How Violence Breeds Violence: Micro-dynamics and Reciprocity of Violent Interaction in the Arab Uprisings

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This article builds on the recent trend of analyzing violent interaction through visual data, but goes one step further than existing research studying the emergence of violence by investigating the micro-dynamics of how violence evolves. The article applies micro-sociological analysis of video material from the uprisings in Bahrain, Tunisia, and Syria as well as interviews with activists, opposition politicians, and journalists from the three countries. The material supports Randall Collins's (2008) argument that the emergence of violence is constrained by particular situational circumstances where the perpetrator is able to dominate the victim and/or to avoid direct contact with the victim. However, contrary to what one might expect if emotional domination precedes violence, this does not mean that attacks are rarely followed by counter violence. Rather, this article argues that violence is often reciprocal with parties mirroring each other in action-reaction sequences. Hence, violence can be considered a form of *interaction ritual* in its own right – a dance-like sequence – initially inhibited by the human tendency to fall into each other's rhythms, but once initiated promoted by exactly that tendency.

Keywords: Violence, demonstrations, The Arab Uprisings, interaction rituals, micro-sociology

Conflicts that turn violent create their own dynamics and generate further enmity, revenge, and wounds that render the threshold to violence a point of no return (Jentleson 2000). A key task for conflict research is therefore to grasp the dynamics of violence.[1] Conflict research often focuses on the structural and motivational conditions for violence but rarely addresses the questions of *how* violence comes about and evolves.

Previously, most researchers have been unable to observe violence at close quarters and therefore had to rely on proxies, such as numbers of battle deaths. With an increasing amount of social life, including violence, being filmed by authorities as well as laypeople, researchers can better investigate how violence actually occurs and unfolds.

The current article grasps the opportunity offered by this technological shift and the micro-dynamics of violent interactions

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[1] Violence is defined here as behavior involving physical force that can hurt, damage, or kill a person.

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in the Arab uprisings in Bahrain, Tunisia, and Syria. It builds on the methodological and theoretical advances by the American sociologist, Randall Collins. By analyzing visual data Collins has developed a micro-sociology of violence arguing that violence is inhibited by tension and fear and shaped by dynamics of emotional domination. The article adds to the body of micro-sociological literature with a unique video dataset of violence and nonviolence in the Arab uprisings in Bahrain, Tunisia, and Syria coupled with interviews and participatory observation. The article supports but also challenges Collins's theory by showing how violence can also be considered a reciprocal ritual rather than merely one-sided or asymmetrical, arguing that once violence breaks out it tends to acquire its own self-perpetuating action-reaction mechanism whereby domination in the situation becomes less important. Thus, violence can be considered an interaction ritual in its own right, with characteristics similar to cooperative interaction; that is, rhythmic entrainment and mirroring the actions of the other part.

The article proceeds as follows. Firstly, I present Collins micro-sociological theory and review its application to contexts of relevance to this study as well as the treatment of the reciprocity of violence in the literature. Secondly, I describe the methods used and the contexts of the three Arab uprisings. Thirdly, I analyze the micro-dynamics of how violence occurs and evolves, arguing that it often follows a pattern of action-reaction that makes us rethink violence as a social interaction ritual resembling a dance-like sequence.[2]

1. Collins's Micro-sociological Theory of Violence

Collins's basic assumption is that humans aspire to maximize emotional energy, an aggregated level of positive emotions that is foundational for agency (Bramsen and Poder 2014). Along with solidarity, this emotional energy is generated in what Collins coins "interaction rituals" consisting of situations where humans are bodily co-present, have a mutual focus of attention, feel a barrier to outsiders, and share a mood (Collins 2004). Such rituals can be more or less successful and intense depending, for example, on the degree of mutual focus of attention, and thus produce various levels of group solidarity and emotional energy.[3]

Not all interactions produce solidarity and energize all involved parties, however. Collins (2004) argues that some rituals of power and status (here referred to as domination rituals, cf. Bramsen and Poder 2014) energize one party and deenergize the other through actions of domination. One party sets the rhythm of interaction and the other party follows submissively.

