. The totalitarian state needs the secret police and its informants, whose realised and potential violence strikes terror into the hearts even of those who never protest openly. Once again: “If one person in a group of twenty acquaintances was arrested, that might suffice to keep the other nineteen afraid” (Applebaum 2012: 478).

But sooner or later, a regime based on violence will start to crumble. Temporary obedience may be realised through violence, but not the lasting exercise of power. To paraphrase Arendt once again, violence can manage without the numbers, power cannot.

Thus Arendt is careful to differentiate between the concepts of power and violence. One sometimes gets the impression that she wants to reserve “power” for what is democratically legitimate or popular. Power is the capacity to act in concert while violence is instrumental and the hope of those who lack power (Ray 2011: 13). “What never can grow out of it [the barrel of a gun] is power” (Arendt 1969/1970: 53) – violence can never generate power, as Arendt sees it (Ray 2011: 13). Government based on violence is instead something that emerges when power is being lost, as in the Prague Spring of 1968, which was in the end crushed by tanks (Arendt makes explicit use of this example). The loss of power produces a temptation to replace power with violence. *Impotence* breeds violence, and the use of violence results in even greater impotence (Arendt 1969/1970: 54). Violence appears where power is in jeopardy (Ray 2011: 13).

When we consider the way in which the communist parties lost elections after the war, and then mobilised the secret police and the entire system of government imported from the Soviet Union, it is easy to think in terms of Arendt’s arguments. The parties turned to violence when they were about to lose power. But at the same time, wouldn’t most people say that the parties were exercising power specifically through the use of violence? In Arendt’s more fastidious view, however, this was more a case of *terror*, the form of government that comes into being when violence endures after having first “destroyed all power” and remains in full control (Arendt 1969/1970: 55).

Thus on the one hand, there were a sufficient number standing “behind” the regimes in post-war Europe, in the sense that they were frightened into it or benefited from it. This resulted in the exercise of power, in Arendt’s terminology, not through the constant use of violence, but rather via its *selective* and *implicit* use. Past violence also played a role, together with violence in both the future and subjunctive sense, that is violence that will or that might occur. Violence “hovered constantly in the background”.

Applebaum (2012: 135) speaks of violence against a relatively small number of enemies, “real, alleged, imagined and future”, which may be viewed as a reflection of a much more large-scale form of violence, which following the excesses of the immediate post-war period no longer had to be realised. I would like to call this *political-indicative* violence, since everyone who sees it interprets it in terms of (1) a promise of future violence, (2) a continuation of earlier violence. This “lesser” violence thus serves as an indicator of a greater both future and past violence. The violence of these regimes started in a context that was itself generously violent – the post-war anomie of Central Europe – and it was indicative of a coming series of acts of violence, which the regimes’ subjects could only imagine. Ultimately it was indicative of the violence of the entire Soviet empire, and was legitimised by the soviet ideology of terror (Karlsson 2003/2005).

On the other hand, the violent practices of these regimes emerged *in the absence of power* because the majority did not support Stalin’s transformation of society from the beginning. This means that we cannot speak of power in Arendt’s terms, but rather of terror. As Applebaum shows, however, the extent and intensity of this terror varied over time, as the governed were sometimes compliant and sometimes offered resistance. There were nonetheless glimpses of a more ordinary exercise of power behind the iron curtain, but these were interspersed with political violence, which then (for Arendt) strictly speaking “interrupts” or suspends power.

Violence comes into its own when power is threatened. Individuals in positions of power who feel this power slipping through their fingers find it difficult to resist the temptation to turn to violence (Arendt 1969/1970: 54, 87; cf. Presser 2013: 39). As Applebaum shows, those in power behind the iron curtain never needed to hesitate, since they had easy access to the tools they required. Or stated more correctly: it was not until 1989 that they started to hesitate, when the empire started to crumble.

I have special memories of the television pictures from Romania at Christmas that year: the dictator Ceausescu on his balcony, the unexpected booing of the audience, a visible flicker of fear in the dictator, who then fled in a helicopter.

Violence in the air

We now find ourselves in an analytical landscape that at first sight appears to be very different from that of Randall Collins (2008) and the situational challenge. Applebaum’s historical writing is certainly a great deal more detailed than Arendt’s philosophical work, but it does not approach the phenomenon of violence ethnographically, like Collins and his colleagues. Instead violence is presented as a political instrument, painted with broad

brushstrokes and in relatively grainy pictures: the deportations at the end of the war, the rapes and mass shootings, the mass arrests of the new regimes, and, finally, the manipulative and selective violence of the totalitarian states.

But these perspectives need not be viewed as irreconcilable. Sociologists such as Collins are also interested in violence in the context of large-scale and historical events – war, terrorism, and imprisonment – and historians such as Applebaum employ detailed depictions drawn from biographies, interviews, trials, and political documents. The societal transformation described by Appelbaum probably included many parallels to the situations and violence-promoting institutions at which Collins directs his focus. The apparatus of communist power as a whole may be regarded as an institution of this kind, as can the imperialist Soviet Union (Karlsson 2003/2005).

What *is* lacking from Collins' perspective is the indicative violence that manifests itself in the form of a general culture. While Collins speaks of the code of the street as institutionalised bluster and boasting (Collins 2008: 348, 360), that is performances that appear to be violent but that as a rule go no further than shouting and gesticulating, this form of indicative culture of violence is restricted to specific neighbourhoods, and does not extend to an entire country or a broad range of public places. There is an implicit understanding that these institutionalised indicators of violence are surrounded by something akin to an ocean of calm, a primarily peaceful culture of non-violence. We need to be able to understand and analyse more extensive violent practices and logics of violence, too, ones that are taken for granted and that extend beyond specific situations. In a culture that has become brutalised as a whole, violence can become something that is unquestioned, easily accessed, and expected.

Allow me to give one further example, from the Berlin of Hitler's Germany. Bernd Freytag von Loringhoven (2007) was adjutant to two generals in Hitler's inner circle, and experienced the final days in the Führer's bunker in Berlin. He had also experienced the attempt on Hitler's life on 20 July 1944. A bomb had been planted, and exploded, but Hitler had survived and subsequently denounced "a tiny clique of stupid, ambitious officers" in a radio broadcast (Freytag 2007: 49).⁴ Freytag had not participated in the attempt on Hitler's life, but knew of it through his cousin Wessel. The plot had its background in the dissatisfaction of the professional military class at the way Hitler was conducting the war. "Within the department there was severe criticism of the conduct of the war, judged to be irrational and amateurish, but the Army high command was day by day losing more of its influence to the profit of the National Socialist Party" (Freytag 2007: 44).

Following the attempt on Hitler's life, Wessel turned "white as a sheet", Freytag (2007: 53–54) writes. He understood that he would soon be arrested. He disappeared into the woods and shot himself. Freytag found him with

a pistol by his side and a suicide note across his knees, but he denied all knowledge of the assassination attempt and was not accused of complicity in the plot.

The problem now for Freytag was who would give Wessel, who was a devout protestant, a Christian burial. His wife had been arrested and his child placed in a National Socialist orphanage. Wessel's mother could do nothing, and her brother had also been taken into custody.

With considerable difficulty I obtained the release of Wessel's body from the Gestapo. Then I needed to find a priest for the ceremony. As soon as the identity of the dead man was known, all the different religious individuals I contacted turned me down. Eventually I managed to persuade a young Protestant pastor, after long hesitation on his part.
(Freytag 2007: 56)

None of Wessel's friends wanted to go to the funeral. The coffin was followed only by Freytag and a colonel named Kleikamp ("the only one to show any courage"). The priest looked furtive, afraid of being recognised. He kept the ceremony as brief as he could, with no eulogy. He hardly took his time to recite an Our Father until it was over.

A story of this kind is probably intended to portray the narrator in a certain light: brave, resolute, and independent. But the glimpse we are given of the atmosphere does not appear unreasonable: the frightened priest looking furtive, the rushed ritual with the coffin, and the violence hanging in the air. Nobody threatened the priest or the others who might have been involved *directly*. Nobody stood beside them with a machine gun or a knife. But the atmosphere was nonetheless violent – violence was there as an expectation in the whole background.

Nazi Germany was approaching defeat. An attempt on Hitler's life had failed, and a purge followed. Nobody wanted to have anything to do with anyone accused of complicity, even less to honour such a person with a Christian burial. Any step in this direction could prove fatal.

Freytag's stories appear similar to depictions of the Mafia, in which disputes are settled with bombs, suicides, executions, and secret burials, but with the difference that the Mafia was in this case at the pinnacle of the state.

This meant that violence was implicitly present virtually everywhere.

Liberating violence?

Arendt is rather sharp in her criticism of those who glorify violence: students, intellectuals, and revolutionary romantics alike. Coloured by the student revolts of the late 1960s, she writes that the "adherents of nonviolence

are on the defensive” and that “it would be futile to say that only the ‘extremists’ are yielding to a glorification of violence” (Arendt 1969/1970: 14).

Nor is she particularly impressed by Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to Frantz Fanon’s (1962/2007) anti-colonial work *The wretched of the earth*.

“To shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone . . . there remain a dead man and a free man”, says Sartre in his preface. This is a sentence Marx could never have written.

(Arendt 1969/1970: 13)

Arendt has little time for such “irresponsible grandiose statements”. Furthermore, she writes, Fanon is more ambiguous about violence than his admirers, which is also a point made in Erik Tängerstad’s introduction to the Swedish language edition of *The Wretched of the Earth* from 2007. Tängerstad (2007: 10) writes that viewing Fanon as a revolutionary theorist who praised violence in general is superficial and serves more to confuse than to clarify.

At the same time, Fanon’s book includes a powerful defence of the use of violence against the colonial powers – and Hannah Arendt, for her part, is far from being an idealist when it comes to non-violence in the face of onrushing soldiers. Arendt argues that while it may be difficult for an occupying power to achieve domination as long as there is some kind of political power in place that does not accept the occupation, it is by no means impossible. “Those who oppose violence with mere power will soon find that they are confronted not by men but by men’s artefacts [i.e. weapons]” (Arendt 1969/1970: 53).

Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* is a wide-ranging text. On the one hand it presents reflections that (1) justify the violence of the oppressed and view it as unavoidable; on the other hand, it is a (2) prophetic work, which formulates dreams of a new world, and a new human being, free of colonialism. The book also includes (3) detailed descriptions of colonial violence, including torture. Fanon certainly does not glorify *this* type of violence.

Frantz Fanon’s book was written during the Algerian war of independence (1954–1962), and its tone alternates between analysis and indignation. Fanon came from the West Indies and had trained to become a psychiatrist in Paris, before joining the Algerian resistance movement. He served as a senior physician in Blida, but then fled to Tunisia. He is most well-known for having coined the concept of the *third world*, a term which to begin with did not refer to a “third” world that existed in addition to a first and a second (often conceived of in terms of the East and West of the cold war, the USA, and the Soviet Union). Instead, Fanon’s use of the term focused on one-third of the world, or *Tiers Monde* in French. The term probably also included

a reference to the French *Tiers État*, or the Third Estate, that is the social stratum that lay behind the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century. The colonised “Third World” would soon turn the existing world order on its head, according to Fanon. And this would be achieved through violence (Tängerstad 2007: 12–14, 21).

Fanon’s writing was influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre. Both Sartre and Fanon felt that it would be impossible to dismantle colonial hegemony by peaceful means. Colonialism was institutionalised violence and could only be countered by violence. In some ways, the Algerians would become the heirs of the French Revolution and the “prodigious theses” on liberty that emerged from enlightenment Europe (Tängerstad 2007: 28). But these were now being turned against Europe, whose great powers were fighting to retain their colonies and did not realise the contradictions that these actions manifested.

Racism, slavery, exploitation, and extermination – *this* was the European heritage that Fanon was rejecting. Liberty, equality, and fraternity, should by contrast be shared by all. This “global modernity” would include the whole of humanity. But Sartre both hyperbolised and distorted this message by polarising “us” against “them” in his foreword (“us” in the west, “them” in the third world), a foreword that Fanon himself came to regret by all accounts (Tängerstad 2007: 31–32). Thus in Sartre’s account, Fanon appears anti-European in every sense and as an opponent of all forms of modernity. This was not in fact completely true.

Fanon speaks of decolonisation as a violent process. One “type” of person (the colonists) were to be replaced by another “type” (the colonised) in every area of society: government, police, the bureaucracy, sports clubs, and cocktail parties. This requires a comprehensive clear-out. Fanon (1963: 37) argues that when two powers confront one another in this way, violence becomes inevitable. Decolonising a country means crushing all obstacles, and being “ready for violence at all times”. It requires “using all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence”.

In the background lies the pattern of completely separate worlds that is produced by colonialism. The colonists and the colonised live apart from one another, work apart from one another and attend different schools. The disparities are obvious and dramatic. “The colonial world is a world cut in two” (Fanon 1963: 38). The extreme can be seen in the South African *apartheid* regime, with its systematic, racist divisions. These separate worlds are maintained through violence or the threat of violence. Fanon (1963: 38) writes that when the colonised wish to speak to the colonists, they must do this via the police officer or the soldier, for it is these who constitute “the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression”.

