

## 8 Conclusion

This book has applied two concepts, ‘mass violence as social interaction’ and ‘conditions of violence’ as new elements in the effort to demystify violence. Both have led to inconvenient findings. This final chapter will synthesize some of these findings, discuss overarching patterns and add some concluding reflections. It also suggests some possible avenues for future research. In this chapter, I consider the two core concepts one after the other and finally offer some further perspectives.

### Mass Violence as Social Interaction

The approach to observing mass violence as social interaction through individual accounts and views from below (and participant observation to a limited extent) has shown how widespread violence was and pointed to the phenomenon of multi-polar violence. First, here are some thoughts about the former. This volume argues that violence is made by the people, as chapter 4 on crowd violence in Bangladesh, chapter 2 on Rwanda in 1994 and chapter 7 on COVID-19 illustrate. It is not by accident that all of these deal with intrasocietal conflict in which, as I argue, many claimed the freedom to kill as a political right (which I would not have grasped without examining the COVID-19 pandemic). Indirectly, I also argue (in chapter 5) that non-violence can be made by the people: many war films in the Soviet Union, about which there were heated debates at the time, generated a peace message by constructing narratives of wartime suffering, pain and tragedy (instead of victory and heroism), and millions flocked to the cinemas to watch them.

Sound history employed for studying mass violence as social interaction brings out, *inter alia*, the emotions and the degree of personal involvement on all sides of conflicts (and in particular, feelings of loss by survivors who tell the story). While I have concentrated on overarching patterns, sound violence also shows the individuality of action related to violence on all sides.

As I said, my approach serves to take everybody involved in mass violence seriously and understand them as autonomous agents under certain man-made conditions (capitalism, war, civil war and epidemic). Among other things, this also means analyzing the ideologies of those targeted. A theme that stood out in this respect was religion, the role of which differed between the cases. For persecutors, religion or spirituality do not seem to have played a big role in mass violence. In Rwanda, attackers made few claims to religious values, and the same goes for objects to protective restrictions in the COVID-19 pandemic. During the massacre at Chuknagar, the Pakistani soldiers killed in a shallow instrumentalization of religion

(as group distinction), and Bihari crowds in East Pakistan possibly made claims to maintaining the unity of an Islamic state but with little obvious spirituality (see chapters 2, 7, 3 and 4, respectively). Those under attack had their religion silenced and repressed at Chuknagar, which was, in part, replaced by elementary pain and loss, along with being reduced to bodily markers and knowledge of songs or language. In the Soviet Union after World War II, religion in anti-war films resurged to a limited extent in invoking a general notion of the humane and was often expressed on a symbolic plain for depicting the sacrifice of the innocent. Only in Rwanda did religion play a massive role, was becoming louder, declergized, autonomous and personalized among those who were persecuted (see chapters 2, 3 and 5).

Multipolar violence against non-combatants, which surfaced in this volume, is an inconvenient finding because its existence is often denied or belittled and it undermines simplistic, heroic and Manichean interpretations of history. It is not rare; historically, it could be observed in Azerbaijan/Armenia, Israel/Palestine, Serbia/Kosovo, in Myanmar and many other areas; in this volume, it is represented in cases in East Pakistan/Bangladesh, Rwanda, the Soviet Union, and World War II in general.

One implication of multipolar violence is that it often involves racism from various sides when violence is being fueled by collective ascriptions, for example, between many Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and 'Biharis' in 1971, perceived Hutus and Tutsis, and citizens of Axis and Allied states (see chapters 2, 4 and 6).<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is also to say that non-white racism exists, a notion that some authors dispute.<sup>2</sup> And it is in conflict with those who try to monopolize the status of a victim of racism by arguing that only black people, only people of color, only Jews, or only members of a certain other group suffer from racism, whereas in other cases one can only speak of prejudice and discrimination. Those who argue that only those in power can be racist and those without power cannot,<sup>3</sup> overlook that power hierarchies are not immutable, can shift and, consequently, "victims [can]

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1 I do not call this mutual racism because this would obscure that many people in societies in conflict were probably not racist, including many victims.

