

Sophie Body-Gendrot
Pieter Spierenburg
Editors

Violence in Europe

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives



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Introduction

Sophie Body-Gendrot

How much related are present and past violence? The answers are complex due to the limited knowledge scientists have gathered, even after spending a life-time studying this very enigmatic and most serious social phenomenon called violence.

All authors agree that the present level of interpersonal violence cannot be sufficiently understood without taking the earlier long-term decrease into account. Ted Robert Gurr (1981, 1989) was one of these pioneers who undertook a statistical overview of the development of homicides from the Middle Ages to the present, looking at England in particular. On his curve, 20 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants were recorded in the High and Late Middle Ages and one case in the twentieth century put an end to the curb. Gurr interpreted this long-term decrease in interpersonal violence as “a manifestation of cultural change in Western society, especially the growing sensitization to violence and the development of an increased internal and external control on aggressive behavior” (Gurr, 1981:258). Currently, both the present and the past have to be considered in any attempt to answer the following questions: is the higher incidence of violence which still prevails a temporary exception or a new trend related to structural dynamics of modern societies? In which regions of Europe is it more specifically pronounced? More generally, this volume claims that historical knowledge of changes in violent behavior and of violence forms an indispensable contribution to an understanding of the manifestations of violence in contemporary societies.

This book is organized in five parts, examining contested definitions, long-term trends, contemporary trends, gendering violent practices and politics, war and violence, all contributing to elaborate historical and contemporary perspectives on violence in Europe. In **Part One**, two scholars agree that common definitions of violence are needed to work along the same parameters.

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In common-sense parlance, violence essentially refers to physical hurt and attack, **Pieter Spierenburg** observes (*Violence: Reflections About a Word*). Among scholars, anthropologists in particular feel the need to stick to this everyday usage, acknowledging that any intercultural comparison becomes problematic otherwise. All efforts of earlier scholars to broaden the scope of the concept of violence derived from a definite agenda. This is obvious in the case of “structural violence,” popular in the 1970s. This concept served to legitimize violent social protest with the argument that all unjust social conditions implied violence. Similar objections are in order against concepts such as psychological or symbolic violence. In conditions of high power inequality, they may lead to an intolerable confusion of sufferers and attackers. These notions are all based on the same implicit ‘logic’: (1) Violence is a serious evil; (2) some other evils in society are equally objectionable; (3) consequently, these other evils should be called violence too. But this logic being unscholarly, Pieter Spierenburg proposes to use violence in this volume as a reference to “all forms of intentional encroachment upon the physical integrity of the body”. This is neither an extended nor a too restricted definition. It includes a broader spectrum of interpersonal violence than that prosecuted under the law and hence it is not legalistic. And, next to interpersonal violence, it includes state violence: police action, execution and war. Hence it is independent from moral judgment and personal views of ‘order’.

“Violence is a multifaceted, socially constructed and highly ambivalent phenomenon,” **Willem de Haan** remarks (*Violence as an Essentially Contested Concept*). It is multifaceted because there are many forms of violence; it is socially constructed because who and what is considered as violent varies according to socio-cultural and historical conditions; and it is ambivalent in the ways it is socially sanctioned, legitimized and institutionalized, as well as culturally transmitted and experienced. Depending on context and perspective, violent actions may either be condemned and considered immoral, illegal and disruptive or admired and perceived as moral, legal and functional. Controversies occur and recur about both the substance of the concept and the scope of the definition of violence.

De Haan’s chapter explores the arguments for and against a restrictive or an expansive definition of violence, making use of Gallie’s notion of the ‘essential contestedness’ of concepts. It means that there are no conclusive reasons for accepting one definition and rejecting all others. For him, a proper definition should not be seen as a starting point for empirical research but as its temporary outcome. It would be more fruitful, he argues, to accept that definitions of violence are contested and that they vary depending on the specific contexts of discovery and contexts of justification.

“Violence has indeed many meanings and not all of them are negative”. “Violence is intriguing. It is universally condemned yet to be found everywhere. Most of us are fascinated and horrified by it. It is a fundamental ingredient of how we entertain ourselves...and an essential feature of many of our social institutions” (Litke, 1992:173). The latin root of violence, *vis/violentia*, refers to

strength, power but also to force and violence. The very act of coming to life is a violent act. Violence becomes dysfunctional when it is not controlled, channeled, contained by rules and laws and civil norms and when it becomes disruptive for social life in society. Robespierre coined the concept of ‘progressive violence’ in the French revolution explicitly for the pursuit of specific political goals. However, direct physical violence which will be studied here – aimed at harming, injuring or killing other people – indubitably stands at the center of the whole issue of violence, Peter Imbusch observes (2003:23).

“Violence always strikes by surprise. Due to its very nature, it exceeds our expectations, disturbs our modes of living, questions our daily life” (Ferenczi, 2000:15). It is superior to all other means of control and coercion and its impact which does not need explanation from the author is immediately grasped and is therefore highly disturbing. “We had secretly made the decision to ignore violence and unhappiness as elements of History,” French philosopher Merleau-Ponty wrote about World War II, “because we lived in a country too happy and too weak to even think about them” (quoted in Ferenczi, 2000:15). But the massive trauma of the 20th century have shown how such hope was fragile.

The combined historical and contemporary approach of this collection owes much to long-term trends in research on violence and three contributions constitute **Part Two**.

The Scandinavian case offers an excellent opportunity for exploring what use can be made of the study of long-term trends. The homicide ratios in some late medieval and early modern towns were indeed among the highest ever observed. Then a dramatic decrease in deadly violence occurred, starting in the 17th century, as part of a general European change. **Dag Linström’s** chapter however reveals a more complicated picture (Homicide in Scandinavia). It is not altogether obvious that the level of overall violence followed the same secular trends as that of homicide. A more detailed analysis of homicide ratios also indicates a much more discontinuous development, with a number of mid- and short-term peaks. Moreover, several local studies indicate considerable regional differences, which sometimes are even more striking than the chronological changes. Regions in northern Sweden and in Finland reveal homicide ratios close to present-day standards during the 16th century already, and in some of these regions they began to rise, contrary to the general trend, during the seventeenth. Finland also offers a divergent development compared to other parts of Scandinavia from the 18th century onward. Whereas the homicide ratios continued to decrease elsewhere in Scandinavia, Finland experienced a rising level of homicide and it still has among the highest homicide ratios in Europe.

Since Scandinavian historians disagree on interpretations and explanations, the merit of Linström’s chapter is to address complexity, to analyze the different theoretical approaches and to discuss interpretations relative to mid- and short term discontinuities, regional differences and the divergent Finnish case.

Court records have been used in a huge quantitative enterprise by historians. Implicitly assuming a perfect equivalence between legal norms and social