But the colonised subject does not merely want to talk to the colonists, he or she wants to take their place. The colonised want to sit at the colonists' tables, sleep in their beds, live in their houses. The oppressed dream of taking the power and glory from the white settlers, of "taking the place" of the colonist (Fanon 1963: 39). The colonial power, by contrast, likens the colonised to animals, which leads the colonised to "sharpen the weapons".

In other words, the colonist is the antagonist who must be pushed out of the way. The colonised act openly in relation to their countrymen, more inscrutably and with desperation in relation to their oppressors. The world of the white settlers is a "paradise close at hand" and this makes the violence comprehensible. Violence between countrymen, on the other hand, was for Fanon a failure, because it served as a distraction from the real problem (Fanon 1963: 52 pp.).

Fanon was not impressed by political parties or attempts at reform. The goals of reformist politicians were not compatible with the kind of radical change he was advocating. "The mass of the people" were not interested in gradual change that might give individuals greater chances for success. No, "what they demand is not the settler's position of status, but the settler's place" (Fanon 1963: 60). Since colonialism is itself violence, it will only bend to an even more powerful form of violence.

How, then, is the violence that hovers in the air transformed into action in a colonial context? Fanon says the following (1963: 71):

The settler who "understands" the native is made aware by several straws in the wind showing that something is afoot. "Good" natives become scarce; silence falls when the oppressor approaches; sometimes looks are black, and attitudes and remarks openly aggressive. The nationalist parties are astir, they hold a great many meetings, the police are increased and reinforcements of soldiers are brought in. The settlers, above all the farmers isolated on their land, are the first to become alarmed. They call for energetic measures. . . . The atmosphere becomes dramatic, and everyone wishes to show that he is ready for anything. And it is in these circumstances that the guns go off by themselves, for nerves are jangled, fear reigns and everyone is trigger-happy.

"The guns go off by themselves" – this is probably the clearest expression of Fanon's conviction that it is colonial oppression that produces violence, rather than any particular individual with a gun. Violence becomes justifiable, comprehensible and liberating; not specific incidents of violence – such as a shot fired at a certain French soldier by a certain Algerian freedom fighter – but rather violence *as a whole*, in the political situation. "Algerian criminality" is a result of the colonial situation (Fanon 1963: 306).

For Fanon, there can be no real change without violent struggle. In Hannah Arendt's (1969/1970: 52) terms, then, violence is portrayed as being both justified, since it is directed at the achievement of future goals, and legitimate, being based on an appeal to the past. A decolonised existence is viewed as being within reach, and the use of violence is in no way anything new – these are roughly the arguments used by Fanon to frame the violence of liberation.

Without violence, change can only be superficial:

Nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of the trumpets. There's nothing save a minimum of readaptation, a few reforms at the top, a flag waving: and down there at the bottom an undivided mass, still living in the middle ages.

(Fanon 1963: 147)

Thus when Fanon portrays the alternative to violence, he produces a neutralisation of the norms of non-violence. Those who refuse to participate, who hesitate to take up arms, can at best contribute to a refinement of the existing facade. The oppression will then be allowed to continue. In such a context it becomes very difficult to argue for gradual reform and peaceful mobilisation through political parties. Violence is portrayed as the natural choice. The radical nature of the rhetoric sweeps away any idea of negotiation and compromise.

Fanon's rhetoric is recognisable in Arendt's (1969/1970: 63) analysis. She writes that rage is not actually an automatic reaction to misery and suffering – it only arises where there is reason to suspect that conditions could be changed for the better. In such cases, a violent reaction may be the only means of satisfying an offended sense of justice, or it may at least be perceived in this way. Such a tendency towards the adoption of violence cannot be “cured”, Arendt argues, by any other means than by dehumanising and emasculating people. At the same time, glorified violence, and the intoxicating feeling of brotherhood or community that the use of violence can produce, is typical of youth.

Thus Arendt, unlike Fanon, does not speak in defence of violence but rather attempts to make it comprehensible on the basis of various elements described by Fanon. The defence itself becomes part of the phenomenon: the powerful words and accusations, the bitterness against the governing elite, the articulation of protest, the demands for justice and redress, and the collective sense of intoxication. The rhetoric about “violence being liberating” *itself constitutes part of the violence that is to be explained*, because the rhetoric itself serves to motivate the revolts and attacks of those involved.

It might now seem like a remarkably short step from this view of violence to the ethnographic tradition that studies the practices of criminal violence, far beyond the world of colonialism. Jack Katz (1988: chapter 1) describes how homicide is accompanied by a form of preconditioned justification, which is encapsulated into the act itself. The individuals who commit these acts of violence feel they are doing what is “right”, see themselves as defending something good, at least in the moment. Some form of “value” has been violated or attacked, and the individual adopts the use of violence to defend it, to “defend the good” (Ray 2011: 144). As described by Katz, this happens without any significant premeditation and often occurs in the home, or at least not at work. It is here that the emotional investment of the perpetrator of violence is greatest and where he or she therefore has more to lose. The defence – that is the violence – becomes extreme, “insane”, but nonetheless appears reasonable at the time. Humiliation is transformed into rage, Katz argues, a rage that defines and sustains the actor’s respectability.

In formal terms, this kind of ethnographic-phenomenological image of “justified” homicide – *righteous slaughter* – is strikingly similar to Fanon’s sketchy and indignant description of the violence of the colonised, which he, strictly speaking, presents as a form of counterviolence. Being “ready for anything” in Fanon’s terms involves feeling downtrodden and oppressed, excluded and emasculated, dehumanised, or completely ignored – Fanon is not alone in his view that such feelings and experiences promote violence. There is a formal similarity between Fanon’s “wretched” insurgents, and Katz’s humiliated killers. What distinguishes Fanon’s rallying cry from ethnography is its strategic political analysis, which in itself serves as a justification for violence. Katz does not argue that violence *is* a reasonable or necessary means of dealing with humiliation, but rather that killers interpret it as such. By contrast, Fanon argues that violence is both reasonable and necessary in order to deal with colonisation. Arendt, for her part, argues that violence is an extremely human reaction among the downtrodden.

Another question involves how the violence of liberation is implemented in practice. Even though it may be praised and idealised to begin with, and glorified after the event as a result of what it has achieved, it is far from certain that the practicalities of implementing this form of violence will reflect these beautiful or intoxicating dreams. In an interview with the military historian Antony Beevor (*Dagens Nyheter* 8 May 2015), the journalist and historian Henrik Berggren described having found Beevor’s description of the invasion of Normandy particularly oppressive (Beevor 2013). The invasion has often been described in heroic terms, as a crucial step in the defeat of Hitler and the liberation of Europe, as an example

of “counterviolence”. “The mass slaughter of young men of my son’s age disgusted me”, said Berggren. Antony Beevor answered,

Thank God our attitude to war has changed. Today there would be a public inquiry into Normandy, not least because so many soldiers were bombed and shot by their own side. But at the same time, an enormous effort was needed to gain a foothold in France and to subdue German resistance.

“I think I would have deserted”, said Henrik Berggren (2015). “At least if I’d had the chance to read your book”.

Some did. The pattern is the same in virtually all armies. A small group of soldiers actively participate in the fighting, perhaps even with enthusiasm, a large group keep their heads down and a few flee at the first opportunity. But people are also affected by how long they have been in battle. People have made calculations as to how long a human being can cope. American paratroopers who had shown extreme bravery broke down in the end, with some even committing suicide.

(Dagens Nyheter 9 May 2015)

If we accept then, that violence really can be liberating, that it is necessary in certain situations, and that certain systems of power can never be dismantled or even changed without violence – what does this mean for the perpetrator?

In the end, those who are assigned this task, or who themselves adopt it with enthusiasm, do not appear only to be “liberated”. And an analysis need not restrict its focus to rationalisations of political violence or the rhetorical context in which it is used; it may also examine the work of political violence. Beevor adopts a position which lies close to that of Collins (2008) and Malešević (2010) when he describes battles as frightening, arduous, emotionally punishing and relatively well-hidden from the general public – with only a small number of soldiers actively participating. At the level of detail, the practice does not live up to the ideal.

The work of the violence of oppression can also be hard, not least for the families of those implementing it. Fanon (1963: 275–277) describes a 21-year-old French student, whose father, a senior civil servant, had been killed in an ambush in Algeria. The student had “symptoms of anxiety” and contacted Fanon in his role as a doctor. But her distress was not due to the death of her father. On the contrary, this had come as a relief. Her father had thrown himself “into the Algerian manhunt with frenzied rage” in order to put down the revolt against the French. “I saw without being able to do anything about it the slow metamorphosis of my father”.

Every time the daughter visited her father, she lay awake all night listening to the screams of Algerians who were being tortured in the cellar and other parts of the house. In the end, she could no longer visit. She could not look her father in the face, she was so “terribly frightened and embarrassed” (Fanon 1963: 276–277).

The student knew the families in the village, and as a child she had played with their children. When she visited her father, he would tell her that a new batch of Algerians had been arrested. “In the end I didn’t dare walk in the street any more”, she said (according to Fanon), “I was so sure of meeting hatred everywhere. In my heart I knew that those Algerians were right. If I were an Algerian girl, I’d be in the Maquis” (Fanon 1963: 277).

When her father had been killed in the ambush by the Algerian army of liberation, the daughter was disgusted by the funeral, and the fine words of those in attendance. She couldn’t cope with their lies about her father’s “devotion, his self-sacrifice, his love for his country, and so on”. She refused the allowance she was offered.

Fanon could have made things easier for himself by avoiding descriptions of cases of this kind. Here he is pleading for sympathy for the *indirect* victims of colonial violence, such as the daughter of a French torturer during the war in Algeria, which undoubtedly makes it more difficult to (as Sartre does) divide the antagonists into an “us” and a “them”, good and evil.

As described by Fanon, the French civil servant’s daughter appears unfortunate in the way she is caught up in the final death throes of colonial rule. She is European and should be counted among the beneficiaries of colonialism, but is instead portrayed more as a victim. She is tormented by her experiences and is “liberated” *from her father* through the revolutionaries’ violence. Whichever way you look at it, this story of liberation leaves behind a sense of tragedy.

Notes

- 1 These examples are taken from media reports published on 17 September 2015.
- 2 For my doctoral dissertation in sociology, I collected narratives in a series of interviews with Swedish and Swedish-Polish businessmen in the region (Wästerfors 2004).
- 3 As is described by Applebaum (2012: 21), “Eastern Europe” became a political and historical rather than a geographical term (despite the name). The Baltic states, for example, were not counted as part of Eastern Europe because they had been incorporated into the Soviet Union. Nor was Greece included, despite its easterly position, since it never became communist. When the so-called Eastern Bloc eventually collapsed, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary among others labelled themselves Central European or simply European.
- 4 Cf. the phrase in the article “The Plot Against Hitler” (1944) in *Bulletin of International News* 21: 16: 626–632.

4 Violence as storytelling

It is clear that violence is a widely discussed phenomenon. And it seems to be very well suited to the narrative form, to storytelling.

A story revolves around something relatively dramatic. To be worth telling, a story will tend to focus on something that surprises us or sticks out, something that is different or that will at least attract some degree of attention. Stories are usually about something that breaks with the expected order (Bruner 1990/1998) or that challenges dramaturgical harmony (Burke 1945/1969: 15–19; Asplund 1980: 150–155). If we instead tell stories about what is predictable, routine, or uneventful, our audience will soon wonder whether the narrative has any point.

Violence is usually relatively dramatic and abnormal. If violence were instead to become widespread and everyday, we would have to tell stories about its opposite: “Last night, I have to tell you, nothing violent happened at all! It all started when Fabian put the beer bottles away”.

Arendt (1969/1970: 7) reminds us of the importance of viewing violence as *events* or “accidents”, that is as something that disturbs routine processes and procedures. As long as people engage in behaviour rather than actions, everything that happens is expected. By contrast, every event or accident “destroys” the possibility of such expectations or predictions, writes Arendt. In this sense violence is an action or accident – as a rule it tends to destroy people’s everyday predictions or expectations.

I have already presented and retold plenty of stories in this book. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon tells the story of the French civil servant who hunts Algerians and puts his daughter in a painful situation. Édouard Louis tells the story of his childhood in *The End of Eddy* and Bernd Freytag von Loringhoven tells the story of the plot to kill Hitler. Hydén uses oral stories to portray women’s subtle resistance against violent men. Applebaum builds a large part of her portrayal of history on individual stories, such as Jacek Fedorowicz’s description of the festival in Warsaw and Elfriede Brüning’s memories of rapes in Berlin.

Randall Collins uses a wide range of stories, drawn for example from slum areas, and soldiers' memories – yes, the work of these researchers as a whole may be viewed as stories. Lonnie Athens, for example, weaves his analysis together with the help of stories from violent criminals and in this way builds up an overarching narrative of his own. His analysis of the development of the violent specialist follows a clear narrative pattern: this happens first, then that, and then. . . .

What then might a narrative perspective on violence have to offer us? It is not a question of weighing one story against another in order to determine which is true (or “most” true). It is rather about learning from the portrayal. The ways in which people portray violence tells us something about violence – and perhaps also about many other things.

Reduction, necessity, and license

Lois Presser (2013) adopts an ambitious approach to narrative criminology in her book *Why we harm* (also see Presser & Sandberg 2015). With the help of stories that in various ways explain and motivate *harmful actions* – above all (but not exclusively) acts that harm other people – Presser seeks to expose a number of shared, collective logics. There are underlying patterns that are common to the ways in which we portray doing harm, argues Presser, and these patterns also serve to reproduce the harmful actions themselves.

