Some Remarks on the Complexity of Collective Violence: Understanding the Whole

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> I think, moreover, that no one will ever line up the truths of this mysterious tragedy and write them down — not the professors in Kigali and Europe, not the groups of intellectuals and politicians. Every explanation will give way on one side or another, like a wobbly table. A genocide is a poisonous bush that grows not from two or three roots, but from a whole tangle that has mouldered underground without anyone noticing.[1]

Claudine Kayitesi is convinced that the causes and dynamics of genocide, or 'the truths' as she calls them, will remain unknown to us. As a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, and not as a scholar, she states that the root causes of genocide are 'not two or three roots, but a whole tangle that has mouldered underground'. This image of a tangle, a confused mass of elements twisted together, is, I think, one of the better representations I have come across studying collective violence. In using this metaphor, Kayitesi shifts from a tree-root approach to a more rhizomatic approach to the highly complex interplay of actors, actions, contexts and cascade dynamics that give rise to genocidal processes. The current academic models we use to untangle this interplay of (f)actors have had their merits and advanced our understanding, but for the moment we are in desperate need of integrating them into new whole(s).

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, and especially in the past twenty-five years, the study of the dynamics of collective violence and the field of Perpetrator Studies in particular has been booming, as the editors remarked in their introduction to the first issue of the new *Journal of Perpetrator Research*.[2] But still it feels like 'a wobbly table'.[3] The gigantic increase in correlates, patterns, and models from several research disciplines has brought us to the point of endless dualistic debates (actor *versus* action, situation *versus* disposition, intentionalism *versus* functionalism, unicity *versus* comparability, etc.) and an incalculable number of concepts and explanations on micro, meso and macro levels. We are confronted with what David Matza already concluded in 1964, that 'when factors become too numerous […] we are in the hopeless position of arguing that everything matters'.[4] It is from this 'hopeless position' that I would like to react to the different topics raised by the editors in their introduction and in Christian

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1 Claudine Kayitesi, as quoted in Jean Hatzfeld, *Life Laid Bare: The Survivors in Rwanda Speak* (New York: Other Press, 2007), p. 206.
2 Kara Critchell, Susanne C. Knittel, Emiliano Perra, and Uğur Ümit Üngör, 'Editors' Introduction', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 1–27.
3 Hatzfeld, p. 206.
4 David Matza, *Delinquency and Drift* (New York: John Wiley, 1964), pp. 23-24.

Gudehus's 'Remarks on the Label, Field, and Heuristics of Perpetrator Research' in the present issue. Even though I agree with many of the views formulated by the authors, I am deeply convinced that our efforts need to be directed towards integration. It has never been more urgent and necessary to achieve greater unity in the study of the etiology of collective violence. So my reflections here will focus on the opportunity of an interdisciplinary specialist field, the challenge of complexity and causality, and the framework of systemism and emergence in conceptualizing collective violence.

As the editors note, the 'ambiguity and the proliferation of grey zones and the necessary acknowledgment of the complexity of the issues at stake' has given rise to the field of Perpetrator Studies.[5] They state that the research from several disciplines 'has begun to coalesce into an interdisciplinary field in its own right' with its own fundamental questions such as how to understand and encounter the perpetrators, the context and the dynamic process of perpetration.[6] I fully agree with the editors' belief that the disciplinary variety and cross-pollination is one of the main strengths of the institutionalization of Perpetrator Studies.[7] But I also think it is one of the major weaknesses. Bringing together this diversity will not only address the complexity, the number of specific disciplinary frameworks, the dualistic approaches or debates, but will also add more elements or particles to the whole. In the editors' overview and introduction recent approaches and new concepts, such as gendering perpetrators and democratic perpetrators, are presented.[8] Gudehus in turn criticizes not only the label of Perpetrator Studies, to be traced back to Hilberg's seminal work,[9] but also shifts the demarcation of the violence from the 'political' to the broader 'collective' and stresses that the focus should be on the actions and their contexts instead of the actors or 'subject positions'.[10] I cannot agree more with all of these aspects. The shift from actors to action, i.e. the focus on the process of perpetration, has advanced our understanding greatly, but what is lacking is a thorough integration of the two approaches.[11]

The complexity of collective violence lies in the interplay of the (f)actors and processes and therefore the overarching focus needs to be on causality and causation. The editors recognize this by stating that 'such violence can develop its own dynamic' and that within most work 'patterns of interaction between the three levels' (micro,

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5   Critchell et al., p. 2.