As argued by Bramsen and Poder (2014), as well as Boyns and Leury (2015), interaction rituals are not always structured as solidarity-generating cooperative interaction or asymmetric domination interaction. Interaction rituals can also be characterized by conflict; these should not be considered failed interaction rituals, but rather interaction rituals in their own right, producing tension and negative emotional energy.[4]

Collins's theory has been applied to many social phenomena, from research communities through the tobacco industry to sex and violence. His *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory* (2008) sets out to explain all types of violent actions across cases – from domestic violence to hooligan fights to war – on the assumption that there are similar micro-sociological dynamics in every violent incident, despite contextual differences. Rather than analyzing violence in terms of numbers of battle deaths, experience of fighting, or study of the background conditions for violence, such as culture or poverty, Collins studies micro-situations of violence in visual data. His surprising conclusion is that we have generally misunderstood violent interaction as long, competent fights occurring between two actors of equal size and strength, as in Hollywood Westerns or action movies. This myth stems from our inability to observe violence directly in its actual unfolding. Even interviews with fighters tend to replicate the myths portrayed for example in Hollywood Westerns,

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[2] I use dance as a metaphor to indicate similarities between dancing and fighting, including how a body falls into the other's physical rhythms without much reflection (when improvising), rhythmic turn taking, and mirroring the partner.

[3] Interaction rituals also produce symbols of social relationship and standards of morality, but these elements are not central to this analysis, and therefore not further discussed here.

[4] Bramsen and Poder (forthcoming) identify three broad categories of interaction relevant in conflicts; cooperative interaction (equivalent to Collins's general usage of interaction rituals), domination interaction, and conflictual interaction. These categories will be used throughout this article.

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because the glamourous portrait of violence has been internalized. Collins proposes a new research agenda for studying violence: to study videos and pictures of un-staged violence. After studying visual material, Collins finds violence to be significantly different than one might expect from watching action movies. Violent episodes are often short, incompetent, and carried out against weak and vulnerable victims. The common belief is that violent behavior is something individuals easily turn to if they are sufficiently motivated. Collins turns this logic around, arguing that violence is difficult and only occurs under specific situational circumstances: that "violent interactions are difficult because they go against the grain of normal interaction rituals" (2008, 20). Thus, violence is shaped by a field of confrontational tension and fear that inhibits violence or makes it incompetent or ineffective. Violence therefore occurs under a limited set of circumstances. Collins describes five pathways to violence: 1) Attacking a weak victim, as when the victim is outnumbered or displays a weak body posture (for example ducking or shrinking). 2) Group-oriented weapons and tactics generating emotional solidarity in conducting violence, as when a group is trained to act in a coordinated manner, for example marching rhythmically in step. Group-oriented action directs the focus of attention away from the enemy and toward fellow fighters. 3) Audience-oriented violence, where fighters direct attention away from the opponent and toward an audience that applauds and supports them. 4) Technical focus of attention or distant violence, where the perpetrator is not interacting with the victim. 5) The clandestine approach, in which no hostile confrontation is expressed until violence is conducted at a close range (Collins 2008).

1.1. Violence and Situational Domination

Collins's micro-sociological theory of violence has been applied to a range of cases where emotional domination precedes violence. For example, Klusemann (2009, 2010a, 2012) applies Collins's approach to analyze the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, showing how emotional domination is a condition for violence even in situations where orders are given. Given that Klusemann focuses on genocides and one-

sided violence, the reciprocal elements of violence are less important to his analysis – which therefore has no place for the way emotional domination quickly shifts or becomes less important in two-sided violence (the focus of this article). Another application of Collins's micro-sociological approach, which is of particular relevance to this article, is that of Anne Nassauer (2013, 2016). On the basis of a comprehensive visual data analysis of 30 left-wing demonstrations in the United States and Germany, Nassauer identifies a number of pathways for conflict, all of which involve an increase in tension/fear. In Nassauer's case studies, violence requires domination on a micro-situational scale, but it occurs when the police no longer feel that they dominate the crowd; that is, when tension and chaos arise because their communication breaks down, the protesters damage property, and/or there are rumors of police being attacked. She finds that violence usually arises when police and/or protesters are uncertain and believe that they already have been attacked or are about to be so. Nassauer focuses on pathways by which violence occurs in the first place, whereas this study seeks to go one step further and investigate how violence evolves and how it can be considered an interaction ritual in its own right with a new mode and rhythm of interaction.

