

Introduction: Extremely Violent Societies

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In 1995 the German public was confronted with an exhibition of crimes committed by the German Armed Forces when they participated in the Holocaust in East Europe during the Second World War. The displayed photographs showed in graphic detail the killings committed by German soldiers, and documented the direct involvement in mass murder by many men (and some women). In 2015, an exhibition of photos of torture and murder by security forces in Syria was shown in the United Nation's headquarters in New York and later in the European Parliament in Brussels; these photos had been allegedly taken by one or more photographers working for the Syrian security forces and later been brought out of the country. Stephen Ferry's *Violentology – A Manual of the Colombian Conflict* (2012) is a collection of images of massive and persistent violence during the Colombian conflict. These exemplary photo documentations present images of mass violence in the twentieth and twenty-first century and they reveal the major changes in atrocity crimes and mass violence since the Holocaust, as shown in the first, 1995 exhibition.

What actually changed between the Holocaust and the two later cases of mass violence? First, even in the course of the violent decades of the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century “mega-genocides” (Levene 2004, 163) like the Holocaust were rare events, but mass violence was not. The majority of these events are of a smaller scale than the Holocaust and more recent genocides, however their reiteration in the course of long-term conflicts account for millions of victims across the globe. The second major change concerns the role of the state in mass violence. The Holocaust established the “crimes of states/ crimes of hate” model of violence (Alvarez 1999), under which mass violence is executed as top-down state action, where a “select group of government elites” (Alvarez 1999, 467) mobilises and orchestrates large numbers and groups of perpetrators, building on the common motivation of hatred against another group. Goldhagen's (1996) narrative of the Holocaust as a seamless transmission of ideology and cultural models into a reservoir of motives, resulting in uniformity of genocidal motivation and finally action among the German population, is exemplary for this totalitarian model, with its assumptions of planning and

strategy at the top, hierarchical chains of command, rigid transmission of elite ideology into subaltern motivation, and unquestioned ideological consensus between elite leaders and the population (Hinton 1998). This “exceptionalist” model based on the Holocaust is presently questioned in many ways, as new legal, political, and analytical challenges arise from profound changes in the global landscape of extreme violence that have become visible during the last decades of the twentieth and the first of the twenty-first century, and of which the latter two photo documentations give evidence.

When Christian Gerlach introduced the concept of “extremely violent societies” in a 2006 article and with his book on the topic in 2010, he aimed at de-constructing the conventional understanding of mass violence as mainly state-driven violence. He wanted to re-contextualise such massive events of violence within a larger framework of conflict, in which different types of civil society actors are constitutive for the occurrence of mass violence events and have a place not only as agents of the state but as actors with their own independent motives, interests and pur-

suits. He describes extremely violent societies as spaces where an “overall acclimatisation to violence” (Gerlach and Werth 2009, 172) facilitates and precipitates events of mass violence of different scales and natures. Mass violence emerges from the “grassroots nature” (ibid.) of other types of violence, and conditions where violence becomes “multi-polar” (Gerlach 2010, 149). Importantly, an array of perpetrator groups comes into the spotlight, among them militias and paramilitary groups, rebel groups, and warlord armies.

Christian Gerlach developed his concept based on astute observation and diligent analysis of documents from mass violence in Turkey during the Armenian genocide, Indonesia in the 1960s, Bangladesh in the 1970s, and post-war Greece, and thus provided an analytical tool that is particularly adapted to the contemporary landscape of mass violence. Contemporary mass atrocities are embedded in trajectories of long-term conflict, and the majority of mass killings since the Second World War have occurred in the context of civil wars and ethnic conflicts (Krain 1997; Human Security Report Project 2011). They typically occur within nation states and independent of their boundaries, and are embedded in the environment, social formations and actor configurations of societies that have a history as well as trajectory of violent conflicts. Societies become “extremely violent” during such periods, creating an environment where violence becomes “multi-polar” (Gerlach 2010, 149). Different groups are victims of massive outbursts of physical violence, including mass killings, systematic sexual violence and enforced displacement, and mass atrocities oscillate between these different forms of violence. Perpetrator participation in these events spreads across the boundaries of different groups and blurs the lines between different types of involvement and non-involvement as for example Fujii (2009) has demonstrated for Rwanda. Diverse groups of perpetrators participate, ranging from state government forces to independent militias and warlord armies, and engage in complex and shifting alliances. Organised violent actors like, for example, paramilitary groups, become increasingly involved, whether encouraged, funded and trained by state actors or other powerful actors. Engagement of military and paramilitary forces, as well as the police, in para-military action