Presser brings together stores from genocides and intimate partner violence, from the penal system, and from meat eaters. Meat eaters? Here Presser is moving on the margins of what we might have expected. She argues that people's narrative defences of the killing of animals are based on the same implicit principles that serve as the basis for their defence of the killing (or harming) of people. Given such a broad approach, it becomes possible to compare material from a range of very different fields. At the same time, the study becomes quite thin in relation to the individual fields themselves.

Presser (2013: 16) finds three narrative logics: (1) the target or victim of the harmful action is reduced, that is diminished and oversimplified, (2) the harmful action is portrayed as unavoidable or governed by a force beyond the actor's control, and (3) the actor is viewed as having permission to harm, a form of license.

Presser (2013: 25, 48) notes that the latter two logics (2 and 3) produce a power paradox. The actor is portrayed as being *both* freed from responsibility *and* empowered. He or she is both given control and at the same time loses it. Thus in Presser's view, a paradoxical component – powerlessness plus power – is built into the narrative portrayal of violence.

The three logics are found irrespective of the field of interest, argues Presser. The soldier during the genocide, the perpetrator of intimate partner

violence, the citizen arguing for tougher prison sentences, or unashamed meat eating – all fall back on these ways of portraying harmful action. Reduction, necessity and license guide the narrators. They start to believe what they are saying – and what they say motivates their actions. Presser (2013: 12) refers to Curtis Jackson-Jacobs (2013), who has studied physical fights from an ethnographic perspective (I will return to this study towards the end of the book). Combatants in physical fights may employ a form of provocative phrases and replies in order to get into the mood to fight. In a similar way, Presser argues that all violence is grounded in rhetoric.

The first narrative logic – reduction – is most clearly visible in stories of genocide. The anti-Semitism that resulted in the Holocaust, for example, involved a specific process of reduction (Presser 2013: 23). Jews were described as “subhumans”, “vermin”, and “rats”. The Nazi narrative dehumanised the target of their violence and ensured that the Jews were regarded as lacking any human value. It became possible to completely despise those who would fall victim to the violence of the Holocaust, and to do anything at all to them. And during the genocide in Rwanda, the Tutsi were labelled cockroaches and dogs – and even “pathetic little nobodies” or “less-than-nothings” (Presser 2013: 34; Hatzfeld 2003).

Victims of intimate partner violence are reduced in a similar way – they may be called “whores” or “bitches” – and the perpetrators of the violence draw a sharp distinction between their own status and that of the partner who is assaulted. The military language used to describe drone strikes is also dehumanising. The people who are targeted are called “objects” and given names such as “Brandy”, “Post Mortem”, “Lethal Aspen”, and “Ribeye”.¹ And we have already seen that the colonist – if we return for moment to Frantz Fanon – likened the colonised to animals.

Reduction can even allow an actor to deny that any harm at all is being done. The meat eater reduces the cow or the pig to something else: pork, bacon, steak – “things whose purpose in life is to be eaten” (Presser 2013: 51–55). “When you look at the meat section [in a food store], you’re looking for a good-looking steak”, said one of the interview subjects. “You don’t think of the cow itself”.

Several of those interviewed by Presser said that they would not be able to eat the meat of an animal they had known. It therefore becomes logical for them to use a powerfully reductive rhetoric when talking about food animals (Presser 2013: 51). The animals have to remain unknown – nameless, characterless, and unnoticed. In a similar way, those interviewed reduced all criminals to just criminals and were thus able to motivate the harm produced by prison sentences. Prison inmates were not spoken of in the same way as other people, but were instead reduced to the crimes they had committed or been accused of. Their crimes gave these individuals a *master status* as criminals, that is an ascribed status that overpowers everything

else and that in this context justifies harsh treatment. (Here, Presser (2013: 95) is using the concept first coined by Everett C. Hughes.)

Thus Lois Presser's work ranges across a broad spectrum of phenomena: genocide and intimate partner violence, violence against animals, and the violence of modern punishment. The reader is thrown this way and that, and Presser's book can leave one feeling almost a little seasick. In the end, however, she succeeds in establishing her logics, precisely because of the shifts in focus. The "narrative of harming" does indeed appear to have common characteristics, such as the reduction of the target of the harm. The target of the harm "is not like us". He, she, or it is viewed as different, less complex, simpler, or less human (Presser 2013: 22–23). By not restricting herself to illegal acts (meat eating and locking up convicted criminals are both very legal), Presser attempts to unite all stories about the-harm-we-must-accept and the-harm-that-is-right.

Presser's second and third logics are, as already noted, linked together in a paradox. The harm is portrayed as both necessary *and* permitted. The actor who produces the harm "must" harm the target, but is also "right" to do so.

A sense of necessity has been identified by many of the researchers cited by Presser, such as Jack Katz and David Matza, for example. Katz (1988) spoke of violent crime as "seducing" individuals and temporarily "blinding" them to their futures. Matza spoke of a fatalistic mood among young offenders which allowed them to "drift" away from moral restrictions. Neutralisations of one's actions (e.g. by denying the victim, injury or responsibility, or by condemning the contemners or appealing to higher loyalties; Sykes & Matza 1957) then become social tools that are cultivated and employed within the group (Presser 2013: 42–44). Presser attempts to unite these observations with her own findings regarding a recurrent style of storytelling. She also refers to Gustav Le Bon, who argued that crowds can eliminate the individual's capacity for independent action and thus lead to actions that individuals would never have engaged in on their own. Presser argues that she sees tendencies of this kind in stories about genocide, from Rwanda for example, where the soldiers say they were "carried away" in a tumult, an uproar, and a collective commotion (Presser 2013: 42; Hatzfeld 2003: 120).

And the same logic is found in stories about partner violence. The perpetrator "lost his self-control", was "provoked" by the victim, or was "forced" to respond to the victim's control efforts, and so on (Presser 2013: 76). The narrators find themselves hemmed into a corner and are *forced*, by necessity, to turn to violence. At the same time, as we have already noted, they feel that they are *right*, as the stories are articulated. The partner "should" be punished and disciplined, the criminal "must" be incarcerated and corrected, humans "were made to" kill and eat animals. The people who are

exterminated in a genocide are portrayed as a rapidly growing threat, an ever-greater danger.

Who's talking about people?

Presser's limited fund of explicit stories sometimes makes it quite easy to find weaknesses in her narrative criminology. The meat-eaters who were interviewed in Presser's study, for example, do not directly tell stories but rather present fairly tepid arguments. Anything else would be a surprise, at least in American contexts, where eating meat is nothing controversial (Lois Presser is American). A meat-eater is rarely if ever called into question in the same way as a participant in genocide or a wife-beater. Why should a meat-eater even bother telling stories, when eating meat is not viewed as deviant or dramatic, and why should eating meat be guided by narratives? Animals are killed and eaten with no regard whatsoever for meat-eating narratives.

Presser's book is generally remarkably empty of stories of the kind "first this happened, and then that happened". The narrative logics are the focus of attention, not people's portrayals of a series of events in dialogue with others (cf. Riessman 2008: 3, 135–136). Presser is in this book more interested in the principles that may be found in storytelling than in the storytelling as such, despite the fact that it is construed as governing people's actions.

Having said this, these logics are nonetheless illuminating. Once they have sunk in, you can identify them in many different contexts. As has been noted, Presser argues that people's stories form their future actions. We could probably just as reasonably say the reverse: people explain *the actions they have already taken* by means of a form of storytelling – and they explain the actions of others in the same way: historical, ongoing, and fictional. Whenever violence is to be made to appear comprehensible, defensible, credible – as being reasonable despite being wrong – reduction, necessity, and license become very useful.

One example can be seen in Astrid Lindgren's (1981) children's fantasy book *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*. Matt's band of robbers have just captured Birk, the son of Matt's rival Borka, and Ronia's secret friend. Birk is now lying with his hands and feet tied, "with blood on his forehead and desperation in his eyes" (Lindgren 1981: 121). Ronia's father Matt wants to use the kidnapped Birk to force Borka and his band to leave the abandoned part of Matt's fortress to which they have fled from the sheriff's men in the forest.

Matt and his band are overjoyed. They have placed a rope around Birk's neck, "and Matt was holding the rope in his hand as if he were leading a dog" (Lindgren 1981: 126). When Lovis (Ronia's mother) wants to clean the wound on Birk's forehead, Matt roars: "Don't you lay a hand

on the snake fry!” “Snake fry or no”, answers Lovis, “this wound must be washed!” Ronia also protests against the treatment of Birk and strikes Matt “with balled fists”, “wherever she could reach”. “You beast, you can’t do that!” (Lindgren 1981: 125, 121).

So Birk is called a “snake fry” and is led like a dog on a leash. An act of caring – Lovis wanting to clean the wound – is repudiated with a reduction, and Ronia herself also engages in reduction when she strikes her father. She calls him a “beast”. Matt’s robbers also call Birk “little Borkason” and in doing so transform him into something other than a person in his own right. He is ascribed only a single characteristic: being Borka’s son. And Borka is the enemy.

The degradation of Birk is seen most clearly when Ronia objects to it (Lindgren 1981: 124).

“You can’t rob people”, says Ronia:

“You can go robbing all the money and goods and rubbish you want, but you can’t rob people, because if you do I don’t want to be your daughter anymore”.

“Who’s talking about people?” said Matt, his voice unrecognizable. “I’ve caught a snake fry, a louse, a little thieving hound, and I am going to get my father’s fortress cleaned out at last. Then you can be my daughter or not just as you choose.

“Beast!” shrieked Ronia [in the Swedish original: *tvi dej!*, meaning *shame on you!*]

“Who’s talking about people?” When Matt captures Birk, beats him bloody and ties him up, Birk is portrayed as no longer being human – at least by the person subjecting him to violence. For her part, Ronia objects to this reduction and also to the necessity of the violence, and the license to use it. In the end, she offers to reduce herself to someone other than Matt’s daughter. You could say that she takes over Matt’s degradational practice and applies it to herself, in a gesture of demonstrative sarcasm. “Look what happens, Dad, if your perspective were to prevail!”

Ronia, the Robber’s Daughter eventually ends in a reconciliation between Matt’s and Borka’s bands of robbers, thanks to the friendship of Ronia and Birk. Prior to this however, as has been shown, we see Matt and his robbers motivating their violence against Birk in terms of dehumanisation. Birk is a snake fry, a little thieving hound, and so on. Kidnapping him is not the same as kidnapping a person. And who was talking about people? Ronia, of course – and Astrid Lindgren.

Because *Ronia, the Robber’s Daughter* is fiction, none of this actually happened. Matt never captured Birk and nobody was beaten or tied up.

My point is thus not that of showing how a robber might argue for the use of violence with the help of Lois Presser's narrative logics. The point is rather to demonstrate that Astrid Lindgren, the author, uses these logics to depict violence in a comprehensible way. If in the novel, Matt had *not* called Birk "a snake fry" or "a little thieving hound", Matt's violence would immediately have become more difficult to understand. As it is now, we as readers can understand him (*Matt* is humanised), even though we take Ronia's side.

And Ronia's violence against Matt, when she loses her temper and hits him, also becomes comprehensible. In her eyes he becomes a "beast" who is attacking her best friend. Who would not have set upon their father in the same situation? The reduction of Birk to a snake fry and a thieving hound is disturbing. But it nonetheless creates clarity in Matt's actions. Matt's dehumanisation of Birk and Borka's robbers stands in contrast to Ronia's rehumanisation – and the violence is acted out in the tension between these two positions.

Astrid Lindgren then leads the reader towards the story's resolution. The moral of the story becomes clear and Ronia is shown to be right. Matt's bitterness is dispelled and the Borka robbers are acknowledged as people in their own right.

I wrote earlier that Astrid Lindgren "uses" Presser's logics. But this is not necessarily done consciously. The example from *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter* may rather be a manifestation of the "deep and collectively shared" logics that condition society, as Presser (2013: 1) describes them, that is logics that we relate to and act upon without having to reflect about them.

A writer like Astrid Lindgren falls back on reduction, necessity, and license in her portrayal of fictional violence in the same way that the perpetrators of non-fictional violence do so in their own portrayals. If Matt had been portrayed in a different way, if his actions and speech had instead emphasised Birk's many and unique characteristics instead of "summarising" him as "Borkason" and a snake fry, Matt's violence would probably have appeared to be much crazier, and perhaps even incomprehensible. Lindgren's literary work manifests an established cultural rhetoric that is used to explain violence (Presser 2013: 19).

Hopefully this has shown the contribution that a narrative perspective can make. A narrative perspective allows us to survey a broad field of stories – oral and written, academic and mundane, fictional and documentary (or texts with such pretensions). The differences between the stories told in *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter* and by politicians, soldiers, or criminals do not cease to exist, but it becomes possible to observe similarities across these different types of narrative material. Portrayals of violence appear to have certain common denominators.

The Matt, Ronia and Birk example is also illustrative of Presser's power paradox. In this portrayal, Matt – as the "defender of violence" – becomes

both free and fettered. He appears as both potent and empowered, as the leader of his robber band. He is an independent actor who drives the story forwards and whose specific actions cannot be predicted. He is not engaging in “behaviour”, in Arendt’s terminology, he is taking action.