1.2. Violence and Reciprocity

This article challenges Collins's assertion that violence contradicts the human tendency of social entrainment. I argue that violence, once initiated, can also be reinforced exactly by this tendency of falling into the opponent's rhythms. While the reciprocal micro-dynamics of violent interaction are not acknowledged within Collins's theory, the social dimension of violence has not gone unrecognized in fields like anthropology and sociology (Schröder and Schmidt 2001), notably with Simmel's foundational study of the fight more than a century ago (1908 [1950]). Interestingly, postcolonial and anthropological studies focus on violence as not exclusively destructive but also productive,[5] by highlighting, for example, how violent acts produce and stabilize identities (Appadurai 1998) or how violent resistance can challenge colonization and "make" political

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[5] This is meant as a descriptive rather than a normative statement.

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identities (Sen 2016). Likewise, several studies emphasize the ordering functions of violent interaction (for example Anderson 1999). However, the argument that I propose in this article is different. Rather than emphasizing the different social *functions* of violence, what I wish to point to here is the potential social and reciprocal nature of the violent ritual per se. Not how violence is meaningful for structuring social life or shaping identities, but how violent interaction resembles a conversation or dance where the parties mirror each other's actions. This is important not only theoretically, but also in practice, as it may inform how violent interactions can be disrupted.

Closer to the argument that I am here making, several studies emphasize the reciprocal aspect of protest violence. For example, Donatella della Porta investigated leftwing demonstrations in Italy, arguing that:

> In these long-lasting processes, there was a reciprocal adaptation of tactics between police and protestors. (...) From the point of view of practices of violence, there was a reciprocal influence as well, with brutal behaviour on one side producing and reproducing brutal actions on the other. Stones, sticks and Molotov cocktails were used to protect the protestors from police baton charges; barricades were constructed to stop police; even firearms were used to respond to police shooting at demonstrators. Escalation thus developed in action. (Della Porta 2014, 169)

However, what Della Porta describes, and what others including Collins recognize (Collins 2008, 413), is the overall action-reaction pattern of violent atrocities giving rise to retaliation. What this article seeks to highlight is the smaller-scale micro-reciprocity of violent interaction where attacks cause immediate counterattacks, back and forth.[6]

2. Methods

Researchers are rarely in the right place at the right time when violence occurs (and for security reasons, that is often more the wrong place at the wrong time). Video and photographs recorded on smartphones and uploaded to the internet and social media provide unprecedented material for the situational analysis of violence and nonviolence (Collins 2008;

Lynch 2016; Nassauer 2016), as they enable researchers to observe critical events and past interactions. The Arab uprisings are among the most intensely documented international conflicts when it comes to photographs and videos, as new media and cellphones played an essential role in the coordination, mobilization, and dissemination of the protests (Lynch 2012):

> "One of the most significant aspects of the wave of protests and uprisings that began in Syria in 2011 has been the use of the mobile phone camera and small video cameras as a tool for documentation, political activism and creative expression" (Elias et al. 2014, 257).

This opens new potential for analyzing the micro-sociological details of violence and nonviolence as it emerges and unfolds. To study confrontations between security forces and protesters, I sighted hundreds of videos of violent and nonviolent demonstrations on YouTube and Facebook, collecting fifty-nine of particular relevance to the study.[7] The selection criteria for the violent videos were 1) that the video portrayed violence or a potentially violent situation; 2) that both police and protesters were visible in the video and that both perpetrator and victim were visible at the time of violence (except in cases where the violence was clearly conducted from afar); 3) that the video was filmed from sufficiently close and was of sufficient quality to observe body postures and interaction; 4) that positions and identities of actors (as police or protesters) were sufficiently visible; and 5) that the video was not edited to the extent that the footage was unreliable and/or that interaction could not be analyzed. Collins's empirical material on violence in riots mainly consists of still photographs and a few three- to five-second video excerpts from television broadcasts (Collins 2008, 413). My dataset of longer videos enabled me to observe sequences of violence – in some cases the entire encounter between protesters and police. I replayed the videos repeatedly in slow-motion in order to record as many details as possible.