2 See Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talk to White People about Race* (London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2017), 98.

3 *Ibid.*, 2, 89. Eddo-Lodge's book, which has been influential among scholars, is a scathing criticism of white racism in Britain. She justifies her argument that there can be only white, and no anti-white, racism mainly by saying that whites form the vast majority in society (and hold almost all positions of power), which is a British perspective that does not apply to many other countries. However, I do concur with Eddo-Lodge's argument that few things are more repulsive than to talk to white racists who say that they are not and that it may not make much sense to talk to them about this issue.

become killers”.<sup>4</sup> That said, keeping asymmetric power relations in mind remains important. This is a profoundly racist world, and white racism is its biggest problem. In any case, particularly concerning racism, the belief is not plausible that it is only produced by the state or a few propagandists.

A key conclusion that can be drawn from the existence of multiple collective ascriptions and multiple racisms is that one needs to soberly analyze violence (and not mystify it), including on a low level of action, to not use collective prejudice oneself and fight the conditions of violence and its causes rather than perpetuate it.

Here is another inconvenient thought. Often, suffering from violence does not make people better. There is plenty of evidence to support this. This volume’s findings come close to those by the Polish historian Adam Leyszczynski, who stated in his “People’s History of Poland”: “People who lived in material distress and in a state that contemporaries often compared to slavery can be brutal and cruel, not only in moments of their rebellion, but also among themselves. Victims are only rarely likeable. Violence and oppression do not make for good manners. It would be a great mistake to idealize the heroes and heroines of this book.”<sup>5</sup> To say so, and contradict the widespread belief that suffering violence ennobles people, results from the effort to take all sides in violence seriously and scrutinize their action.

## Conditions of Violence

Conditions of violence cause many deaths. The concept builds on an understanding of violence as participatory. Attention to the existence of conditions of violence and their genesis highlights once again how deep and entangled roots violence can have in society. These conditions had a lot to do with imperialism, as the two case studies in this volume suggest (World War II and the COVID-19 pandemic). Creating conditions of violence is the preferred weapon of liberal imperialism, elegant and near-invisible as they are if one controls the media. Creating

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<sup>4</sup> See Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Nicholas Robins and Adam Jones, eds., *Genocides by the Oppressed* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009). For some examples of intellectuals justifying what was arguably counter-violence by the oppressed against civilians, see Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 256–260.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Leyszczynski, *Ludowa historia Polski*, quoted in Reinhard Lauterbach, “Ausbeutung und Renitenz”, *Junge Welt*, February 17, 2021, 11 (my translation from German).

these conditions is perfect for those who conduct economic war from their sofa and strangle a lot of people while saying, ‘hopefully there will be no war’ (i.e., no war that reaches them). This also is to say that conditions of violence are not only created by small elite groups but by large though identifiable collectives who act through mechanisms that prevail in capitalism (and sometimes, actually, market mechanisms in socialism). As an effect of these mechanisms, most of those who die under conditions of violence are poor and vulnerable (but this can include people impoverished by force, displacement and internment).

That said, one chapter in this book that analyzes conditions of violence is focused on economic warfare while the other is not (see chapters 6 and 7 on World War II and on COVID-19, respectively). Although many threads connected patterns of behavior in the Corona crisis to the inner workings of capitalist economy and society (and to imperialism), that case also differs from economic warfare in terms of a lower degree and different forms of political organization and an even greater impact of individual decisions and reasoning. It is a reminder of the questions that should be asked related to conditions of violence: who is it who creates them; what characterizes the system through which conditions of violence work; and what directions does the violence take?

This book often refers to capitalism but is not totally silent on violence in socialism. The Soviet Union and Soviet citizens imposed conditions of violence on various groups, foreign and domestic, in World War II, and the removal of COVID-19 related restrictions in the People’s Republic of China in December 2022 was clearly enforced by political pressure from out of the population (see chapters 6 and 7). Both facts point once again to the importance of agency from below. And they say that conditions of violence are not solely a problem of capitalism.