But he is also submerged in a generation-long family rivalry and is thus a prisoner in his own story. He is swimming around in a reservoir of hostility (Presser 2013: 14), in much the same way as a politician engaged in a long-standing military struggle. He lacks the ability to liberate himself. A power paradox takes form.

Singular identities

One of Lois Presser’s logics is a central element in Amartya Sen’s (2006) philosophical treatise *Identity and violence*. Amartya Sen argues that reduction – the *miniaturisation* of people – promotes violence. And here it is not merely a question of individual actions but rather of large-scale struggles between classes, ethnicities, countries, and religions. Portraying people reductively serves to spur armed conflict. Amartya Sen refers to a range of different fields of conflict that were current at the time he wrote his book: Kosovo, Bosnia, Rwanda, Timor, Israel-Palestine, and Sudan.

Amartya Sen’s argument is roughly as follows. Every time the world is described as being divided into conflicting categories, the person responsible for the description has oversimplified things. The world might perhaps be described as a conflict between civilisations, religions or cultural spheres of influence, as a collision between peoples, nations, or races. Such descriptions are based on a strange assumption, namely that there is an overarching system that provides a foundation for the relevant division of the world, and on the basis of which people are easy to categorise.

Such descriptions presuppose *a single* system of this kind. Every individual is ascribed a singular identity. People are viewed as being members of exactly one group (Sen 2006: xii).

Singular identities serve particularly well when it comes to misunderstanding people, argues Sen. In our everyday lives, however, we view ourselves as members of several different groups. One and the same person can be an American citizen, have a Caribbean background and African relatives – and at the same time be Christian, liberal, vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a teacher, a feminist, and a daughter. In practice, none of these identities can be taken as the individual’s only identity. A singular identity is thus unreasonable, but such an identity can nonetheless be invoked and foisted on a person, particularly by someone who is trying to fuel a conflict. The person in question is a Christian, not a Muslim, and making this identity *the only one* can result in powerful demands on the individual to act. A form

of identity mobilisation occurs. The individual is reduced and contrasts are made sharper.

Thus Amartya Sen is not trying to say “we are all the same” and “we should therefore get along”. “No”, he says, “we are all different”, and hope is found in understanding pluralism. Across a myriad of differences, some form of similarity will as a rule be visible. By contrast, in the context of a process of miniaturisation, all affiliations bar one are drowned out, which serves to intensify conflicts.

Al Qaeda, for example, rely on the cultivation and exploitation of a *single* identity, a militant Islamic identity, which is contrasted with a similarly oversimplified Western identity (Sen 2006: xvi). This dichotomy sweeps away everything else: citizenship, place of residence, origins, gender, class, occupation, employment, hobbies, and so on. People’s eating habits, sporting interests, taste in music, and consumption patterns are made irrelevant. Nothing mundane is found in the narratives about Al Qaeda (neither in the organisation’s own narratives, nor their opponents’), nothing apparently trivial that might cast any doubt upon the All-Important Clash.

In practice, Sen writes (2006: xiii), identity pluralism is unavoidable. In this pluralism there lies a form of hidden and surprising community. A person must of course often make a decision about the importance to be ascribed to one identification in relation to another, that is which affiliation should be ascribed the most importance (Sen 2006: 19). In this sense, there is competition between different identities. But the choice is contextual, that is, it shifts depending on the situation and the environment. The choice may be subtle and mundane, such as joining a group of smokers on a balcony, and thus emphasising one’s identity as a “smoker”, but it may also be explicit and awe-inspiring.

Amartya Sen (2006: 30, 165 pp.) uses the example of Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, who explicitly prioritised his identity as an independence-seeking Indian over his identity as a well-educated lawyer, and thus as an advocate of British law. The conflict situation impelled and required a distillation of Gandhi’s identity, but behind this distillation lay a plurality of identities. Gandhi also advocated pluralism in his politics, for example by refusing to oversimplify the Indian population in terms of religious distinctions. Other distinctions, he argued, were at least as important (such as gender and class).

Amartya Sen’s argument is simple but illuminating. Time and again, he lays bare the pluralism that is usually brushed away. A singular categorisation often serves a mobilising function, whereas a reminder of pluralism is less likely to promote violence. It is not as easy to go to war with someone with whom you have something in common. India is not only a “Hindu civilisation”, writes Sen, and democracy is actually not an essentially Western

idea. In fact, ancient Greece had links to ancient Iran, India, and Egypt (Sen 2006: 52). Not all Muslims or Christians are the same. Life is not mere “des-tiny”, argues Sen, and those who argue otherwise are guilty of “descriptive poverty” (Sen 2006: 46). When Samuel Huntington (1993: 35) speaks of “the clash of civilisations” and “the West against the rest”, he ignores both the internal differences that exist within the same civilisation and the ties that exist between different civilisations.

In Amartya Sen’s work, singular identities emerge as a highly narrative phenomenon. Someone has to narrate them into existence. Someone else, like Amartya Sen, may object, and such objections are also a narrative phenomenon. Because at the same time as Sen describes the miniaturisation of identity, he simultaneously produces a corresponding magnification and pluralisation – showing the multitude of human identifications. Astrid Lindgren’s Ronia makes use of the same narrative tactics when she protests against Matt’s actions against Birk. Ronia’s angry protests are very similar to Amartya Sen’s arguments, an attack on the reduction of identities and those who disseminate such reductions. (“Tvi dej!” *Shame on you!*) Here we have what I would like to call the *riposte to reductionism*.

On the basis of the work of Randall Collins and the situational challenge, we might of course ask how Amartya Sen can really know that singular identities serve to promote violence (cf. Malešević 2010 and his scepticism to the causal effects of war propaganda). His book is not a research study, and he does not present any detailed evidence for mechanisms of the type “reducing identities produces violence”. The similarities with the work of Lois Presser are nonetheless striking, and Presser’s arguments for the relationship are based on empirical data. We can probably say that singular identities facilitate violence, but that a more hands-on situation, in Collins’, Katz’ (and Malešević’s) terms, is also required, that is the immediate conditions must be “good”, in order to circumvent people’s customary and spontaneous tendency towards non-confrontation. In the final analysis, all singular identities cannot be said to give rise to physical attacks.²

One clear example of the collective manufacture of singular identities can be found in the phenomenon of nationalism. All those within the borders of given country are to come together under the same flag, and a broad range of characteristics are to be formed on the basis of a single affiliation: language, culture, history, loyalty and hostility. In its most powerful form, nationalism leaves almost no space for competing intra-national identities, even though these are found beneath the surface.

And, of course nationalism has its critics. When the German musicians Einstürzende Neubauten were asked to write a piece of music to mark the anniversary of World War I (the album *Lament*, from 2014), the musicians chose to include a national anthem which, perhaps remarkably, was shared

by several of the participants in the war, such as the British, Germans, and Canadians. *God Save the King* (or *Queen*) was a song that was sung by several categories of subjects at this time, and that had previously also been sung by Russians. In *Einstürzende Neubauten*'s version, the language shifts between German and English, which gives a surreal sense of national confusion.

Thus the citizens of nation states sang to the same tunes, but using different words. Today, more than one hundred years after the outbreak of the war, the band members of *Einstürzende Neubauten* seem roughly to be saying that we may just as well blend everything together.

The irony of nationalist miniaturisation could probably not be illustrated any more clearly. A single sobering melody united many of the combatants of World War I, but in different, warring armies. When the singular identity of nationalism was intensified prior to the bloody work of World War I trenches, this took place in a somewhat bizarre mirroring of the parallel efforts of others.

A singular identity may claim to be unique, but its form may be strikingly similar to the singular identities of others.

“Violence on the rise”

Thus those who defend and engage in violence may need a recognisable narrative. But the same is true of those who *worry* about violence. For example, a persistent narrative of rising and increasingly serious violent crime in society can fill an important function. Such a narrative identifies a problem that attracts the focus of everybody's attention. It unites the collective, and brings calls for action. Violent crime is on the rise! This is terrible! Something must be done.

The level of tolerance towards violence has decreased over time, laying a foundation for waves of indignation. During the 19th century, for example, society was full of legal violence that would today give rise to outrage: violence in families and schools, the violence of the master of the house against his wife and servants, violence within the military, in childcare and the prison system (von Hofer 2008: 45; see Liliequist 2001, on the legitimate violence of men in marriage and within the family). Since this time, violence has been *deprivatised* and has become a public issue, a growing problem – at the same time as the use of violence has in practice declined.

As Felipe Estrada (2010) shows, the amount of attention directed at youth violence has increased in Sweden since the mid-1980s. The level of youth violence itself has not increased however. The trend instead seems to be due to a shift in the focus of our attention, and in the types of explanation that are formulated. While attention was previously focused on youths' theft crime,

it is now instead directed at their violent offending. While youth violence was previously explained in terms of “problem youth”, it is today explained in terms of ruthlessness and callousness. Previously, the social narrative on youth crime linked young people’s offending to modifiable social conditions. Today, descriptions of youth crime are formulated in a more moralistic and condemnatory tone. While schools previously dealt with incidents of violence themselves, they today report almost everything to the police.³

The change can inter alia be seen in the articles on youth crime published in Sweden’s daily newspapers and in the journal *Skolvärlden* (*School World*), and also in a general increase in the propensity to report offences to the police. Estrada argues, for example, that the increased number of reported cases of violence at school during the 1990s was primarily due to an increased reporting propensity among school staff (see also von Hofer 2008: 48). Forms were printed in advance that could then be filled in and faxed to the police. Estrada contrasts this with earlier routines, when schools had been expected to resolve conflicts at school without involving the police.

Estrada’s data also show that when the number of reported assaults against children aged 7–14 increased during the period 1981–1997, more serious incidents of violence, that is incidents that resulted in injury or required immediate medical treatment, accounted for only two percent. The largest proportion (61 percent) of reported incidents related to violence that had produced bruising, but that had not required any medical attention. These incidents had not been visible in the statistics prior to the point at which they started being reported. We could perhaps say that violent incidents had previously been “under-reported”, or that violence today is “over-reported”, but it is difficult to know for sure whether the nature of the violent incidents themselves has changed.

What has changed, Estrada argues, is that society’s definition of the “correct” response to crime changed from the 1980s onwards. Instead of viewing long periods of incarceration as problematic, a tough and distinct response to crime is now lauded. The crime victim is to be given redress, society is to be protected. Tolerance for violence is declining (whereas tolerance for theft appears to be increasing), and this is linked to an increased reporting propensity, increased attention in the media and the introduction of stiffer sentences in the criminal justice system. A declining proportion of young offenders are given waivers of prosecution, for example (Estrada 2010: 326).

It is not that we are witnessing what might be termed a moral panic in relation to the “rising violence”, but rather a self-reinforcing production of meaning. The increase in the level of attention focused on violence is perceived as being a reflection of reality, and thus *becomes* part of that reality.

Politicians react to the image of crime that is portrayed, and in doing so contribute to further reinforcing this image (Estrada 2010: 327).

The media coverage of crime has expanded dramatically and elicits a powerful fascination among viewers and readers. Today we can almost follow criminal investigations being broadcast live (and sometimes even crimes), and this has consequences for the way we view crime. Criminologists refer to statistics and sources of statistical error, but there are plenty of other channels that can be used to convince the public: violence is defined as on the rise and this is terrible (Estrada 2010: 320–321).

Felipe Estrada (2010: 330) argues that the narrative on rising violence serves a social function. It may be used by politicians to “redirect” people’s general sense of insecurity in the face of what the future might hold. This feeling can be channelled into fear of crime. A fear of crime discourse is established, despite the fact that crime in Sweden is generally not increasing (Sahlin Lilja 2022: 25), even though deadly gun violence is an exception (Sarnecki 2022: 32–34).⁴ Any vague sense of worry or threat may crystallise into a focus on something much clearer – the criminals, violence! – and is at the same time also furnished with a clear solution: incarceration.

Criminologists pose the question, however, when are punishments sufficiently severe? When will politicians who “anxiously rely on public opinion surveys” be satisfied? (Estrada 2010: 331; Jerre & Tham 2010). In more carefully calibrated surveys, the public appear to be less repressive than the politicians who refer to them.

A sense of threat linked to foreigners or people from other ethnic backgrounds can also be channelled into a fear of crime discourse. Offence types for which ethnic minorities are overrepresented may start to be described as being caused by these ethnic groups. As the analysis ignores other factors, such as family conditions, economic conditions, residential segregation, marginalisation, and stigmatisation, it is easy to produce a highly polarised view. Estrada (2010: 331) writes:

There is a risk that the “majority population” and “immigrants” start to view one another with greater suspicion. “Swedes” view “immigrants” as criminal, workshy, welfare parasites. “Immigrants” view “Swedes” as racists who support a society that discriminates against people purely on the basis of their origins. The exploitation of the crime issue plays a very clear role in this process.

“The exploitation of the crime issue” – here it becomes clear that violence as storytelling can be analysed as a political instrument. “Things used to be wonderful, but now there is violence everywhere” – this narrative can

mobilise people and set them against one another. Those who have an established position in society are set against those who are *outsiders* and this occurs with the help of a certain definition of violence as a social problem. The use of violence is ascribed to specific categories within the population, and these can then be cast out, vilified and mythologised.