6   Ibid., pp. 2, 11–15.

7   Ibid., p. 2.

8   Ibid., pp. 7–10.

9   Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

10   See also Christian Gudehus, 'Violence as Action', in *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence: Action, Motivations and Dynamics*, ed. by Timothy Williams and Susanne Buckley-Zistel (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 36-57.

11   Christophe Busch, 'Demonic Transitions: How Ordinary People Can Commit Extraordinary Evil', In *Genocide: New Perspectives on its Causes, Courses and Consequences*, ed. by Uğur Ümit Üngör (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), pp. 49-82.

meso, macro) are clearly identified.[12] Gudehus also speaks of 'collective violence as a whole' and the need to discover the 'complex interactions of all these aspects and levels'. The problem is that we often stay within our own frameworks, methodologies, and approaches. A decade ago, we developed typologies of perpetrators, now we are describing typologies of actions.[13] These are important building blocks, but again they lack modelling on the interactional part. The opportunity before us is that Perpetrator Studies as a specialist and interdisciplinary field can contribute to the merging of disciplines and models. Similarly, it should also merge (interactionally) abstract categorizations such as perpetrators, victims, bystanders, or resisters. I compare it with the field of criminology and the study of crime and criminal behaviour. These topics were previously studied within law and sociology and gradually became topics of interest within a variety of other disciplines. The emergence of the interdiscipline of criminology as a separate field of expertise made it possible to reflect on integrative models that explain the emergence of crime.[14] Similarly, the field of 'Perpetrator Studies' has the opportunity to combine the advancements from individualism (the composition of social systems) and holism (the structure) towards the paradigm of systemism, where everything is a system or a component of a system. A paradigm that opens up space for both agency and structure.[15] Doing so will not only label collective violence as complex but will advance our understanding through integrative and connective modelling.

The very difficulty of conceptualizing collective violence lies in the search for causal mechanisms of the processes and the interactions that produce the outcome. It is understanding the whole as a whole. In doing so we need to reflect more on the notion of causation, the causation of events, the causation of acts etc.[16] In this light, I agree with Gudehus that individuals are causal agents who act within a context and therefore our attention needs to be with these actions themselves. Actions and events can shape situations and further function as trigger. Per-Olof Wikström, an ecological and developmental criminologist, points out that it is important to differentiate between direct causes and indirect causes (causes of the causes).[17] An inspiring example is the approach by Tore Bjørgo on the levels of causation of terrorism.[18] He

12   Critchell et al., pp. 12-13.
13   Timothy Williams, 'Thinking Beyond Perpetrators, Bystanders, Heroes: a Typology of Action in Genocide', in *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence: Action, Motivations and Dynamics*, ed. by Timothy Williams and Susanne Buckley-Zistel (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 17-35.
14   Mario Bunge, 'Systemism: the Alternative to Individualism and Holism', *Journal of Socio-Economics*, 29.2 (2000), 155–56.
15   Ibid., pp. 147–57.
16   Lieven Pauwels, *Oorzakelijke Mechanismen en Verklaringsmodellen voor Regelovertredend Gedrag* (Ghent: Academia Press, 2015), pp. 719-748.
17   Per-Olof H. Wikström, 'Does Everything Matter? Addressing the Problem of Causation and Explanation in the Study of Crime', in *When Crime Appears: the Role of Emergence*, ed. by Jean Marie McGloin, Christopher J. Sullivan and Leslie W. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 53-72.
18   Tore Bjørgo, 'Introduction', in *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality and Ways Forward*, ed. by Tore Bjørgo (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1-15.

distinguishes between *structural causes* (causes that affect people's lives on a rather abstract level like class structure, globalization, modernization, relative deprivation, social structures etc.), *facilitator* or *accelerator causes* (causes that make terrorism possible or attractive without being the prime movers such as media technology evolution, transportation, weapons technology etc.), *motivational causes* (the actual grievances that people experience on a personal level, often ideological translations of the causes from the structural level up to the motivational level), and finally *trigger causes* (causes that are the direct precipitators of terrorist attacks like provocative events or events that call for revenge or actions). Some of the root causes can be seen as preconditions (e.g. globalization, media technology, modernization etc.) that can have positive and negative outcomes and can hardly be removed or countered. But next to these deep-seated causes there are also more immediate circumstances and events that provoke or trigger terrorist events or processes of engagement. Here, there is a more direct link between the cause and the outcome.[19] What is further needed now are modelling efforts (from the field of standard social sciences and beyond) that search to integrate and explain the complex interaction between the many (f)actors or causes at play. Many disciplines within the social studies are advancing towards that direction, but also insights and methodologies from more 'distant' theories, such as assemblage theory, chaos theory, complexity theory, dynamic systems theory, or situational action theory, can inspire us towards an interdisciplinary emergent systemism that is needed to grasp the complexity of collective violence as a whole.[20]