The participatory character of creating conditions of violence also encompasses rationales for violence. As conditions of violence in World War II and in the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate, these rationales were not only elite-driven and certainly not only provided and distributed by the state. This was also true for crowd violence in East Pakistan/Bangladesh in 1971–1972 and, indirectly, the mass murder in Rwanda in 1994. There is more conscious behavior in the populations than many assume.

This participatory character raises questions about the relationships between rationales, denial of violence and violence itself in conditions of violence. The case of the current world conflict, in which parts of the northern hemisphere are drifting toward comprehensive nuclear war, is insightful. Large parts of the intelligentsia play a big role there. If, when the rubble is cleared up in the end, they will claim that they were only followers and unwilling executioners, don’t believe them! People from the intelligentsia (on different sides) are a driving force of war, not fellow travelers; drivers of repression; their own censors and the censors

of others. In other words, they are manipulators, not manipulated. This goes in particular for people presented in the mass media as ‘experts’. This is the time to question the ideology of liberal imperialists, the people who assert that everybody else is ideological, except for them.

The concept of conditions of violence allows to shed light on the inner workings of destructive liberalism. In the case of this book, I hope to have done so in regard to the previous world conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic (chapters 6 and 7).

Mystification in the mass media and scholarship involves completely delegitimizing certain incidences or forms of violence and its carriers (for example, violence for decolonization or revolution), which they call ‘terrorism’, ‘genocide’ and bestiality, allegedly driven by an absurd ideology (this is for dehumanizing the ‘perpetrators’ or depicting them as insane); and that serves, in turn, to legitimate and demand different forms or incidences of violence which they give other names such as ‘sanctions’, ‘self-defense’, ‘air strikes’ and ‘soft power’.<sup>6</sup> They deny that this is violence at all or that it claims victims. Scandalizing some kinds of violence is used, and essential, to produce other violence. The misuse of the study of past mass violence for legitimizing war in different national political contexts has recently reached new peaks.

Accordingly, there will be criticism that this book simply declares everything violence and that one needs to keep apart different kinds (methods) of violence, some of which are allegedly more severe, repulsive and intentional. Presumably, among such critics will be some war intellectuals who have called the loudest for arms shipments, aerial attacks, invasion or economic warfare.

Bourgeois scholarship serves to stabilize and optimize capitalism, bourgeois rule, and the international rule of certain groups of the bourgeoisie. System-preserving ‘experts’ work, therefore, in close cooperation with courts, including international courts, which maintain the existing order. Make the laws, man the courts. And write the history. This is also a question of class. After all, violence is often regarded as a disturbance of the bourgeois order, and this perspective is also derived from feelings of moral, political and cultural superiority in relation to lower class, uneducated or colonized people. The ‘haves’ determine the rules legally as well

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<sup>6</sup> For great imperialist (naval) powers and their legal scholars keeping their starvation blockades out of international law for about a century, see Mulder and van Dijk, “Why”. The connection between narratives of violence suffered, allegedly or actually, and using violence is also discussed in the psychological literature about competitive victimhood. Two examples are Masi Noor et al., “When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflict”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16, 4 (2012): 351–374; Isaac Young and Daniel Sullivan, “Competitive victimhood: a review of the theoretical and empirical literature”, *Current Opinion in Psychology* 11 (2016): 30–34.

as they do in economic warfare: both are neat and veiled. Few of these well-paid intellectuals have any regard for the 'have-nots', against which the kinds of war they support are often directed, and often they do not even see them. Their rules-based world order has violent rules. Others have said so too. Through his concept of structural violence, Johan Galtung referred in particular to imperialism, finding the two almost identical.<sup>7</sup> I just suggest considering other forms of indirect violence than him, violence that has a direction and kills somewhat more quickly.