Estrada refers to a study by Stuart Hall and his colleagues in the UK, which examined the way in which a media focus on street violence was exploited by politicians (Hall et al. 1978). The focus of the media's attention was directed at young black men, which led to an increase in the level of control focused on the black population more generally. "In this way, increased levels of control were simultaneously directed at the poor, the unemployed and their children" (Estrada 2010: 331). An image of "rising violence" that energises politicians may also lead to entire social strata becoming a focus for increased levels of control, despite the fact that only a small number of individuals within these strata are actually committing acts of violence.

Malin Åkerström (1998) also argues that an increase in the attention focused on violence serves a social function. She identifies the same period as that described by Estrada – from the middle of the 1980s – as being formative for a moral crusade against violence in Sweden. Although levels of reported violence only increased relatively marginally during this period, the media coverage increased dramatically. The murder of Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986 became a form of cultural exclamation mark. "This doesn't happen in Sweden", "Violence has now arrived even here".

Åkerström (1998: 324) interprets the attention focused on violence in relation to the Swedish self-image. Sweden is viewed as orderly, calm, peaceful, and safe. Violence belongs somewhere else. But now it had arrived, and furthermore in forms that were argued to be quite new: "unprovoked violence" and "meaningless violence". The media spoke of violence in the definite article "the violence" – as if it represented a distinct, independent force.

But it was not a case of general moral panic, argues Åkerström. No widespread public concern became established, and there was no increase in the fear of crime. Participants in surveys reported that *others* were fearful, but not themselves. The same survey participants also reported that *others* had probably adapted their behaviour, but they themselves continued to live their lives in the same way as before. A survey conducted among 16–18-year-old youths in the city of Halmstad in southern Sweden, for example, showed that 37 percent of the participants believed that others were carrying weapons in response to the purported increase in violence. But when the youths were asked whether they personally knew anyone who carried a weapon,

the proportion was much smaller. Only one percent answered yes to this question. Similarly, the youths in Halmstad also said that others had become more fearful than themselves. A survey conducted in the city of Helsingborg produced similar results (Åkerström 1998: 330).

Åkerström also describes the results of a large survey from Denmark, which had been conducted in 1986–1987 in a similar media climate and which had led to similar conclusions. While the media and politicians focused their attention on violence, the citizens' everyday lives carried on as usual. They focused on other matters: work, illness, relatives, food, travel, and so on (Balvig 1990).

With the help of such examples, Åkerström shows that (a) people do not necessarily become fearful (or arm themselves) as a result of the media starting to produce large numbers of stories about violence, (b) people nonetheless start to engage in a form of *dialogue* with the narratives presented by the media. People believe that others become fearful, that others are being victimised, that others are adapting their behaviour, and so on. Violence becomes an important and urgent subject of debate.

Åkerström writes that during this period, violence became a topic of conversation that ordinary people could neither avoid nor question. It became difficult to express opinions such “I don't think things are so bad”. The media dramaturgy that was staged in relation to “the violence” of the period starting in the mid-1980s functioned as a “communication transmitter” of manufactured general attitudes in society at large (Åkerström 1998: 335).

As is shown by Estrada and Åkerström, then, we can compare media and politicians' portrayals of violence on the one hand, and portrayals drawn from everyday life on the other. The one cannot be entirely separated from the other, but nor can they be viewed as identical. In an analysis of narratives of worry about violence, analysts can move back and forth between different types of material: media portrayals and everyday portrayals, the alarm expressed by politicians and the scepticism of criminologists. Everything that is formulated in this area appears to be in dialogue with other formulations.

In one sense we have now moved away from the narratives of those who commit acts of violence and have instead moved towards the narratives of those who observe violence, that is societal dramatisations of events that take place on our streets. The observers borrow from the media in order to manifest surprise and outrage, and to come together and mobilise.

In another sense, at least one aspect of the narratives of the perpetrators of violence has been transferred to these narratives of worry, namely the sense of the extraordinary, the striking and the dramatic. In all events, violence appears as something that needs to be explained. What is happening? And why?

Safe little Sweden

In Malin Åkerström's cultural analysis, "the violence" throws orderly Swedish society into disarray. Violence is portrayed as something completely alien to Swedish society, something that has come from somewhere else, which motivates the involvement of moral entrepreneurs. The collision is a dramatic one, between safe little Sweden and "the violence", and provides the basis for a highly illustrative analysis of a nation's self-image.

But there are also counter-narratives. One example is found in a book by the artist Steve Nyberg, which presents ironic postcards on the "Safe Little Sweden" theme. Each postcard presents a violent event from the past in the form of an apparently harmless cartoon. When I interviewed Steve Nyberg for this book, he pointed out that the drawing style is known as "clear line". Using clear lines, Nyberg has illustrated one violent Swedish event after another, much like in a Tintin comic book.⁵

On one postcard, a well-dressed gentleman is seen storming into a town-hall courtroom with two pistols at the ready. The man is wearing a bowler hat and the assembled onlookers appear shocked. The incident took place in 1936, when Axel Ragnar Willén shot wildly around during a divorce case at the Nyköping town hall. He killed the municipal prosecutor, who had barred



Figure 4.1 One of Steve Nyberg's postcards from the "Safe Little Sweden" series: Axel Ragnar Willén storms into the Nyköping town hall with two pistols in 1936.

Willén from practising law in the town, and also the man who was there to get a divorce. Willén then shot himself in the head.

Another postcard shows a number of men jumping from a truck with coshes in their hands. The focus is directed at a number of buildings in the slum district of the town of Jönköping where the “tinkers”, that is members of the traveller community, lived during the 1940s. The picture relates to a private dispute that occurred in 1948 between a scrap merchant named Bengtsson and a number of adversaries, a dispute that was amplified, ethnified, and intensified by the surrounding community and the newspapers. “Backed up by large crowds”, writes Nyberg, “Bengtsson’s private dispute instead became a final reckoning between the people of Jönköping and the slum’s “tinkers”. With coshes and other weapons they went from house to house attacking everyone they could lay their hands on”.⁶

Steve Nyberg produced one postcard a month for a while, as well as longer comic strips about other events. He has probed into cases from Sweden’s history in order “to show that things weren’t better in the past”, he says. Above all, he sees his work as a remonstrance with the image presented in both the mainstream and social media. He wants to “remind people about the past”. His focus is directed at “the collective image that we have and want to have”, that is, our image of Sweden. “Here things are calm and cosy”. “Nobody is angry with anyone”. He also wants to protest against the idea that “the violence” has somehow been introduced to Sweden in connection with the immigration witnessed over recent decades. Violence is every bit as Swedish as it is foreign.

Through his choice of the clear line style, the message is made both soft and sharp. Sweden in fact has a long history of extreme and spectacular violent events, but many of these either are completely unknown to the general population or have been half-forgotten. There is no reason for people to base their current fear on a view of how things were in the past, Nyberg argues, because just as many terrible things happened then as happen now. Even in the past, people thought that things had been better in the past.

Thus here we can see an alternative narrative, which poses a challenge to the common conception of Sweden. In the terminology of Lois Presser and Amartya Sen, Steve Nyberg’s work constitutes a protest against narrative reduction and singular identities. His cartoons attempt to show that Sweden cannot be reduced to a peaceful environment and that “Swedishness” is not synonymous with “non-violent”. Sweden is much more complex and multi-faceted. A Swedish identity also includes violence.

“Imagine if it were to happen here!” This was the Swedish response to the terror attack against the editorial offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in 2015. “But it has already happened”, says Steve Nyberg. In one cartoon series, he portrays the bomb attack on the journal *Norrskensflamman* in

Luleå in 1940. Against the backdrop of the Winter War in Finland, a group of radicalised pro-Swedes placed a bomb at the printers in order to protect the Swedish nation against communist propaganda. Five people who lived in the same building were killed.

Another narrative – and again one which is relatively dark and violent – can be found in the book *Svensk historia* (*Swedish History*) written by historians Olle Larsson and Andreas Marklund (2012). When their historical account – which begins with King Gustav Vasa in the 1520s – reaches the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, we find the heading “Crises, hatred and men with weapons”. The writers are referring to the economic crisis that Sweden experienced at the beginning of the 1990s, with the unemployment rate rising to over 12 percent in 1994. “The crisis fuelled xenophobic sentiment, which not only the Ny Demokrati party, but also more militant right-wing groups attempted to exploit” (Larsson & Marklund 2012: 352). During the 1990s, refugees from the collapsing Yugoslavia, together with more established immigrants from the Middle East and Africa become “useful scapegoats”.

Larsson and Marklund write that a wave of racist violence swept across the country. Refugee reception centres were attacked with Molotov cocktails and other homemade incendiary devices. The so-called Laser Man, John Ausonius, shot people of foreign appearance in Stockholm, using a laser-sighted gun. “Sweden has been shaken by other racially motivated homicides and attacks during the past twenty years”. The historians mention the serial shooter Peter Mangs in Malmö, and the terror bomber Taimour Abdulwahab in Stockholm.⁷ The latter only succeeded in killing himself, however.

Thus Larsson and Marklund formulate a modern-day history characterised by crisis, the threat of terrorism, racism, and xenophobic violence that has continued up to the present day. At the time this book is being written, refugee reception centres are again burning, and acts of racist violence are being committed. The difference between today and the 1980s appears to be a new politicisation. The violence is no longer regarded as unfocused and meaningless (like the “youth violence” of the 1980s) but rather as ideological. Commentators speak of hatred and ideology rather than anomie and moral decline. Perpetrators of violence utilise explicitly racist justifications, and the commentators latch on.

Are there any similarities between the image of society from the 1980s and that found in Larsson and Marklund’s history of the present day? The answer is yes, the similarities lie in *their alarmistic tone* and the way both *view the past as having been idyllic*.

The irony is that this becomes particularly clear in the book *Swedish History*, which in its entirety describes what can only be viewed as a very violent past: the Stockholm Bloodbath, the country’s involvement in the

Thirty Years' War, the witch trials of the 17th century, the Great Northern War at the end of Sweden's period of great power status, the murder of King Gustav III, and so on.

The heading "Crises, hatred and men with weapons" could equally have been used to describe *several* periods of Swedish history – and probably with much greater validity than in its use to describe the period from 1989.

Notes

- 1 See the interview with Edward Snowden in *Dagens Nyheter* from 6 November 2015. "It is military language, everything becomes acronyms, everything is reformulated to sound better." "You don't want to think about the fact that you're actually killing people, that these people maybe have a family. You want to think of them as objects, as targets, as a puzzle." (Sundström 2015).
- 2 Organisation, discipline, and the encouragement of an audience – on the basis of Collins' perspective, the conditions that promote violence can take many forms. But we could also say that Sen's singular identities have a place in Collins' theory, for example when he notes that people may already be divided into powerfully antagonistic group identities before a fight breaks out (Collins 2008: 11).
- 3 Hanns von Hofer (2008: 48) provides support for Estrada's arguments. He notes that the increase in the proportion of individuals convicted of assault at age 15–17 during the 1980s and 1990s "should in part be ascribed to changes in the practices of intervention". He also mentions campaigns against youth violence and the fact that self-report surveys that have been conducted among youths in their final year of compulsory education since 1995 show "largely stable frequencies with regard to both exposure to and participation in acts of violence."
- 4 I do not mean to diminish the serious problems with deadly shootings in Sweden recently – the paragraphs here are about the public narrative on crime and violence, and its functions, not on the substantial circumstances of the shootings. (See Sarnecki 2022, for a discussion on the increased frequency of deadly gun violence in today's Sweden, the obstacles to solve these cases from the point of view of the police, and the fact that statistically, one cannot identify any general wave of violence in Sweden in connection to the increased shootings.)
- 5 The quotes from Steve Nyberg are taken from a telephone interview I conducted with him on 6 October 2015 and from his website *stevenyberg.com* during the same month.
- 6 See also Marcus Prifti's article "Så får våldet sin näring uppifrån" ("This is how violence is nourished from above") in *Svenska Dagbladet* 1 July 2013.
- 7 The violent attack by Anton Lundin Pettersson in the town of Trollhättan in 2015 is also regarded as an act of racism, but took place after Larsson and Marklund's history book had been written.

5 Scraps and side-tracks

Violence as situation and specialty, as politics and storytelling – this book covers no more than a fraction of the broad range of possible perspectives. I have no more than one occasion come close to despair at the task I have set myself in writing it. Violence is inexhaustible. The more you examine it, the more aspects emerge. And I have not been able to include the majority of these.

But I have also found the way one perspective leads into another quite entertaining. Johan Asplund (1979: 10–11) has spoken of the way in which all long-term research projects include some level of “waste product”, that is a number of side-tracks and approaches that are never fully developed. In this chapter, I have brought together some of this waste product.¹

I begin by presenting a number of research ideas: *provocation and nostalgia*, *alluring fights*, *warning signs*, *intoxication*, *victim competition*, and *peaceful but preoccupied with violence*. I conclude with two ideas based on my field studies at youth detention homes: *fictive violence* and *blackening eyes*.

The ideas that follow are, as I have indicated, less well synthesised and consolidated than those discussed in previous chapters. They may be read not only from start to finish but also in no particular order, as brief, discrete research notes.

I have also included a case description from my studies of violent events in youth detention homes in Sweden, with the aim of showing how the book’s four perspectives are relevant alongside one another – and that the people involved seem to take them into account too. This is my attempt to weave the perspectives together and point out their interrelations within a piece of empirical data.

I round off with a brief vignette similar to those with which I began the book.