results in forced disappearances, widespread torture, and sexual violence (Alvarez 2006; Mitchell, Carey and Butler 2014; Rothenberg 2012). Actors engage in atrocity crimes for a multitude of reasons, and the power of violence stems from the mixture of attitudes, interests and motives that brought them together in the first instance, and their confluence in atrocity events.

Extremely violent societies are not defined by structural or cultural characteristics that are conducive to massive violence and atrocity (Gerlach 2006, 460). Rather they have moved into a violence-prone and dangerous situation, which they can also leave behind again. Mass atrocity crimes are embedded in such trajectories: they act as triggers and create such trajectories as repressive measures mount, the pool of perpetrators widens, and violence is used in an increasingly indiscriminate way against different victim groups.

Notwithstanding the participation of a range of civil society actors, state-led atrocities are a constitutive element and integral part of extremely violent societies. This type of repressive violence is a driver of other types of violence that coalesce in the context of extremely violent societies. In fact, the state and its loyalist arms (militias, paramilitary groups) often account for the majority of atrocity crimes, as for instance in Guatemala. As Gerlach and Werth (2009, 136) point out, state violence has a very public and a secret side. State terror and repressive policies on the one hand are publicly committed and communicated, and on the other hand often secretly and stealthily executed. Killings, deportations and sexual violence are more public, while enforced disappearances, torture and illegal imprisonment are often concealed. Nonetheless, both public and secret violence instil fear and terror in the population. Even when the conflict ends, they leave “societies of fear” in their wake where citizens distrust institutions and each other, and breakdown of social relations is widespread (Karstedt 2013a).

As Gerlach moves from the state as dominant actor to an understanding of “violent societies”, he focuses the analytical gaze on “the realization of violence rather than upon plans and intentions” (Gerlach and Werth 2009, 134). This uncovers a “diversity of backgrounds, experiences, education

and age groups involved”, and sheds light on the different roles these groups and organisations play in the execution of mass atrocities. This “reflects a new sense of complexity” (ibid.) and promotes a more nuanced understanding of such events. Importantly, when unravelling such events from the perspective of how violence is realised, the dynamics of the mass violence events come to the fore, and with it a new understanding of the role of emotions involved, which had received short shrift since Hannah Arendt’s book on Eichmann and Stanley Milgram’s experiments in the 1960s (see for example Klusemann 2009, 2010).

This important new concept has been received by more traditional genocide scholars with a number of reservations (Hinton, Wolfe, and Huttenbach 2007). On the other hand, it has been used to construct a quantitative indicator of extreme violence that combines both violence by state and non-state actors (Karstedt 2012) and has been promoted as a foundation for a relational approach to violence (Karstedt 2013b). The fact that today we aim at measuring violence by non-state and state actors separately, and the *Human Security Report 2012* (Human Security Report Project 2013) names non-state actors as major violent actors and perpetrators of mass violence in complex conflicts, all this speaks to an at least implicit acknowledgement and success of Gerlach’s conceptual vision and innovation.