All of this does not mean to omit, belittle or glorify severe forms of decolonial or revolutionary violence against unarmed people (like killing, rape and expulsion). One can resist the temptation to identify with one side without being politically 'balanced' in a bourgeois sense. However, to take this violence seriously, one should soberly analyze it, and not on system-stabilizing 'experts' terms. In this volume, I have tried to do so with regard to the violence by Bengalis in 1971-1972 and, arguably, Soviet mass violence against non-combatants in World War II, arguing that it was not necessarily distinct from other violence at the time in terms of forms and justifications. The conviction that one's own side was 'good' also played a momentous role in these cases.

By combining the two research concepts of mass violence as social interaction and conditions of violence, this book describes how violence can become hegemonic, especially in chapter 7, and that many people derive from this social hegemony the claim to a *right* to kill. Examining the COVID-19 epidemic made me understand this. Chapter 7 also shows how conditions of violence can be produced through everyday practices. I argue that propaganda and indoctrination play some role in violence becoming hegemonic but not a primary one, while the main problem is that violence becomes a dominant social practice. It is not by accident that violent masses repeatedly appear in different forms and with different ways of action in this volume: in East Pakistan/Bangladesh in 1971-1972, in the COVID-19 pandemic and in the mass killings in Rwanda of 1994 (see chapters 2, 4 and 7). Racism is a case in point: it is a social practice, and that it is being deeply engrained this way may be a worse problem than racist ideology.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Johan Galtung, "A Structural Theory of Imperialism", *Journal of Peace Research* 8, 2 (1971): 85.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that racism is the only problem depicted in this book, which also talks about violent discrimination according to age, religion and sometimes gender and class.

## Further Perspectives

A conditions of violence perspective can be applied to other cases. Such conditions are also imposed by the economic warfare euphemistically – and arrogantly – called ‘sanctions’, and could be examined accordingly. In the 1990s, when this practice intensified, researchers pointed to the many deaths it caused, especially among the poor.<sup>9</sup> A recent, more comprehensive study allows for a more far-reaching argument. It shows, based on a large country sample, that “sanctions” on average reduce the life expectancy of the population in the target country significantly (0.4 to 0.5 years in the case of unilateral adoption by the USA, and 1.2 to 1.4 years in the case of UN “sanctions”) and that 98 mostly non-industrialized countries were subject to “sanctions” 1977–2012. Under certain conditions, the life expectancy of women is cut short more than that of men.<sup>10</sup> In other words, this economic warfare *usually* kills non-combatant non-elites en masse, and most countries in the world have suffered from this or must expect that they can become targets. The organizers, promoters and defenders of the economic warfare called ‘sanctions’ usually claim emphatically that they pursue ‘values’ through them; these statistics show what values they actually represent. The decrease in life expectancy is especially grave when ‘sanctions’ are adopted by the United Nations. Today’s United Nations, founded in 1942 as another name for the anti-Axis coalition, based on the Atlantic Charter, are worthy of their origins.<sup>11</sup> Conditions of violence have also been imposed through ‘humanitarian’ interventions (a temporary label of modern imperialism) and through ‘development’ policies.<sup>12</sup> This is evidence for the fact that liberal imperialism is now the main threat to mankind.

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9 For example, see John Mueller and Karl Mueller, “Sanctions of Mass Destruction”, *Foreign Affairs* 78, 3 (1999): 43–53; Joy Gordon, “A Peaceful, Silent, Deadly Remedy: The Ethics of Economic Sanctions”, *Ethics and International Affairs* 13, 1 (1999): 123–142; Anthony Arnove, ed., *Iraq Under Siege: The Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War* (Cambridge: Southend, 2002, updated ed.).- Galtung already observed much earlier that “[e]conomic sanctions occupy [an] interesting middle position” between direct and structural violence, although he trivialized it as being driven by good hopes. Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”, *Journal of Peace Research* 6, 3 (1969): 188 note 17.

10 Jerg Gutmann et al., *Sanctioned to Death? The Impact of Economic Sanctions on Life Expectancy and Its Gender Gap*, working paper (Munich: CESifo, 2019).