Provocation and nostalgia

Sara Uhnöo (2011) makes use of recorded conversations with 41 youths from Gothenburg in Sweden (of different ethnicities and aged 15–21) in a study of violence and moral work. More specifically, she shows how youths, in conversation with one another (and the researcher), negotiate rules relating to legitimate and illegitimate actions in the context of violence and fighting. Among other things, she shows that the first punch in a fight – the “opening move” – is subject to hard moralising. The one who throws the first punch is ascribed responsibility for what follows.

But there are exceptions. Certain types of statement, such as insulting someone’s mother, can legitimise throwing a first punch. In such cases, the youths present the *statement* itself as having come “first”, and it is this provocation that is censured (Uhnöo 2011: Ch. 6).

Uhnöo also shows that the youths largely reflect the dominant societal discourse that depicts violence as being on the rise and as becoming increasingly serious. The youths also express nostalgia about a less violent past, and contrast this with a violent present. When they claimed that children today – that is those younger than themselves – were increasingly badly behaved, this was a successful argument in their discussions (Uhnöo 2011: Ch. 3).

Both of these results could serve to motivate new studies. Which statements, in which contexts, are viewed as being so provocative that they legitimise a violent response? How can we describe the art of provocation? A pre-school class, a schoolyard, a prison, a nightclub queue, a care home for the elderly – there are any number of interesting fields of inquiry, each of which has its own characteristic jargon.

Provocations are not restricted to face-to-face interactions. Katz (1988: 321) compares the cocky street criminal with the world power that sends its navy into enemy waters in a politically challenging way. Which military operations would be counted as “throwing the first punch”?

And the nostalgia – it would be interesting to bring together the stories of individuals from different age groups, the old and the young, and allow them to debate with one another. The question is whether they would join together in nostalgic agreement, or would instead problematise one another’s views, since they would be speaking about different “pasts” (and perhaps even different “nows”).

It would also be interesting to collect data showing how parents from different periods have protected their children from shocking depictions of violence and thus probably contributed to a supposed idyll. In this way, we could examine how the foundations are laid for the way in which media reports consumed during adulthood are time and again contrasted with rose-tinted references to childhood memories.

Alluring fights

In his ethnographic studies, Curtis Jackson-Jacobs (2013) shows that violence cannot always be explained by preceding conflicts. Jackson-Jacobs followed youths aged 18–22 in a thriving and very affluent suburb in Tucson, Arizona, who actively sought out and started fights in the course of wild nights out.

The analysis was unable to refer to common background factors (“race, poverty, and neighbourhood”), nor to the prevailing perspective that violence constitutes the culmination of an escalating conflict. In this particular context, the youths *aspired* to the experience of fighting. They were enticed by the kick of being able to demonstrate a “strong character”, of showing solidarity with others and of having adventures they could talk about.

An apparently accidental push, a gesture interpreted as an insult, an encouraging crowd – fights could be started by the youths using a range of sophisticated means to goad and incite themselves via intentionally provocative interactions with their surroundings. They subordinated themselves to challenges that they themselves constructed and generated together with others involved in the same situation (Jackson-Jacobs 2013: 48).

There was something tautological, or self-explanatory, about these fights, and this was somehow their charm. Constructing a fight, writes Jackson-Jacobs, is a process in which one actively invokes justifications for violence, and then feels authentically motivated by these justifications.

Jackson-Jacobs is careful not to equate violence with fights. The affluent youths he spent time with were not motivated by a desire to beat or bully others unilaterally. Their efforts were directed at fighting and *winning* – and in doing so bringing the violence to an end. The intention was to get the other to fight back. Violence should only be realised *as a fight*.

This element could be examined more closely. In which other contexts do people find violent interactions attractive and amusing, and therefore attempt to create such interactions? By identifying cases that are not usually captured by the traditional gaze of social scientific research (which instead tends to associate violence with social exclusion, resource deficiencies, criminality, and deprivation), Jackson-Jacobs can inspire us to look further into other areas, such as violence in the world of sport or public entertainment.

This topic should also be of relevance to those who wish to minimise violence. How might crime prevention work deal with the allure of violence described by Jackson-Jacobs, and perhaps mould it into a form that excludes suffering, injury, and victimhood?

Neglected warning signs

In Miki Agerberg's book *Bakom vansinnet* [*Behind the Insanity*] (2007: 121–123), Ulrika Haggård-Grann describes an interview study focused on 133 violent offenders and their situation prior to their crimes (Haggård-Grann 2005). The majority had undergone forensic psychiatric examinations or participated in psychological assessments. The interviews focused on drugs and medications, mental illness, sleep, and relationships.

Haggård-Grann argues that alcohol use increased the risk for violence in every individual, as did not taking medications and conflicts with family members. Suicidal thoughts could also trigger violent crimes. “The violence expresses a kind of desperation”, says Ulrika Haggård-Grann.

One-quarter of those interviewed had sought but been denied psychiatric care prior to the crime. Being rejected by the care sector produced a fourfold increase in the risk that the individual would act violently within 24 hours. When Haggård-Grann interviewed those who had relapsed into violent crime and had received psychiatric treatment, all but one had “communicated clear warning signals prior to the crime”. She argues that the care sector had not been sufficiently attentive, and that the patients' own views about resolving their problems should be given more consideration.

Some may feel quite content to voluntarily isolate themselves, for example by living apart and staying away from others. “We should be more wary about applying our own image of happiness to these people”, says Haggård-Grann.

Warning signals, alcohol, desperation, and voluntary isolation – here we see indications of a range of behaviours and emotions that people suffering from mental illness may use to deal with possible violent tendencies. In particular, it should be possible to pay more attention to warning signals that are otherwise ignored. If a violent individual has a sense of what may be about to happen, and tries in vain to get others to help to prevent it, then the formulation and reception of such “signals” should be studied in more detail. What does the patient say, to whom and in what way? How is this information received?

But these questions focus not only on how the interaction between the care provider and the person receiving care might best be described but also on how the definition of “ignored” emerges. It seems likely that demands made on care providers are neglected or forgotten all the time. It is only when a violent event has occurred that this becomes the object of controversy, discussion, and criticism. The character and importance of the signals missed by the care sector is only clarified *retrospectively*.

This process – whereby missed signals are *defined* and *made relevant* – would be an important topic for continued analysis.

Intoxication

Alcohol is linked to violence in several ways. But the associations are not simple. People become intoxicated without becoming violent, and violence is committed by people who are completely sober (cf. von Hofer 2008: 53).

Hanns von Hofer (2008: 52) shows that between the mid-19th century and the beginning of the 21st century, numbers of assault convictions in Sweden changed “largely in parallel with alcohol consumption”. The trends for alcohol consumption and assault convictions follow one another quite neatly. By comparison with other potential explanations, such as the nature of penal sanctions, alcohol consumption emerges as a very powerful explanatory factor. Hanns von Hofer argues that variations in violent crime are not influenced by penal sanctions, whereas alcohol consumption exerts a great deal of influence. The death penalty, for example, has not had any deterrent effect in relation to violent crime, whereas periods with high levels of alcohol consumption have clearly been associated with higher assault frequencies, and vice versa (von Hofer 2008: 27, 53).

When distilling alcohol at home was prohibited and taxes on alcohol increased during the 1850s, the numbers convicted of assault declined, as was also the case when an alcohol rationing system was introduced after 1910. When more widely accessible medium strength beer was introduced in 1965, the level of assaults increased (von Hofer 2008: 51).

Alcohol is also identified as an explanatory factor in studies with a more restrictive focus. In the report *Partner violence against women and men (Våld mot kvinnor och män i nära relationer 2009: 51)*, for example, alcohol is described as playing a significant role in violence in intimate relationships: “In approximately half of these incidents, the perpetrator was under the influence of either alcohol or drugs”. If alcohol and drug use declined, the author writes, this would be “directly reflected in violence trends”.

Here there ought to be opportunities to combine Randall Collins’ situational approach with statistical findings. Getting drunk may – in an alcohol culture – function as a successful means of circumventing the tension that Collins identifies in human confrontations, a way of developing the courage and ability to be violent (and also to legitimise doing so) despite the obstructive effects of regular patterns of interaction. But how does this happen, in more detail? And in what order? Being drunk may also constitute a narrative element in the explanations of violent aggressors (cf. Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015: 76, on drunkenness as a culturally based excuse for men’s violence).

Philip Lalander (2009: 96) writes the following on explosive violence in a study of drug-using youths in the Swedish town of Norrköping:

Drugs in themselves rarely trigger outbursts of rage. Nor does alcohol. It is when these intoxicants are combined with powerful frustration and

feelings of powerlessness that the situation can become dramatic. Most commonly, there is a history behind this type of uncontrolled violence, a history that may be complicated and perhaps not even comprehensible to the individual who commits the violence.

It is easy to imagine intoxication and violence as two consecutive events, but there is nothing to say that rage and violent intent do not precede intoxication. Just as violence may be instrumental (in the sense described by Hannah Arendt), so may intoxication. An actor may be convinced that a certain act cannot be carried out while sober. And this leads to curiosity regarding (1) how such a conviction might arise, and (2) when it might be powerful enough to result in action.

Victim competition

A striking example of victim competition is found in Goran Basic's (2014) studies of post-war Bosnia. Basic uses interviews with 27 survivors of the war in north-western Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1990s to describe the way responsibility and guilt are allocated in relation to acts of violence committed during the war.

In the interviewed individuals' memories, accusations, reproaches, and denunciations Basic finds that the role of victim is a desirable one for all the parties involved: Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Serbs, Bosniaks, and people of unclear or mixed ethnicity.

Basic refers to Nils Christie's (2001) concept of the *ideal victim* (see Walklate 2006, Ch. 2). Individuals in a post-war society may compete for this flawless status. What complicates the narratives is the fact that both the perpetrators and victims of violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina often know and have relations with one another. Being an ideal victim, on the other hand, requires the absence of such relations. The victim is expected to be attacked by a stranger.

At the same time, writes Basic, the ethnic cleansing and other violent crimes committed during the war created a new form of estrangement. During the war, people who had previously been friends and acquaintances began to act "*as if* they no longer knew each other" (Basic 2014: 212). Nesim – one of those interviewed – described an experience of people being transported to a concentration camp,

When I had seen how they assaulted the men they had rounded up, and when I saw who was guarding them by the railway, that it was my work-mates, the shock was even worse. You had worked with someone for 14 years and you had been through good times and bad together, shared everything with each other. . . . I found myself seizing up completely.

Nesim portrays himself as a victim and in doing so competes with others who were interviewed, who also laid claim to the status of victims. But the portrayal is complicated by the former intimacy: “You had worked with someone for 14 years . . . shared everything with each other”. When a former colleague and friend engages in ethnic cleansing, and you yourself are among those affected, the story revolves around shock, betrayal and horror much more clearly than if the act had been committed by a stranger. Intimacy not only disturbs the purity of Christie’s ideal victim but also makes victimhood a more frightful experience.

Victim competition and the associated complications for people’s status as victims could be studied in many different areas. Categorised violence is associated with categorised victims: relationship violence, youth violence, wartime violence, sexual violence, economic violence, hate crime, stalking, bullying, and so on (cf. Best 1999: 95). The victims – or those who view themselves as their advocates – compete with one another for redress, support, acknowledgement, and sympathy.

We could dream up a new violence label, twitter-violence perhaps, or bonus-dad-violence. Wouldn’t we then be well on the way to producing a new victim category? And doesn’t the possible intimacy between victim and perpetrator make the category more highly charged, an intimacy that the violence *transforms* into estrangement?

It is perhaps time to refine Christie’s concept of the ideal victim. A relationally charged presentation of victimhood may be ideal in situations of victim competition.

Peaceful but preoccupied with violence

Hanns von Hofer’s (2008: chapter 2) portrayal of the long-term trend in violence in Sweden contains a paradox. The level of violence has actually declined, at the same time as violence has increasingly become a public concern. For many years now, the struggle to combat violence has been prioritised in the field of crime policy, but the amount of violence in society appears to oscillate around a stable mean. And statistically, this is not a recent phenomenon. It has been this way since the mid-18th century (von Hofer 2008: 56).

At least, this is the case for unlawful violence. The meaning of violence in general has changed dramatically, however. Violence that was lawful in the 19th century has gradually been criminalised. At that time (as I have already noted) violence was commonly used in the raising of children, both within the family and at school, and it was used as a means of disciplining wives and servants and as a punishment within the military and the child-care and prison services (von Hofer 2008: 45). During the first half of the

19th century, it was still legal to beat wives, children, servants, apprentices, soldiers, and prison inmates. And it was not until the end of the 1970s that the “ancient tradition of using violence to raise children” was finally prohibited in Sweden (von Hofer 2008: 54).

von Hofer views all these forms of violence as instrumental, and as forms that can be distinguished from assault and homicide. They have become less common and have at least in part been transferred to those categories of violence that are prosecuted. The lawful use of violence has thus become increasingly restricted, and is today now reserved for certain types of officials and public servants in the conduct of their duties. Private violence, on the other hand, has been made “completely illegal” (von Hofer 2008: 55).

At the same time, as was mentioned earlier, our preoccupation with and concern about the violence that remains has increased. von Hofer notes that during the 19th century, theft offences often led to imprisonment, whereas assault resulted in a fine. Today this situation has been reversed. Few become indignant about stolen goods, everyone is outraged by people being punched and kicked (Sarnecki 2022: 56). As a rule, violence results in tougher sanctions than theft.