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[6] Importantly, I do not argue that violence is always symmetrical; several of the videos from Bahrain, Tunisia, and Syria show one-sided violence where a group of riot police for example attack a single protester. Thus, violence can be *either* an asymmetrical *or* a symmetrical ritual depending on the situation.

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The videos from Syria, Bahrain, and Tunisia were only filmed by activists and bystanders. This creates a potential bias in the data, with the videos being filmed from a particular angle (the protesters point of view) and potentially edited to only show parts that the protesters would like others to see. This might imply that there are even more situations where protesters likewise attack the police than is portrayed in the data-set (which would however not challenge but rather support the argument of this article, that violence often breeds violence).

As Wessels (2016) rightly argues, only a fraction of Syrian YouTube videos can be used as legal evidence for war-crimes prosecutions and transitional justice due to the lack of verifiable contextual information, such as date, time, geographical location, and identity of perpetrator and victim. Likewise, using videos for research clearly involves many pitfalls: they only show a specific event, filmed from a particular angle, and some may even potentially be manipulated or fabricated[8]. Nevertheless, videos are the best source we have for investigating such situations and provide an unprecedented, information-heavy window into what are now historical events. Participatory observation, textual analysis, and interviewing likewise involve observation from a particular angle. In fact, video is better than participatory observation for micro-sociological analysis of interactions, as observing from a safe distance and watching repeatedly allow greater attention to detail. That said, certain contextual dimensions and experiences cannot be extracted from videos. To better grasp these aspects of the three uprisings, including other unrecorded situations and ensuring ethnographic sensibility in the visual data analysis, I also conducted participatory observation of a demonstration in Bahrain and fifty interviews with activists, journalists, and opposition politicians from Bahrain, Tunisia, and Syria.

3. Cases

Syria, Bahrain, and Tunisia present three diverse cases (Gerring 2008, 650) of Arab uprisings and different entry points to examining violence: in Tunisia, the revolution was successful, short, and improvised; in Bahrain, the revolution

has been unsuccessful thus far, prolonged, and increasingly very routinized; and in Syria the demonstrations were met with brutal violence and spiraled into civil war (Lynch 2016). Even though demonstrations in these three countries are diverse in the context of the Arab Spring (different durations, success, and degrees of routine), the findings suggest that similar patterns of violent interaction can be identified across cases. Before proceeding to analyze the micro-dynamics of violence, an introduction to the three contexts of violence examined in this article is called for.

3.1. Tunisia

On December 17, 2010, a fruit seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, had his cart confiscated and was slapped in the face by a female police officer. He responded by setting himself on fire in front of the governor's office in the city of Sidi Bouzid. His act transformed popular discontent into protests that spread to several other cities and finally the capital, Tunis, within a month (Aleya-Sghaier 2012). People from various socioeconomic backgrounds participated in the protests: lawyers went on strike, bloggers reported the events to international media, and student organizations as well as labor unions organized demonstrations. Despite the different groups participating in the revolutionary actions, the protests were largely unorganized and improvised (Mabrouk 2011, 631). Although the uprising in Tunisia is sometimes portrayed as a nonviolent revolution, a more correct description is "popular revolution," since the protesters also committed violence in the form of stone-throwing and at times threw Molotov cocktails. After President Ben Ali resigned on January 14, 2011, the demonstrations and sit-ins continued in order to push for elections and prevent the military or anyone else from Ben Ali's closest circle coming to power.

3.2. Bahrain

The success of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt re-energized activism in Bahrain, where the Shia majority in particular had been challenging the rule of the Sunni Khalifa family for

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years. On February 14, 2011, activists called for a "day of rage," resulting in demonstrations in several Shia villages. Demonstrations intensified and the protesters occupied the Pearl Roundabout. That night, the protesters were violently removed by the police, but they returned on February 17 and sustained the occupation of the roundabout until March 15, when the protest camp was violently cleared with help from the Saudi Arabian armed forces (Karolak 2012). Occasional demonstrations have continued since then, including clashes between police and protesters, annual celebrations of the uprising, and opposition-led marches (Matthiesen 2013). The mass marches with thousands of participants led by the opposition parties were banned in 2014, causing a shift to smaller protests in the Shia villages, frequently on a daily basis. While the protests in 2011 were largely characterized by one-sided violence by the riot police and military, since then some protesters have reintroduced stone-throwing and Molotov cocktails, which they used before 2011.

