

ZiF Research Group: Control of Violence

1. Main Features of the Concept

The research group will examine *patterns of explanation* for, *changes of form* in and the *future* of violence.

In doing so, its guiding hypothesis is that in future we will face an *increasing loss of control over violence*. This *loss* is expected to lead to a rise in rates of violence. To test this hypothesis, the group will study manifestations of *physical violence at the individual, collective and state level*.

Two inferences are to be drawn from this.

First, we need to aim for *internationally comparative analyses* that consider developments in South America, Africa and the Arab world as well as in the West. These comparisons will make it possible to examine diverse *mechanisms* that operate at a particular time in a particular country. This will involve not only international comparisons, but also the *systematic* question whether *gains* in control exist that require examination in respect of their *quality* and their *impacts* on societal developments.

Second, this *geographical* comparison is to be combined with a *historical* comparison. This comparisons aim at exploring the specific features of the present situation and placing them in the context of longer-term effects.

2. Analytical Focus: Violence and Control

(a) The Notion of Control

The idea of a non-violent society has never been realistic, nor is it now. This also applies to so-called developing countries, and especially to societies in transition. A greater or lesser incidence of violence between individuals, collectives or states always exists. Nonetheless, people have not and will not abandon their hopes and efforts to at least “*contain*” the potential for violence. This is being tried by influencing socialization and distribution processes, by a state monopoly of violence to penalize breaches of norms, or by international law. Thus the concept of control has a thoroughly positive ring, at least when the point is to limit destructive power through violence by individuals, groups or state institutions. “*Keeping under control*” has a soothing effect on those who are on the side of those being protected. On the other hand “*out of control*” signals a threat in every respect.

However, control is an extremely *ambivalent category*. Control is based on superior power. This can assume various forms: the power of definition, physical power, legal power, or military power. Those who control hold sway over others and, as individuals, over themselves as well. Control is geared to enforcing a particular order as it is defined. It is a category whose effect or aim is to prevent any undesirable behaviour. It ranges from social control via state control to international control and employs various means, including collective mistrust, repression and the legal process.

In turn, forms of control *retroact on the controlling societies*. Control has different political functions. It is manifested in different ways, depending on whether it is restricted by the rule of law or is exercised in an authoritarian and dictatorial manner. It may lead to a massive increase in repressive organs or to an intensified logic of reprisal. It can be supported by majority opinion or be shaped by limited groups and their interests. In any case, control is not a neutral element in societies.

(b) Understanding of Violence

Our research must be embedded in a debate on the understanding of violence, because the characteristic feature of violence is ambiguity. In international violence research there is no agreement on the concept of violence. It is understood in a wide variety of ways and is applied to psychological, cultural and physical violence, right down to the concept of structural violence. In addition, there are other systems for classifying the multifarious aspects of violence, such as direct or institutional violence, etc., or micro and macro violence. We will have to take into consideration the most recent debates, which have mainly taken place in Germany, on whether the “why” or the “how” of violence should take a more central position in violence research.

Additionally overlapping connotations with other analytical concepts such as power and conflict must be debated.

Nonetheless, our understanding of violence is centred on *direct physical violence* aimed at inflicting damage, injury or death, which is thus exercised openly and in most cases deliberately.

This is a necessary benchmark, since we will vary other concept parameters such as the historical and international comparison and because the research group needs common “cores” in its individual subjects in order to conduct a meaningful interdisciplinary discussion.

3. Main hypothesis: Increasing loss of control

Violence is a resource to which individuals, collectives and states can have recourse at any time and which they use, or refrain from using, in line with specific risk assessments. This gives rise to the question whether there are signs that individual, collective, state and international losses of control are arising or spreading. One must examine whether the diverse mechanisms that exist at each instance and level are, for various reasons, in danger of becoming ineffective. If so one might justifiably assume that the future of violence could consist of a combination of a change in quality and an increasing quantity of acts of violence.

The hypothesis of a loss of control feeds on the finding that in modern societies there is an increasing frequency of quasi-footloose violence. This leads to unpredictable escalations and violence can no longer be contained adequately by the relevant control regimes, such as police, state surveillance institutions, national repression apparatuses and international law.