The five contributions to this Focus Section demonstrate, each in its own way, a new understanding of massive violence and atrocity crimes that is inspired by the core features of Gerlach’s concept. The engagement of the authors with the concept of “extremely violent society” ranges from an analysis of state-led torture in West Papua (Hernawan) to the surge of violence by organised crime groups in Mexico (Rodriguez) and homicidal violence in Caracas in Venezuela (Tremaria). Wendy Isaac-Martin’s analysis of the conflict and violence in the Central African Republic (CAR) shows how pertinent this concept is for the analysis of contemporary complex conflicts with multiple actors without explicitly using it. John Braithwaite and Bina D’Costa in their analysis of the conflict in Sri Lanka focus on the dynamic interaction between different types of violence and actors, defining these as “cascades of violence” that trans-

form and mutate from one type into the next. They illustrate three “cascade” dynamics, and the nexus between (ordinary) crimes, war and state-led violence: how crime cascades to war, war cascades to more war and to crime, and both crime and war both cascade to state violence such as torture, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial execution.

While Braithwaite and Bina D’Costa, Budi Hernawan, and Wendy Isaac-Martin all use cases of conflict and mass atrocity that have more in common with the type of violence and violent actors that Gerlach describes, Octavio Rodriguez focuses exclusively on non-state actors and violence by organised crime. However, the drug wars raging in Mexico have been recently rated as a non-state conflict, and one of the most lethal globally (see Rodriguez in this issue). If anything, this testifies to the changing landscape of conflict and mass atrocity in the twenty-first century that Gerlach’s concept foreshadows. Rodriguez argues convincingly how different actors with different motives entered the conflict and fuelled the violence in Mexico; in particular state repression was a driving and destabilising factor in the surge of violence between 2006 and 2012, which at the time of this writing has picked up again. Stiven Tremaria exclusively uses interpersonal violence as the lens through which he analyses not Venezuela, but its capital city Caracas as a “violent society”. He demonstrates the ways in which this is related to the political sphere and action by the government. His tale of the city of Caracas is one of destabilisation of control, delegitimisation of security and policing forces, and encouragement of violent action by government agencies and political leaders.

Even if the concept of extremely violent societies was not originally conceived to cover such types of violence surges, these two contributions show how surprisingly valuable it might be when used outside of the framework of mass atrocities. Both contributions demonstrate that societies embark on a pathway into extreme violence not when states are strong or mainly through state-led violence as in the Holocaust, but when states are weak and lose out to groups and actors, including government agencies, security forces and factionalised elites that pursue their own interests with violent means. Karstedt (2014) has defined this as the paradox of state-led viol-

ence that is high in strong as well as in weak and failing states.

With her analysis of the conflict in the Central African Republic, Wendy Isaac-Martin (this issue) presents a case that epitomises the type of violence, actors, and dynamics that are defining features of contemporary conflicts. She in particular describes the role of militias that are engaged by political leaders, act in shifting alliances and with confluent motives, and thus create an extremely violent environment. Again, her study is one of a weak state engaging directly or by proxy in mass violence and terror. She demonstrates that the role of ideology, in particular religion, is hugely overrated in this conflict, and corroborates Gerlach's argument of the motivational mix and indistinguishability between ideological and utilitarian or purely pragmatic motives (Gerlach and Werth 2009, 135).

Budi Hernawan presents a narrative of torture in the long conflict between West Papua and Indonesia. This is a study of what Gerlach and Werth (2009, 136) term "the public and the secret" in the development of repressive policies and mass violence. Hernawan shows how torture had a very public side – it could hardly be hidden in the built environment of Papuan villages and towns – but also a hidden side with forced disappearances and a secretly operating security apparatus. Hernawan uses a Foucauldian approach to describe its public side as "theatre of torture".

As these contributions demonstrate, the concept of extremely violent societies is not a rigid framework. It allows for analyses of different scales and spaces – from cities to countries – and different types of violence and conflicts. It is a concept that has a lot of potential in reaching out to other frameworks and aligning and accommodating them. However, its main potential lies in its conceptual power to analyse contemporary mass violence beyond state-led violence, and to get to a more nuanced understanding of such violence. Such understanding will ultimately enhance our tools for intervention and prevention. It is hoped that these contributions will prove its potential and value to a wider audience.

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