3.3. Syria

Likewise inspired by uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Syrian activists made several attempts at mobilizing the Syrian people against the regime headed by Bashar al Assad in early spring 2011. Widespread demonstrations began on March 18, after a group of teenagers were detained and tortured for writing "the people want to overthrow the regime" on their school wall in the province of Deraa. Mobilization occurred at a slower pace than in Bahrain and Tunisia, and significant protests never reached the capital, Damascus (ICG 2011). In Syria, the first encounters between protesters and security forces played out very differently depending on the region. In Damascus, demonstrators were often met with riot control in the form of sticks and teargas, whereas activists in Homs, Deraa, and Hama were frequently attacked immediately with live rounds. President Assad offered concessions to the opposition but continued to violently crack down on protesters, fueling further demonstrations. In the course of summer 2011, parts of the

uprising militarized while others remained peaceful. Since then, the revolution has spiraled into a civil war (Lynch 2016).[9]

4. Violence as an Interaction Ritual

Analyzing the dataset of fifty-nine videos of violence, I found that violence between protesters and security forces in the initial phase of the Bahraini, Syrian, and Tunisian uprisings took five different pathways: the perpetrator attacked from *above/afar*, from *within a vehicle*, from *behind*, at *night*, and/or *attacked the outnumbered* (Bramsen 2017a: 229–46). Each pathway enables the perpetrator to avoid direct, face-to-face confrontation with the victim and/or to dominate the situation. This confirms Collins's observation that perpetrator domination precedes violence and suggests that violence is a form of domination ritual. A video (Figure 1) from Tunisia exemplifies such a situation, where violence is a form of domination and the victims surrenders to the rhythm put forward by the perpetrator(s).[10]

Figure 1: Violence as domination ritual: one-sided violence against a demonstrator in Tunisia

In a few cases, most significantly in situations in Bahrain, violence *did not occur* because activists stood their ground, very literally with both feet solidly on the ground and a proud body posture, arms stretched high in the air and a straight back, looking straight into the eyes of the riot police. It other

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[9] The focus in this paper is on the first period, where the anti-regime demonstrations were relatively comparable to the cases of Bahrain and Tunisia. It therefore excludes later war-like situations in

which Syrian revolutionaries were armed with anything more than stones or attacked with military weaponry such as barrel bombs.

[10] Video 6.

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words, the riot police were unable to dominate the protesters and thus unable to attack. This again corresponds with Collins's theory that emotional domination and/or lack of direct confrontation are conditions for violence.

The visual and interview material from the authoritarian contexts of Syria, Bahrain, and Tunisia supports elements of the micro-sociological theory of violence but also forces us to rethink them. While Collins (2004, 110–11; 2012) recognizes the importance of retaliation and revenge as larger patterns of violence, his theory does not account for the escalatory dynamics of violence in specific situations, possibly because his analysis is based mainly on pictures and a few three- to five-second videos (Collins 2008, 413). The larger dataset of relatively long videos allows me to analyze violence as interaction rather than as single, isolated acts. Given that violence occurs when one side has established situational domination, it would seem logical that violence would generally be one-sided; that is, after attacking, the situational domination would be maintained – if not strengthened – on the side of the perpetrator, and the victim would be unable to strike back. However, this does not seem to be the case in many situations in Bahrain, Syria, and Tunisia. Although there were many demonstrations where the protesters refrained from stone-throwing even when attacked, most of the video recordings show violence being committed by both sides.[11] There are generally also very few videos showing the transition between nonviolent demonstrations and violent clashes compared to videos showing nonviolent demonstrations or violent clashes, respectively. Violence, it seems, is not easy. When it does occur, however, it acquires a self-perpetuating, escalatory dynamic. A truism in conflict studies is that "violence breeds violence" (for example Galtung 1990).[12] This seems to be the case on the ground in protests in Bahrain, Syria, and Tunisia. More often than not, violence occurs in response to violence. One of the most frequent interactions before a violent act, and thus the best predictor for further violence, is a preceding violent act. When I asked ac-

tivists why they threw stones, they all described it as a "natural" reaction to police violence.[13] This lack of reflectiveness around violent counterattacks by protesters suggests that is often experienced as a reflex and thus part of an action-reaction pattern.