We could further analyse this preoccupation with violence in a society that is relatively peaceful. The dramatisation of violence, the way we zoom in on violence, our interest in violence – where it occurs, in what ways and with what consequences.

von Hofer writes that violence used to be regarded as a public order problem, whereas it is now viewed as an affront to our personal integrity. There is no doubt more to be said on this issue – on a society preoccupied with the integrity of the individual.

Fictive violence

Once you have become aware of the phenomenon of fabricated and symbolic violence – playfights or pretend fights, playful threats or pushing people in passing – you also become aware of how often it can occur. In contexts in which people interact closely with one another over long periods of time it can sometimes become so common that it is hardly noticeable.

People engage in practical activities, a jovial and taunting jargon emerges, people’s bodies pass close to one another. The tempo is high, the interactions intense. Families, youth clubs, pre-schools, school playgrounds, swimming baths, gyms, and certain types of workplaces – there are many environments in which fictive, symbolic violence can be found, particularly among children, youths and young adults.

Gestures, physical contact and words represent violence, such as the waving of a clenched fist, accompanied by a smile, “I’m going to get you!”,

or a couple of air punches directed at someone, parried by the other's arm or by ducking. But these gestures, physical contacts, and words do not express the same thing as violence, that is antagonism, anger, loathing, or similar. The playfulness gives them another meaning.

I have myself studied playfights at detention homes (Wåsterfors 2016). On the basis of ethnographic data, I argue that these interactions represent a temporary respite from the institutional order. Threatening, grabbing, and hitting each other as a joke – sometimes very fleetingly – produces small pockets of personified interaction that serve to “bracket” formal expectations. Youths and staff step out of their institutional positions (“student” or “inmate”, “treatment assistant”, “teacher”, etc.) and demonstrate that there is a personal intimacy between them.

But playfights may also be defined as problematic, particularly when they are perceived as coming too close to bullying or harassment, when they become reminiscent of the ideals of street masculinities, and when they look as though they may escalate and result in real violence. At detention homes, the staff attempt to “soften up” playfights and transform them into a show of caring, for example by responding to a push with a hug or a friendly pat on the back.

In doing so, they tone down a certain form of masculinity. Macho male youths are often said to be concealing a longing for intimacy under their aggression or physical dominance, even when it is expressed playfully. And this does not mean that girls do not do the same. They too grab hold of one another or staff members in a playful and ostensibly aggressive way, which both youths and adults understand as expressing a desire for intimacy. But as a rule the playfighting – *the rough and tumble* – is coded in terms of masculinity.

At youth institutions, this playfulness is constructed in a way that is suited to the context. The joking occurs at appropriate times and in appropriate places, it is momentary and occurs in the background, and those involved are prepared to explain their behaviour if necessary. At the same time, this playfulness is conspicuous. It undermines the institutional order and the seriousness of the institutional situation, even if only temporarily, and it makes it possible to manifest a distancing of oneself from the institutional regime. An institution that completely lacks playfulness – including playful aggression – could be likened to a church with absolutely no doubts or secular elements. It would appear perfectionistic, morally daunting, and unvarying. Even on units where play fighting is expressly forbidden, it still bubbles up to the surface.

All play is precarious (Gordon 2008: 324). It includes elements of both seriousness and ambivalence (Huizinga 1949/2004). This is precisely what makes play attractive. If play fighting were never allowed to escalate into real fighting, if fictive violence were completely distinct from real violence,

this tension would dissipate. One and the same physical movement may be regarded as being irritating, aggressive, violent, sexual, or “a joke”. Human interaction is in part made engaging by the fact that people can ascribe different meanings to actions in interaction with one another, and then act in accordance with these meanings.

In my analysis, I attempt to describe a process that playfights follow (Wästerfors 2016: 9). The institutional order provides the initial background conditions. People act more or less in the way that is expected of them. But then some form of vacuum or degradation appears in the institutional order of the detention home: a pause, having to wait, a change of activity, a “free moment”. Pretend fights tend to occur between, in connection with, or beyond what is scheduled, that is, when nothing in particular is expected to happen. A more or less obvious signal for play may then establish a frame for playfulness – a taunt, a sarcastic smile or a stylised gesture – and fictive violence may then occur.

Following a playfight, there is something that corresponds to what narrative analysts label a *coda*, that is a return to the now and (in this case) to the institutional order. Here a form of relaxation comes into the picture. The temporary flight from the institutional order is over, but has an effect on the continuing interaction. The waves produced by playfulness reach the shore.

Fictive violence appears very different from physical violence. While not wanting to claim that no such difference exists, I would nonetheless argue that at the symbolic level, fictive violence is reliant on physical violence. It rides on its coattails, makes use of it, and communicates with its help.

Playing at violence is not a social problem and should not result in alarm or panic.² Nonetheless, it is neither a marginal nor an unimportant phenomenon. Popular culture exploits violence and in doing so produces enormous numbers of highly engaging books, films, and games.

I would argue that everyday social life contains plenty of examples of the same trick being used. Fictive violence attracts and brings people together – while excluding others – in much the same way as laughter (Billig 2005: 121). The outsider is excluded and defined as (too) serious, those involved in the play fighting establish contact with one another. A sketched observation:

I am standing directly behind two young men – A and B – in a gym waiting for a training session to begin, when A strikes at B’s hip a few times. B chuckles and moves out of the way by taking a few steps to the side of his black mat and exercise board. He replies with a feigned jab in the direction of A’s chin. They do the same thing a little later on in the same session, when changing weights between two music tracks. I feel their joy – the light-hearted pause from the effort of the training session – but I also feel a bit excluded.

Blackening eyes

Another detail from my studies at detention homes may also be worth discussing. Both youths and staff sometimes spoke of the black look in connection with violence. It is the eyes of the violent individual that blacken. Their look darkens and they become unresponsive. This look is regarded both as something frightening and as explaining something.

In one interview,³ with two youths named Sara and Kristina, we were talking about how they thought the staff should act in order to avoid violence. They shouldn't just "read what it says on the paper", said Sara, "I mean only acting on the basis of forms and manuals", instead they should "talk to us a bit more".

Sara: Because in the end it's we who are part of these situations [uhum] you know, I mean it's like us – I mean of course they can come to us "yeah what do you want us to do when there's like, when there's an alarm and that kind of thing" [uhum] yeah, maybe not go in with – we, I mean, they treat us as if we –

Kristina: – dogs –

Sara: – were Ebola-infected dogs, yeah, they take hold of us, then they take hold of us, I mean, do you get it, they really go in like as though we are murderers who have killed their children, you know, I mean they really, I mean see the anger in their eyes.

Kristina: Their eyes go completely black [uhum] I swear.

Sara: Yeah, they think it's funny, I mean they want this, want to feel this adrenaline and stuff.

Kristina: That's it, I swear [[laughs]].

Sara: Yeah, that's how it is.

David: When things get intense you mean?

Sara: Yeah exactly.

Kristina: [[laughs]]

Sara: Yeah, but it's true, I mean they want to [uhum].

Kristina: It's true, it's true, it's true.

"You see the anger in their eyes", "Their eyes go completely black" – the unreasonable attitude of the staff is contrasted with the way they should be. They should talk to and ask the youths what they want to happen "when there's an alarm", not treat the youths like "Ebola-infected dogs".

Black eyes appear to symbolise an insensitive, ambivalent, and cold way of behaving, as if the party one is interacting with is less worthy or completely worthless. Sara and Kristina describe violent staff at the youth institution using metaphors that in many ways reflect some of the analytical

concepts that I have exemplified in this book. They feel that the gaze of the staff reduces and diminishes them, and the same gaze also seems to add fuel to the harsh treatment meted out by the staff (cf. Lois Presser and Amartya Sen). The staff are also described as getting enjoyment out of violent situations, and the kick associated with them, in the way noted by Jack Katz (1988) in his analysis of the seductions of crime.

Above all, the staff are portrayed as detached, distant and unresponsive. The black eyes symbolise this in a striking way. The gaze of the other is no longer a regular, interpersonal gaze. As described by Sara and Kristina, the blackening of the eyes and the meaning of this change (a certain way of viewing the situation, a cold attitude, etc.) appears to function as a means of circumventing the obstacles to using violence. In this way, it is reminiscent of Randall Collins' analysis.

Here there are many opportunities for further studies. Descriptions such as that provided by Sara and Kristina may on the one hand be given a naturalistic interpretation, that is as information that is more or less reflective of social reality, and that may be dressed up in the terminology of violence theory. On the other hand, such descriptions may also be interpreted in ethnomethodological terms, that is as descriptions that themselves construct social reality. Sara and Kristina (and I, as the interviewer), have constructed a piece of social reality focused on violent staff at youth institutions. Popular variants of the work of Katz, Collins, Presser, and others are well suited to understanding interactions at youth institutions and at the same time to moralising about them. And these two forms of interpretation may be combined.

Another youth at the same type of institution, Kasper, described to me that his own eyes can turn black. Kasper also associated violence with a dehumanising detachment and a special form of interaction. Kasper said that the staff had sounded the security alarm on two occasions when he had become "riled up with another student", "in a big way". His eyes had then "gone black", "then there was nothing [for the others] to do but get out of the way". "I can't stand the staff", said Kasper, "I just . . . bang".

Kasper presents himself as being just as unreasonable as the staff in Sara and Kristina's story, that is as unresponsive and transfixed by anger. But he feels he has learned what to do in order to regain his self-control. He goes to his room to be by himself.

David: What do you mean by your eyes going black, so, I mean?

Kasper: I mean, when I get really riled up, my- I mean my eyes go completely black. Some can go completely red, you know, and some can go completely blue, I don't know, but mine go completely black.

David: Uhum. And what do you do then?

Kasper: Then I know, when I notice that I'm starting to get really riled up, I just go to my room, or I'm by myself so that [uhum]

...

David: But what do you do in your room, then, when you . . . ?

Kasper: I sit and read and play cards or something, just try to calm myself down [uhum] or relax and so on. That's what you have to do. (6 sec.) I've tried it lots of times in different ways, but that's what's been successful, just going into my room.

Kasper also spoke of an occasion outside the institution when he grabbed hold of a guy who'd been "having a go at my brothers" and hit him. "Then I picked him up and put him against the wall and just kept going". In the end, his brothers had to drag him to the ground and hold him down, otherwise he would not have stopped. On this occasion too, his eyes had gone black. "I've no idea what I'm doing", he said, "I simply just keep hitting". It was only when he had calmed down that he felt pain. His opponent had kicked him in the back.

Once again, the black eyes become an explanation – but not directly in relation to the violence (which is viewed as having other explanations: irritation, solidarity and other factors) but rather for its uncontrolled nature. A gaze that does not see the other as a regular human being explains why the violence *does not stop*, why Kasper "just keeps hitting", "just keeps going".

His gaze "goes black". The other is reduced to a pure enemy, to an object rather than a co-actor.

Kasper's analysis of his behaviour is quite reminiscent of the concept of *forward panic*, whereby the actors involved are viewed as disappearing into a "tunnel" of violence that cuts off any other alternatives. There are also similarities with the violent performances described by Lonnie Athens (1992: 63–71), which socially confirm and provide the basis for a given actor's emerging competence with violence. Once again, then, it is clear that the perspective of the layperson need not differ greatly from that of academics. It is also clear that theories about uncontrolled violence are used in concrete situations. Kasper, Sara, and Kristina are able to refer to "blackening eyes" as an account for situations that occur at youth institutions, and as a warning sign that tells you what is about to happen.

People describe their own or others' lack of self-control using metaphors, concepts, and theories. We may expect to find blackening eyes not just in youth institutions but also elsewhere.

The event with the rumour

If we zoom in on an event within a youth detention home – a setting in which I have conducted a series of studies – we may find a concluding

example of how the book's four perspectives can be weaved together. By now it comes as no surprise for the reader that violence as situation and specialty, politics and storytelling can all be relevant in a given case. I will nonetheless underline this point by lingering on an event and tease out what I found to be the embedded dimensions.

The event – here called the event with the rumour – revolves around Teresa, 15 years old, who one day cannot stand another girl's rumour mill at the ward and suddenly punches and kicks her (Wästerfors 2019b: 47–63). The event could also be called the event with the make-up, since one of the distinguishing features is that Teresa, directly after her punch and kick, returns to a make-up table and continues doing her make-up. The data about this event remind us that several accounts often coexist – articulated as layers on top of one another – and that violence need not be understood as amoral in the eyes of its practitioners. In fact, *not* being violent can, to some extent, be understood as a restriction of moral engagement, a mutilation of “the right thing to do”. Both staff and young people articulate moral lessons closely related to this and other events, often reflexively directed to themselves.

The event with the rumour is about a short-lived and passing physical confrontation, which in itself might be telling. Also within institutions, violence is typically quick and brief, illustrating the packed social life taking place inside. (Cf. Collins 2008: 369, on the “goldfish bowl” in schools, prisons and similar enclosed institutions.)

In an interview conducted by my co-worker Jesper Hambert, Teresa first contextualises this event in terms of gender. “I’m more of a tomboy”, she says and argues that the background of her punch and kick is that she cannot stand girls’ bullshit.

