Action Action Action[1]

Christian Gudehus

'Yet just how should one teach about perpetrators [of mass violence]?' This question was raised during the Q & A of a panel on perpetrators at the last meeting of the International Association of Genocide Scholars (in Cambodia 2019). More specifically, the question was how to bridge the distance between extreme violence on the one hand and the fact that this violence is carried out by humans on the other. How can the figure of the perpetrator be related to the triviality of human existence? In another panel, Alette Smeulers convincingly showed how the origin of perpetrator research lies in legal proceedings. Accordingly, German discourse on perpetrators was for a long time based on legal documents or investigation files. The focus on perpetrators thus results from the forensic logic that looks at the accused (perpetrators) and assigns deeds to individuals in order to evaluate their actions and motives and punish them where necessary.

Both aspects illustrate why I consider the concept of 'perpetrator research' fraught with problems and therefore would like to suggest another approach (which by no means claims exclusivity). Taking actions as a starting point of research on collective violence removes the need to reconcile what can hardly be grasped morally with the often still normal existence (before the act of violence, during the act of violence and after the act of violence) of people carrying out this violence. Having individual actions as the vantage point for the study of this kind of violence is one of many possible heuristics, a methodological decision, the choice of a perspective and method possibly connected with it. It is, contrary to what Raya Morag writes in her comment on my intervention, not an ontology at all.[2] The same cannot be said of perpetrator research that linguistically constructs a form of

1   Jackie McLean, *Action Action Action* (LA: Blue Note Records, 1964).
2   Raya Morag, 'On the Definition of the Perpetrator: From the Twentieth to the Twenty-First Century', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 13–19 (p. 13).

being – perpetrators – and on these grounds engages in explaining just why this does not establish an ontology. My suggestion would be to explain actions in the context of collective violence. If this is done thoroughly, collective violence can also be explained because actions are embedded in often complex systems of relationships, communication, institutions, and so forth. Actions are as much consequences as they are starting points. They are both the result of pre-existing frames of psychological, social and concrete nature and they are their causes. Especially sociological and psychological approaches to action have been discussing these aspects for a long time.[3] I would like to make a case for adapting this substantial knowledge much more thoroughly so that it will become an integral part of research on genocide and other forms of collective violence.

As far as I can see, a large part of the criticism, especially the one uttered by the authors of the editorial, amounts to nothing because it is either based on a too narrow reading of my argumentation or on a misunderstanding. Therefore, let me start by clarifying two central aspects of my argument:

1. 'Collective violence', according to my understanding, is the most general concept defining what all of us write about in the *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, *Journal for Genocide Research* and similar journals, whereas political violence, to take but one example from the responses, is much more specific.[4] Each possible action is a specific form of action. Therefore, starting with an overarching or very abstract concept does not preclude the use of more specific ones.

2. I would like to suggest action – or behaviour, or doing(s) – as the starting point of analysis. Perpetrators can only be identified by actions that researchers consider to be part of perpetration. One cannot identify perpetrators beyond their actions. Taking part in perpetration refers to the context, namely collective violence. This is why I suggest action and collective violence as the starting points of conceptualisation.

Therefore, contradicting Raya Morag a second time, I do not see action as opposed to perpetrator. Neither do I doubt that there are perpetrators in a moral or juridical sense. I only put forward a couple of arguments why action may be a better starting point for analysing

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3   An overview can be found in Christian Gudehus, 'Violence as Action', in *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence: Dynamics, Motivations and Concepts*, ed. by Timothy Williams and Susanne Buckley-Zistel (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 36–57.

4   Marcia Esparza, 'Examining the Political and Military Power in Latin America: A Response to Christian Gudehus', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 20–25 (p. 24).

collective violence than the concepts of perpetrator, victim, bystander, or helper.[5] I further think that these statements clarify Marcia Esparza's concerns. First, she seems to criticise a lack of context when analysing action – or situations – as she puts it. However, analysing actions means reconstructing cultural meanings, symbolic communication, habituations, triggers, individual experiences, norm-systems and so forth. Second, she argues against universal themes and all-encompassing concepts. Collective violence, she seems to say, is too broad a term, so broad indeed that the specifics of, let's say, political violence remain underexposed. Yet, as explained above, collective violence is only the most general concept.

Since my remarks in JPR 2.1 addressed the editorial of the first issue, the editors' response contains a couple of direct comments. It will be shown that these comments are, on the one hand, unsystematic, that is, they focus on a number of very different aspects, each demanding a very elaborate answer that would exceed the scope of the present format. Some of these answers I have already given in other publications. On the other hand, it seems that the editors defend a concept that they, strictly speaking, do not adhere to consistently themselves. They are, as a matter of fact, not dogmatists but resourceful academics willing to engage in dialogue. 'Perpetrator research' is a catchy label that helps to bring together research, to generate attention, to raise funds. My criticism merely refers to the linguistic conceptualization of the object of investigation that accompanies the term and concept because this has consequences for the possibility of understanding collective violence, as Aliza Luft and Daniel Bultmann forcefully illustrate in their contributions. To clarify my position further, in the following I would like to pick up some of the arguments raised, first, by the editors and, second, by other contributors.