An illustrative example from Bahrain reveals a complicated sequence that initially supports Collins's theory in terms of domination preceding violence, but once the violence has begun such dynamics seems to become less important. The video shows a group of police running away from protesters. When one policeman stumbles and falls, he is attacked by a protester who beats him with a stick and tries to get the teargas grenade gun out of his hands (Figure 2, left). This corresponds with Collins's theory about attacking the weak and fallen. Shortly afterwards, four other protesters arrive. Before they can attack the policeman, however, the apparent attempt by the protester to wrest the teargas gun out of his hands results in the protester inadvertently helping him to his feet. The activist who accidentally helped the policeman runs away and a few others take over; one comes running from behind and throws a stone at the policeman while another tries to push him back down. Still facing the protesters, the officer shoots the protester closest to him in the face with the teargas gun, even though he is still outnumbered (Figure 2, right). He then runs away toward the other policemen.[14] While the attack on the fallen and outnumbered policeman is a clear case of situational domination, this is not the case for his counterattack, given that he is outnumbered, is face to face with the man he attacks, and runs away immediately afterwards; instead, this is a case of violence following action-reaction patterns where a victim is likely to fight back if he or she is physically/materially equipped to do so and is not completely paralyzed by the attack. It seems as though once violence breaks out; violent acts occur as spontaneous reactions that are less shaped by emotional domination.

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[11] Videos 1, 19, 29–39, 50–52.

[12] Galtung's assumption about violence breeding violence also includes cultural and structural forms

of violence. Here I only refer to direct forms of violence being self-reinforcing.

[13] Interviews conducted by the author with a Tunisian activist (March 2015) and a Syrian activist (January 2016).

[14] Video 27.

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Figure 2: Attack on fallen riot police member in Bahrain (left); policeman is inadvertently helped to his feet and shoots a protester (right).

Another video from Bahrain shows a longer fight emphasizing the same point. A protester runs out of the scattered crowd of peaceful protesters and throws a stone into a group of riot police. He comes closer and is repeatedly shot at with teargas at close range. He falls down and is shot with teargas again when he gets to his feet (Figure 3, left). Subsequently, several protesters run toward the police and throw whatever is available – stones, garbage cans, and garbage – at the police who respond with teargas (Figure 3, right).[15]

In Collins's theorization of violence, a violent act is a broken *interaction ritual* that contradicts the human tendency to become rhythmically entrained and "fall into solidarity" with others (Collins 2008, 82). By contrast, the two fights described above – as well as numerous videos of attacks and counter-attacks between police and protesters in Tunisia, Syria, and Bahrain – illustrate violent action-reaction sequences where the parties rhythmically mirror each other's actions.[16] If a person is attacked and the situation allows it, they are likely to fight back (in fact, it might actually be more difficult not to do so). Not just for revenge or self-defense, but because of emotional attunement, mirroring, and action-reaction mechanisms. A fight can even be said to resemble a conversation or dance

Figure 3: Fighting between Bahraini riot police and protesters

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[15] Video 28.

[16] Videos 1, 19, 29–39, 50–52.

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with rhythmic turn-taking. One Tunisian activist described to me how the fighting on the streets would take the form of attacking and running away: "and then we run away, and then we come back, and then we run away."[17] The fighting is asymmetrical in the sense that the police are well-equipped and attack with live ammunition and teargas, whereas protesters have stones and/or Molotov cocktails. Yet the fighting ritual being performed is one of symmetrical fighting, each responding rhythmically to the other's attacks.

In some cases, especially in Syria, protesters even threw stones at security forces (and were met with gunfire) from distances of one or two hundred meters (Figure 4).[18] Throwing stones in a situation where they are unlikely to hurt or even reach the opponent may be associated with stone-throwing being a symbol of resistance in the Arab world (Pearlman 2011), but it also fits with the idea of fighting as symmetrical ritual.[19]

Figure 4: Mutual violence at a distance between Syrian protesters and regime forces.