'It's all about interactions.'[21] Collective violence is a multi-causal, multi-level and emergent phenomenon. Several theories of collective violence deal with these cumulative effects and cascade dynamics.[22] Concepts such as 'cumulative radicalization'[23] and 'mutual radicalization'[24] show that they are inherently driving on interaction and feedback (circularity). But in modelling these diverse concepts there is a lack of attention to the interactions between diverse causal mechanisms. A lot of models are still a product of linear and additive thinking. Lieven Pauwels argues that emergent systemism is the perfect antidote against this simplified linear modelling and strives

19 Ibid., pp. 3-4.

20 Wikström, 'Does Everything Matter?', pp. 53-72; Bunge, 'Systematism', pp. 147-157.

21 Per-Olof H. Wikström et al., *Breaking the Rules: The Social and Situational Dynamics of Young Peoples' Urban Crime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 405.

22 Kjell Anderson, *Perpetrating Genocide: A Criminological Account* (London: Routledge, 2018); *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence: Action, Motivations and Dynamics*, ed. by Timothy Williams and Susanne Buckley-Zistel (London: Routledge, 2018); Elisabeth Hope Murray, *Disrupting Pathways to Genocide: the Process of Ideological Radicalization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

23 Hans Mommsen, 'Cumulative Radicalisation and Progressive Self-destruction as Structural Determinants of the Nazi Dictatorship', in *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison*, ed. by Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 75-87.

24 Fathali M. Moghaddam, *Mutual Radicalization: How Groups and Nations Drive Each Other to Extremes* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2018).

toward 'unity in etiology'.[25] Systemism tries to grasp the complexity of the phenomena we want to understand. It is an important worldview and methodological approach that sees everything either as a system or an actual or potential component of a system. These systems have systemic or emergent features that their components lack.[26] In understanding, representing and countering collective violence it is absolutely necessary to combine all ideas together into systems and to approach them in a systemic rather than sectoral fashion.[27] If not, we will circle around important elements like actor, action, context and typologies of them. The shift towards emergence is needed, something that Sullivan, McGloin, and Kennedy have called 'moving past the person or the context'.[28] They state that:

> In drawing on the emergence framework, there is also a focus on interdependency and interaction within context as well as a clear structuring across different levels of understanding and focus on mechanisms as they fit with theory and research. In sum, with emergence, there is a sense that something new has arisen or appeared at another level based on the complex interaction of elements, forming a pattern where a degree of organizational cohesion can be clearly identified.[29]

An example of this is the multi-level approach which models how three layers, the landscape, the regime, and the niches, interact with each other and create new patterns.[30] Another model is the situational action theory, a general theory of crime or moral action, that seeks to explain these acts by stipulating the key causal processes and personal and environmental factors that initiate, motivate and guide people to act.[31] In short, a unified model based on empirical and theoretical concepts that are widely accepted within sociology, criminology and behavioural sciences. One of the major tasks of researchers who want to advance our understanding of collective violence is, similarly, to describe these interactional fields to bridge the fragmented and poorly integrated insights from the many disciplines that focused on the dynamics of perpetration. In can only hope that the specialist field of Perpetrator Studies will advance the systemic approach in connecting our understanding of causes and the causes of the causes.

25 Pauwels, p. 743.
26 Poe Yu-ze Wan, *Reframing the Social: Emergentist Systemism and Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 2016).
27 R. Keith Sawyer, 'What is Emergence?', in *When Crime Appears: The Role of Emergence*, ed. by Jean Marie McGloin, Christopher J. Sullivan and Leslie W. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 19-38; Bunge, p. 149.
28 Jean Marie McGloin, Christopher J. Sullivan and Leslie W. Kennedy, 'Moving Past the Person *or* the Context', in *When Crime Appears: The Role of Emergence*, ed. by Jean Marie McGloin, Christopher J. Sullivan and Leslie W. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 3-16.
29 McGloin, Sullivan and Kennedy, p. 6.
30 Les Levidowa and Paul Uphamb, 'Linking the Multi-level Perspective with Social Representations Theory: Gasifiers as a Niche Innovation Reinforcing the Energy-from-waste (EfW) Regime', *Technological Forecasting & Social Change* 120 (2017), 1–13.
31 Wikström, 'Does Everything Matter?', p. 62.

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