Moreover, the ambivalence of the control paradigm can also contribute towards an expansion of violence if control regimes themselves use violence. In extremis, societies may land in situations from which there is simply no way out. They face the economic and logistical dilemma of, for instance, only being able to limit the danger of terrorist attacks by markedly expanding state and police control mechanisms. This in turn prevents them from controlling other areas such as property offences, road traffic, etc. to the extent that meets the standards of Western democracies.

4. Three Levels of Analysis and Three Subject Areas

The hypothesis of an increasing loss of control of violence is to be analysed in three subject areas that belong to three different levels.

(1) Micro Level

At the *micro level* the group will look at individual murder rates. In West European societies, the downward trend in the murder rate seemed to end in the 1960s. It is also true that the number of homicidal massacres in the US has increased. In addition to massacres in schools, more and more men are killing their whole family and often themselves too.

In this field of investigation, what can be said concerning the relationship between loss of control and violence? First, one must look at homicide trends. As expected, explanations of these trends differ. Some authors regard them as being evoked by processes of delegitimization of state institutions – especially the state monopoly of violence – that seem to weaken their control capacity. The role of the civilizing power of the state monopoly will have to be explored. Additionally it will be investigated in a historical comparison whether changes in the efficiency of the monopoly of violence have to be regarded as linear or rather must be considered as a cyclic process depending on specific developments in a respective society. Furthermore, the question is to be explored, whether self-control, and in particular “conscience” as an element of self-control, is in decline. Our hypothesis is that people who commit homicidal massacres, especially, have lost control over their own lives. The disintegration of relationships providing recognition seems to play an especially important role in this.

While focussing on a loss of control due to delegitimization of the state monopoly of violence as well as on a decrease of the perpetrator’s self control we are exploring whether we are confronted by a double loss of control.

A homicidal massacre is an apolitical act of revenge committed in the everyday life of society with a destruction of life that is distinguished by a high degree of expressive force. In many cases proxy rather than named individuals are the victims. This intensifies the loss of control. Secondly, this violence is aestheticized in that the perpetrators, via the media, “immortalize” themselves even if they commit suicide if, due to the technologization of killing machines, they have achieved large-scale annihilation of others. This, too, involves an increasing loss of control.

We will have to discuss different approaches (civilization theory, modernization, etc.) that are intended to explain this historical development of homicidal massacres. In doing so, we have to combine theoretical, empirical and historical arguments. In addition, we have to look beyond Western Europe to non-European societies and ask how killings are culturally coded and prosecuted by the state there and what effect existing control mechanisms are having.

(2) Meso Level

At the *meso level*, we will discuss collective forms of violence and violence in the grey area between individual and collective violence. For this, we will focus especially on terrorism. This is not only because there is an enormous social and scientific need to interpret and explain it, but also because of the widespread assumption that these actions are decreasingly foreseeable and controllable.

The central *problem* is concentrated on the question whether the threat to modern societies by terrorist groups after 9/11 is different from threats in previous eras. Many current diagnoses of the age assume that there are differences from more traditional forms of terrorism. This is

postulated without making the history of terrorism itself an object of analysis – apart from the aspect of development logic. The research group will focus its attention on comparing hypotheses on the manifestations and causes of terrorism as developed in post-9/11 “diagnoses of the age” with historical constellations for which empirical studies already exist, such as the late nineteenth and early twentieth century or the 1970s and 1980s.

In this, the following *dimensions* will take centre stage:

- a) *Physical experience of violence and changes in it*
- c) *The Organization of Terrorism as a Social Movement*
- d) *Ethnic and Religious Terror: Loss of Control Through Expectations of Religious Salvation*

We must ask whether, compared with former manifestations of terror, terrorism is acquiring a new quality. Assumptions are that on the one hand terrorism is thoroughly permeated by the market and makes use of the logic and strategies of capitalism in a most sophisticated way. On the other hand it can be assumed that political ideologies have lost their significance for terrorist groups because they are based “only” on convictions that are temporally limited since they always run the risk of being rebutted. In many cases, the driving forces are collective humiliations and cultivation of the role of victim, sometimes coupled with conspiracy theories, a belief in ethnic belonging and expectations of religious salvation. The assumed new quality of ethnic or religious terrorism might evoke a double loss of control: Potential targets of terror have lost control in that there are longer any warning intervals to minimize the fear in everyday life. In the case of the perpetrators, expectations of otherworldly salvation override the traditional parameters of risk assessment.