In an article from 2013 Collins acknowledges that violence can be considered an interaction ritual, although only "an extremely asymmetrical interaction ritual, with strong common focus of attention by both sides, attackers and victim, and tight rhythmic coordination; but the rhythm is set entirely by one side, and the other side is forced to accede to it" (2013, 142).[20] On the contrary, I argue that violence need not be asymmetrical; it can also be mutual, rhythmic entrainment, as seen in cooperative interactions.[21] In other words, violence can be observed *both* as an asymmetrical domination ritual and as a symmetrical conflict ritual, depending on whether or not the victim is too dominated to fight back. This does not rule out Collins's assumption that violence initially "runs counter to the basic mechanisms of emotional entrainment and interactional solidarity" (Collins 2008, 25), but it suggests that once violence occurs it can likewise be *driven* (rather than inhibited) by emotional entrainment and the tendency to fall into the rhythms of the opponent. Violence breaks normal modes of interaction but – like other forms of intense interaction (such as sexual interaction) – once instigated violent interaction creates a new rhythm and mode of interaction with a certain momentum that is difficult to disrupt.

5. Conclusion

On the basis of visual data, human rights reports, interviews, and participant observation, I found that the violence occurring in demonstrations in the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Syria, and Bahrain followed five pathways corresponding with Collins's theory of violence, in the sense of attacking vulnerable victims without face-to-face confrontation. I also found examples from Bahrain and Syria where violence was avoided at least in part due to situational circumstances of eye contact and emotional equilibrium between police and protesters. While it is not easy to initiate a violent interaction ritual, I argue that, once instigated, violence is less conditioned by perpetrator domination

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[17] Interview with Tunisian activist, conducted by the author (March 2015).

[18] Videos 50, 51.

[19] For further discussion of why stone-throwing should be considered a violent act see Pressman (2017).

[20] Collins does not explicitly rule out that violence could take the form of a symmetrical ritual; he simply does not mention this possibility. His argument that violence is preceded by emotional dominance would imply (unless otherwise explicated) that this domination continues throughout the violent interaction.

[21] Unlike solidarity interactions, violence generally does not generate solidarity among participants (friendly fights are perhaps exceptions here). Rather violence is either a form of domination energizing one party and deenergizing the other or a form of conflict ritual energizing both parties with negative emotional energy (Boyns and Luery 2015, Bramsen 2017b).

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and acquires its own self-perpetuating dynamic where the parties mirror each other in a pattern of action-reaction. Unlike what might otherwise be expected from Collins's theory about emotional domination conditioning violence, violent interaction rituals are often not one-sided and asymmetrical. On the contrary, many of the situations in my data resemble a dance-like sequence of action-reaction, where the opponents respond to each other's attacks like in a dance. Collins's argument that violence contradicts the human tendency to become entrained in other people's rhythms and emotions might hold when violence is first initiated and thus breaks an established mode of interaction. But once an attack has been initiated, the "social" reaction by the counterpart is to respond. Violence then no longer goes against the tendency to connect and become attuned with other people, but instead defines the mode of interaction that both parties engage in. In such situations it might require much more emotional energy and training to actually avoid engaging in violent interaction, as exemplified by training of activists to respond nonviolently to violent attacks (Vinthagen 2015).

The argument that violence is reciprocal might be fairly commonsensical; it is well-accepted that violence breeds violence, at least over time. The specific contribution of this paper is twofold: firstly, to challenge Collins's theory of violence as merely an asymmetrical form of interaction, and secondly to show empirically how violence evolves reciprocally, mirroring social interaction, even on a small scale.

What is gained in practice by considering violence as a form of conflict or domination ritual? Firstly, I would argue that this perspective is useful in violence prevention, as it implies going beyond normative condemnation of violence (as it is common in nonviolent resistance), and emphasizes the importance of training people how to react when attacked and to resist the tendency to mirror the attack of the other. Secondly, it raises questions of how violent rituals can be disrupted. Like any other ritual, violence has a certain momentum that may be possible to break for example through nonviolent actions responding to the violent act with neither submission nor counterattack. If protesters give flowers, say "thank you," or initiate

other rituals of fraternization (Ketchley 2014), it may be challenging for violent actors to initiate or continue the violent ritual.

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