11 See United Nations website, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/history-of-the-un/preparatory-years> (last accessed April 19, 2024).

12 For development policies, see for example Patrick Barron et al., *Contesting Development: Participatory Projects and Local Conflict Dynamics in Indonesia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 36–43; Christian Gerlach, “Indonesian strategic resettlement and development policies

That said, liberal imperialism is unfortunately not mankind's only problem. The concept of conditions of violence could also be applied to the treatment of nature by humans. After all, some of the same sources of aggression as in the COVID-19 pandemic are at work in the human destruction of, if not the planet, then at least of animals and plants. The main reason is the refusal to change one's lifestyle even though it is destructive. It is not comfortable to live in harmony with nature. One piece of evidence is fundamental to describing the relationship between humans and nature: the biomass of all humans (390 million tons) exceeds by far the estimated biomass of all wild mammals, terrestrial and marine combined, on Earth (61 million tons). The biomass of humans is only surpassed by that of livestock, that is, mammals in human captivity (often intended to be killed at some point; 630 million tons).<sup>13</sup> Man does not only kill the big mammals (and fish<sup>14</sup>); man has not only *displaced* mammals; it has *replaced* them. *This* is humanity. It shows to which degree humans monopolize life, based on boundless arrogance and a merely instrumental relationship to nature.<sup>15</sup> The 'right' to kill and torture animals – and plants –, to regulate and dominate them and decide their fate, is derived from an alleged moral, cultural and intellectual superiority (although empirical evidence has increasingly shown how baseless such assumptions are), which leads to a "global commodification of living organisms" and their exploitation. At the core of this is simply a lack of respect.<sup>16</sup>

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in East Timor", in Martin Thomas and Gareth Curless, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Late Colonial Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 584–599.

<sup>13</sup> See Lior Greenspoon et al., "The global biomass of wild mammals", *PNAS* 120, 10, 2023 (February 27, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2204892120>.

<sup>14</sup> For freshwater fish, see Stefan Lovgren, <https://www.spektrum.de/news/riesenfische-die-letzten-giganten-der-fluesse/2143479> May 22, 2023 (last accessed June 5, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> Humans' capacity to monopolize life in the oceans seems to be more restricted. Thus, estimates of the total biomass of fish globally are not only higher than the biomass of humans (ranging between 1 and 5 billion tons) but also vary greatly, indicating (fortunately) a lack of control. See figure 1 in Daniele Bianchi et al., "Estimating global biomass and biogeochemical cycling of fish and without fishing", *Science Advances* 7, 41 (October 8, 2021), <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.abd7554> (last accessed November 18, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> A recent philosophical effort for a non-hierarchical ethics of human-nature relationships is Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2013), quote: 8. Less far-reaching, Martha Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals* (New York et al.: Simon and Schuster, 2022) is a liberal reformist kind of study.

How does the knowledge about intellectual, cultural and social qualities of animals, as well as about the existence and (near-)extinction of species, come about? Often through humans holding animals in captivity, doing animal trials, killing animals, controlling and 'regulating' species.



## Personal Reflections

My efforts to demystify violence through sober inquiry have stretched over 30 years, with limited effect. In a sense, this may be true for most scholarship in the social sciences. However, it is difficult and intellectually limiting to operate in a public sphere, and a scholarly sphere, that consistently reward the mystification of violence that aggressive liberals need for the violence imposed by their side – for their structural violence, for conditions of violence, and at times for direct violence against civilians as well. This problem is highlighted in a situation of world conflict and an atmosphere of repression.

Some time ago, a former student from Pittsburgh wrote to me. In her view, the USA are an extremely violent society, which was the topic of a course of mine that she was reminded of due to current events more than a decade later. I felt ashamed. Was it only this that my teaching is memorable for? Is there nothing inspiring in what I teach?

The COVID-19 pandemic, for one, has revealed societies of recklessness. Mercilessly, it has shown that other forms of social order are needed that could be called societies of solidarity and responsibility. It is research on such societies, or the possibility thereof, to which I should turn.