(3) *Macro Level*

Third, the hypothesis of an increasing loss of control of violence is to be analysed on the *macro level*. Here, general changes in state power and international relations after the end of the Cold War along with the privatization of violence in various states are of special interest. These developments will be explored in terms of their impact on the possibilities for controlling violence. Geographically, we will look beyond Western societies and include other regions of the world, especially African or Latin American states.

One common assumption claims that the Cold War produced worldwide antagonism around which numerous conflicts grouped. However, the straightforward nature of conflict zones and their links to a superpower might to a certain extent have led to a situation in which violence was controllable and calculable. Thus, one question to be asked would be whether this relative global calculability was – after the *collapse of the bipolar world order* – replaced by the outbreak of hardly controllable violent conflicts.

Secondly, we will consider *global economic changes* and their impact on the controllability of violence. *Economic structural change* always has an impact on changes in social hierarchies and thus might contribute to the exacerbation of social conflicts. One must also ask to what extent *traditional mechanisms for controlling violence* have been weakened or have broken down in the course of neoliberal globalization.

Of main importance in this context is the *privatization of violence*. Where markets of violence exist and where perpetrators act with a low subjective risk, warlords and warlike gangs can take advantage of civil-war-like constellations for their own economic interests. Although the

privatization of violence is taking place worldwide, it is particularly significant in countries where the state order is endangered or has collapsed.

Under the concept of “*state failure*” the loss of control over violence has become a major topic of scientific discussion in recent years. It refers to the collapse or processes of disintegration of state bodies and institutions that are necessary for people to coexist in an ordered, calculable way. Studies in this context, that are mostly based on a governance-perspective, heavily underline the importance of having a legitimate state monopoly of violence. They also emphasize the importance of the existence of a democratic civil society when the controllability and calculability of deployments of violence is at stake.

However, we have to be aware that these concepts are mostly extracted from Western experiences of modern state-building and do hardly allow for alternative paths of development. Thus, empirical work will have to show whether terms like “state failure” or “fragile states” stand the test in a study of existing control possibilities in non-European societies. Additionally, from a historical perspective has to be explored whether states with a functioning monopoly over the use of force can be seen as the “normal case” or rather the historical exception.

5. Comparative patterns: international and historically

The Research Year is based on the aim of producing internationally and historically comparative analyses. This approach will allow us to examine various mechanisms of loss of control – and also potential gains in control – that operate at a particular time in a particular country or region. Building on that, we can explore the specific features of the present situation and place them in the context of longer-term effects.

6. Interdisciplinary Framing: The Controversial Relationship between Modernity and Barbarism

Violence is one of the most difficult phenomena to explore and thus renders an interdisciplinary approach necessary. The controversial relationship between modernity and barbarism seems to provide a useful framework in order to investigate the loss of control across disciplines.

With regard to the relationship between modernity and barbarism four fundamental positions can be distinguished. The *first position* interprets violence as a temporary anomaly that is “offset” against civilization gains (such as security). Thus, a positive balance of developments results.

The *second position* is diametrically opposed to this. Here, the focus of observation is not on the imperfection of the modern age but on its “instrumental success”, so that civilizing modernity itself appears at heart as barbarism.

A *third position* stresses the ambivalence between progress towards modernization and violence. That is, it assumes an increase in both humanitarian and destructive potential.

Finally, the *fourth position* denies that any connection exists between civilization and eruptions of violence during the twentieth century and the underlying premises. Instead, the anthropological argument sees violence as the inalterable destiny of the human species.

Clearly, there are problems with the central assumptions on which all four views are based. Hence, the aim is for the research group to make a contribution toward further clarifying these issues. In doing so, we should have in mind that control – due to the already mentioned ambivalence – can be an element of both barbarism and civilization.

7. Results-oriented goals

The results-oriented goals are concentrated on four facets:

- a) The point is to have an integrated perspective on a step towards a *theory of loss of control*. To achieve this, the goal is to define in more detail than previously what indicators for the loss of control over specific violence phenomena stand up to examination. To this end, we need a detailed understanding that is comprehensive in the sense of being historically and internationally comparative.
- b) This should lead to the emergence of *theory-based* assumptions and evidence of *mechanisms of violence control*.
- c) Third, the aim is to elucidate the *change of form* of both violence and violence control.
- d) The final point is the *dialectics of violence and control of violence* and the ensuing “new” violence, in other words the “unfinished” dynamics that spawn violence again and again.