Teresa: I’m not that type who often hangs out with girls, like, I’m more of a tomboy. But when you’re living under the same roof with a lot of girls there is bullshit from all sides, and okay, I’m not the type who likes that.

Teresa says that she prefers complaints told upfront and that she acts in this way in relation to others. To do the opposite, to lower your gaze and not interact directly and face to face when having something to say is weak, she says, even provocative. Teresa says that “girls” do this but that she cannot stand it. On the one hand, she invokes a gendered account of talking bullshit (“girls” do that), on the other hand she treats herself as an exception. She defines herself as more direct than the other girls at the ward – and by fighting and being a “tomboy” she borrows a typified masculinity into her version of femininity (cf. Messerschmidt 2004). She presents herself as a girl, but not “girlish”.

All of this turns out to be relevant in Teresa's depiction of Vivi, the other girl in the confrontation. Vivi's style – girlish, in Teresa's terms – provoked Teresa. She describes the event as follows:

Teresa: And she [Vivi] sat there like . . . she's more like this type, well, when you're in front of her face, then she like, looks down, talking very quietly. And then when, like, I'm in here [at the ward] and she's out there [among the others at the ward, but Teresa also seems to imply outside the institution] she's sort of calling and telling, like, a lot of stuff and shouting and like stuff. So we, I said "why have you said this"? And she's like "well I haven't". I like "what?" She like "I don't know" like, still looking down. And then I just "look at me, I'm talking to you" like. "You are bigmouthed on the outside, why can't you just talk to me here too?" And then she [said] "but". Well, I remember directly what she said then, and then I turned just fucking pissed so I blacked out.

A simple "but" is eventually triggering Teresa who had enough of Vivi's style and attacks her.

I hit her. You know I sat and did my make-up, I hit her and then I just went back . . . I sat on the same spot as I sat before and continued doing my make-up. And then when she went into her corridor she just shouted "fucking whore, I'll kill you". But she didn't say that at the time.

In her story, Teresa presents herself not only as temperamental but also as straightforward and upstanding. She demands a direct communication with Vivi and loses her temper when she does not get it, since Vivi persists in her indirect and avoiding style. The violence is brutal and unsentimental. The whole episode is easy to interpret in the light of Teresa's introduction: as a consequence of being a tomboy, not fond of girls spreading rumours behind each other's backs. In other parts of the interview, Vivi is described as lying and gossiping, and Teresa says that "we" – the other girls and herself – had given Vivi "chance after chance".

So when the details of the data are unfolding, the event turns complicated. First, Teresa starts talking about "we", thereby sometimes framing her violence collectively and morally. She, as well as the other girls, could not tolerate Vivi's rumour mill, and the "limit" she mentions ("You know, I have my limits . . .") implies a supporting collective. Her response to Vivi's behaviour is dressed as a moral one, executed by Teresa but sanctioned by the other girls.

Second, Teresa starts to talk about her personality:

And I was rather new here you know, so that I hadn't begun with anger control [training] so I didn't know you could control your anger. . . . I can get like a blackout, cause I have PTSD, post-traumatic stress syndrome, and I can get blackouts. So I don't think, I don't think before I do it, I think after. . . . But it wasn't any serious violence like, it was like a punch and then nothing more.

Teresa is softening the seriousness (“a punch and nothing more”) and invokes a diagnosis and her blackouts as excuse. In fact, she did kick too (as witnesses point out, and as she, in other passages, admits herself), but in the above excerpt a very brief and delimited execution of violence seems to fit better into her account. All things considered, Teresa combines different explanations to portray her actions as accountable: a gendered, medical as well as therapeutic background, and a moral justification. Vivi is portrayed as – sort of – deserving the attack, and at the same time Teresa portrays herself as having no chance to control herself. Her anger control training at the detention home had not yet begun.

So what can we trace in a relatively short piece of interview data on this event, relating to this book's perspectives? We get a glimpse of *violence as situation*: the moral tensions built up at the ward and the moral emotions, the sense of an emotionally supporting audience, and the taken-for-granted understanding of the physical attack as an object of careful explanation. Violence is not defined as easy, or as self-evident in its procedure (cf. Collins 2008), but as a drama with a particular and situational logic. When Teresa is asked to explain the event, she points to the immediate context she was situated in.

We also get plenty of examples of violence as *narrative* and *speciality*. Teresa makes a story out of the event, in collaboration with the interviewer, and she accounts for her attack in terms of both necessity and license (cf. Presser 2013). She portrays herself as trapped inside her PTSD and her series of blackouts, but at the same time she seems morally obliged to act against Vivi, “certified” by a shared judgement on the ward amongst the other girls. Her proposed identity as a tomboy contributes to the story; this identity makes it accountable that it was Teresa, and no one else, who acts out. As not being “girlish”, she is positioned as especially unable to stand the girls' (presumed) habit of talking, and especially able to be violent. This gendered component in Teresa's indicated “speciality” is combined with her talk about her personal problems to control anger. She is presenting herself as especially and principally explosive, and points out that her violently charged background must be taken into account.

Later on in the interview, Teresa elaborates on her upbringing and the violence she experienced as a kid, which she argues means that she easily resorts to violence in general. “. . . because I have that background which comes from being abused . . . since the age of seven”. She also mentions a couple of other fights with the staff and the other girls on the ward, although she emphasises that she has recently improved in her behaviour. She presents some of her accounts in past tense, as if she *did* think in certain ways at the time of the event (some months ago), ways that she *now* cannot endorse. “. . . at that moment I thought that she deserved it, but right now I don’t think so”. The moral emotions seem to belong to the moment whereas more reflective passages (on her personality and background) show distance to these emotions.

Violence as *politics*, then? To find the relevance of this perspective we need to analyse the institutional context and how it is embedded in the descriptions. Teresa mentions, for instance, that the fact that she interrupted her make-up application to punch and kick Vivi, and then just returned to the make-up directly afterwards, made the staff “terrified”. They saw her behaviour as remarkably cold and emotionless, and they “didn’t know what I was”. She was temporarily placed in an isolated section of the detention home, because staff turn “unsure” about her after the event, as she says. She notes that her behaviour is an object of political analysis. Her power and anger are defined as too challenging, too dangerous. More specifically, we may say that, in Hannah Arendt’s terms, Teresa makes use of violence when her power over Vivi is in jeopardy. Impotence breeds violence, and the use of violence results in even greater impotence (Arendt 1969/1970: 54).

In the staff interviews, another institutionally oriented picture of this event emerged, where Teresa is narrated as almost a bargaining chip for other interests. Pjotr, one of the staff members, says that he had noted tensions and “worries” in the atmosphere of the ward before the event – a sense of an upcoming turmoil – and that Teresa’s attack was a result of an ongoing bullying process against Vivi. Pia, another staff member, says that yet another girl, Sofia, had recently returned to the ward from a school nearby and that she – successfully – tried to mobilise the girls against Vivi by providing presumed evidence of Vivi’s rumour mill. So when Teresa attacks Vivi she is – according to staff – more or less executing what Sofia wants and tries to accomplish. At the same time, staff members do not portray Teresa as completely subordinated. She had “appointed herself as the one who should indicate to this girl then [Vivi] that she has behaved wrongly”.

Pjotr also gives a slightly different picture of Teresa directly after her attack. At this point she is said to be “very scared” of being isolated because of her act, as if anticipating the institutional punishment she awaits and also

signalling to staff that she knows that she did something wrong. Paradoxically, staff also describe that Sofia praised Teresa afterwards and emphasised that Vivi had gotten what she deserved, whereas Teresa actually responded calmly (according to the staff Pia) and said “no”, “I was the one who did wrong”, “I take responsibility for delivering the punch”.

The politics of the event with the rumour, then, can be detected when we zoom out a bit – and bring with us remarks and insinuations from the interviews. The punch and the kick are interpreted as part of the problematics of governing this ward. The violence is taken – by the involved parties themselves – as politically indicative, not only for Teresa’s capabilities but also for the inmate collective at the ward. Teresa herself is reported to interpret her violent response in institutional-political terms, as she foresees the sanction she faces and tries to deal with it by showing regret. The sequence as a whole is political – the gossip and Sofia’s intrigues, the moral tensions witnessed by staff, the sense of Teresa being a performer of the collective and at the same time “appointed” by herself. It exemplifies the politics of the ward and the overall detention home as such, and it forms a narrative in itself.

Indeed, it seems impossible to understand the event with the rumour without taking into account the local regime and its composition. We have the staff, watching and judging, but we also have the collective of girls, operating “under” the adults but still engaged in their version of social order. The situation takes place inside this context, as does the storytelling. The “speciality” of violence (Teresa’s special relation to violence) is seen as imported into it.

I think these four perspectives – violence as situation and speciality, narrative and politics – can be helpful to get going in analyses of cases of concrete violence. In doing so, we seem to benefit from what Gubrium and Holstein (1997) calls analytic bracketing. We need to, on the one hand, highlight the substantial side of the data at hand by reading them naturalistically, and, on the other hand, also highlight the constructionist side by reading the same data ethnomethodologically. When, for instance, Teresa talks about the attack, we can (together with data from other sources) say something about what most likely occurred at this moment at this ward, as we interpret the narrative as ethnographically informative. But we may also pay attention to her ways of making the attack accountable in the interview interaction, as we interpret the very talk as active “doings” of the case. One aspect can be bracketed for the moment, and the other aspect the next. By shifting attention between these aspects and perspectivising them in line with my suggestions in this book, we can hopefully get closer to a more complete picture – and an answer to the question “why did violence take place?”

In my studies of violent events at detention homes, I have tried to compare oral versions with written ones, since these kinds of events are often reported and written up in incident reports and journal notes (Wästerfors 2019a). This was how Teresa's attack was formalised by staff:

During the day Teresa was involved in conflicts towards staff where she had not listened to the instructions she received. Teresa throws a plate belonging to a member of staff on the floor. Later during the afternoon, Teresa hits another girl in her face and kicks at her. We need to reach out to Teresa alone and work with strategies so that she will be able to live with the other girls at the ward without using violence.

In this institutional text, Teresa as an individual is zoomed in on. She has not listened, she engages in "conflicts". Her punch and kick are narrated as one event in a series of other and similar events, and as one of many indicators of her personal troubles. The interaction with the other ones at the ward is omitted, and a thrown plate is added. There is nothing about the rumour mill or the bullying, nothing about the make-up or the "worries" and intrigues that staff sensed in advance, nothing about gender or contrasting and layered accounts. Much of the colour and the details we get from oral storytelling or ethnographic fieldnotes are absent, and we do not get an idea of the young people or staff members as personal and social beings in a particular setting. The institution is summarised with an anonymous "we": "we need to reach out to. . . ."

I think this formal way of describing violence is a good example of diffusing and obscuring the multidimensional character of the phenomenon. The social nature of violence is almost completely disguised. What we are left with is a reified "Teresa", a bleak version of the morally engaged human being whom we can listen to in the recording, here pinpointed as a sole and violent subject.

This might be a convenient way for youth institutions to portray violence. But it is not the way of social science.

*

With this final section – these side-tracks, "scraps" and the event with the rumour – I bring this book to a close. Situation and specialty, politics and storytelling have functioned as four reference points, not unlike the pins that we might use to mount a canvas.

But these reference points cannot tell us exactly what should be painted on the canvas. As a motif for our efforts to produce some kind of representation, violence may in one moment appear as tangible and concrete as an oncoming battle tank, only to become as ephemeral and transient as a cursory glance in the next.

Imagine . . .

Imagine that you have been ordered to do national service. This may have happened a long time ago, or perhaps it will happen in the future. You dislike the hierarchy and being ordered about. Parading on the drill square, the detailed regulations for putting up a tent, digging a hole and loading a backpack – everything seems both trifling and grandiose.

Reflected in the window of a jeep, you catch a glimpse of yourself in your helmet. You shudder.

But your greatest aversion is reserved for your gun. Your AK5 has to be stripped down and the parts cared for with tenderness. You feel a great respect for your weapon, and you know that you would be able to use it. But the country is not at war, and you are shocked by the attitude of the other recruits. They find their weapons so exhilarating that they are unable to sit still in the grass. They want to start shooting as soon as possible. You yourself feel a growing revulsion.

You lie to the psychologist (“I can’t bring myself to shoot!”) and request to be moved to non-combatant service. Your request is granted and you are transferred to civil defence duties.

When you leave the regiment, all the others happen to be on parade in their uniforms, and they see you walking away. You keep your eyes down and feel both shame and pride at the same time. In your civilian clothes, you feel not only strangely alone but also young and free.

Notes

- 1 A similarly rich collection of studies is described by Edling and Rostami (2016). Lifecourse, group affinity, ideology, organisation, moral work, justifications, violent capital, socialisation, the identity-related attractions of violence, and so on – the writers in this anthology provide a range of exemplifications of the concrete sociality of violence. Also see Ray (2011) for a range of perspectives: spatial, gendered, and socio-economic analyses as well as historical studies.
- 2 Cf. Uhnoo (2011, Ch. 8), regarding the societal discourse on play fighting, and Dalquist (1998), on the absence of a correlation between fictive and real violence.
- 3 In my transcripts, single square brackets represent the interviewer’s supporting comments, a hyphen represents hesitancy, a dash represents overlapping speech, and double square brackets represent non-verbal communication (laughter). Passages that have been removed are marked with . . . and pauses with the number of seconds in brackets.

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