Definition

The editors circumvent the difficulty of formulating a consistent definition by referring to a variety of possible perspectives and criteria. They refer to disciplinary as well as epistemological differences. Perpetrators can thus be as much defined in ideological as in praxe-

5   Morag, pp. 13–4.

ological terms.[6] I would like to point out that at least two criteria are necessary to define perpetrators: perpetrators are defined as such (I) by their relation to specific actions (II) in the context of collective violence. The action itself does not have to be violent. A minimal definition of violence would comprise the notions of (1) intention, (2) harm, (3) acting against the will of the harmed, (4) knowledge on the part of those who harm that they are acting against the will of the harmed.[7] Many of the actions that constitute collective violence are not violent, however – e.g., cooking, driving, compiling lists. Additionally, the assumption that definitions of perpetrators can be inspired by practice theory (praxeological approaches) is somewhat surprising. The field of praxeological approaches is wide, but the approaches I refer to in my work explicitly do not focus on the individual but the practice. Elizabeth Shove and Mika Pantzar, for example, write: 'Practices exist as sets of norms, conventions, ways of doing, know-how and requisite material arrays.'[8] Such a perspective comprises anything, but not person-centred concepts. The editors further mention 'top-level perpetrators who are the movers of the macro-process'[9] and argue that these individuals play an important role because they initiate violence. That may or may not be the case. However, the problem remains: What are the criteria by which we classify those individuals as perpetrators? My suggestion is: by describing, analysing and explaining their actions as part of a process of collective violence. By the way, some prominent proponents of practice theory explicitly reject the micro-meso-macro-logic promoted in many disciplines because every phenomenon can be traced back to a bundle of practices that can then be described and analysed.[10] I stress this point to illustrate that even narratives as well-established as that of the levels are not without alternatives. This is another reason to further focus on social-theoretical concepts. At one point, the editors briefly discuss the relation of agency versus structure and point out that they do 'not

6   Kara Critchell and others, 'Response to Christian Gudehus', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 33–6 (p. 34).

7   The last point was inspired by the definition given by Hans-Jürgen Kaiser and Hans Werbik, *Handlungstheorie: Eine Einführung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), p. 179.

8   Elizabeth Shove, Mika Pantzar, 'Recruitment and Reproduction: The Careers and Carriers of Digital Photography and Floorball', *Human Affairs*, 17.2 (2007), 154–167 (p. 155).

9   Critchell and others, 34.

10 Theodore Schatzki, 'Practice Theory as Flat Ontology', in *Practice Theory and Research: Exploring the Relevance for Social Change*, ed. by Gerd Spaargaren and others (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 28–42 (pp. 33–4). Thomas Hoebel and Wolfgang Knöbl discuss the many problems that come with the use of this logic: Thomas Hoebel, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Gewalt erklären! Plädoyer für eine entdeckende Prozesssoziologie* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2019), pp. 131–151.

assign primacy to the agency of the perpetrator'.[11] First of all, taking 'action' as a starting point of analysis still allows for a discussion of both individual agency and structure (or other similar concepts like 'culture' or 'discourse'). My argument is that we gain nothing by labelling those involved as 'perpetrators'. In my first piece, I argued that those dynamics leading, for example, to norm variations that eventually result in violence do not necessarily have perpetrators as their agents. The editors reacted by pointing out that very often those who start such processes later become perpetrators.[12] Probably, but I was talking about something else. In the original article there is a reference to Timur Kuran who describes reputational cascades as a motor of ethnification (which, like everything else in the social world, is a process). The relevant point made here is that the action – wearing a specific hat, for example – changes its meaning and becomes a sign of belonging and, at the same time and not necessarily intentionally, exclusion.[13]

Identity and Subject Position

In the following, the editors embrace a by no means exclusive, yet also not uncontroversial concept of identity, according to which 'it is obvious that multiple identities and acts can coexist in the same human being, successively or simultaneously'.[14] I tend to disagree. First, because acts do not exist in human beings but are carried out by them – scripts of actions may be stored in an embodied way, as cognitive paths or knowledge about a specific practice. We, as observers, do not definitely know what goes on inside a human brain, soul, or body. What we can analyse, depending on the epistemological perspective, are, among other things, actions or practices. Second, I do not find the notion of multiple identities convincing. It creates the idea of compartmentalised psyches as a norm. I do not see identity as a fixed entity but as a process in which an individual continuously relates to its social and physical environment, to expectations (for example in the shape of social roles), and so on. And finally, when criticizing my description of collective violence, the editors mix up historical subject positions

11   Critchell and others, 34.
12   Ibid., 34.
13   Timur Kuran, 'Ethnic Norms and Their Transformation through Reputational Cascades', *The Journal of Legal Studies*, 27.2 (1998), 623–59.
14   Critchell and others, 34.

and analytical categories devised later on. To clarify this, a somewhat longer quotation is necessary:

> Gudehus writes: 'Collective violence consists of events, actions, and relations that are based on group-attribution: humans harm and are harmed because they belong to a group or are conceptualised as such.' What is this other than a subject position? No one is saying that these subject positions (perpetrator, victim, bystander) are predetermined, universal, unchanging, or mutually exclusive.[15]

Of course not, nobody is saying that, not even me. What I am saying is that belonging to a constructed group in a social reality can be seen as referring to a subject position. However, 'perpetrator' in the context of this discussion is a label, a field, and a heuristic constructed by scholars – it is the *concept* (and not the historical position) my criticism went against. *Nazi*, *Jew*, *Untermensch*, *inyenzi* are labels created by the very actors of the violence researched. Further, group-attribution is what is going on in processes of collective violence. However, someone is not a perpetrator because she/he is biased. Someone is a perpetrator because she/he acts in a specific context that academics (among others) classify as perpetration.

Responsibility and Morality

The editors and Ernesto Verdeja are interested in how an action-oriented approach addresses the question of individual responsibility, which, according to Verdeja, is of a moral nature.[16] My answer is that the underlying action theories discuss in detail how specific actions come about, what role personality traits, situations, historical-cultural frames, triggers and therefore routines, habituations, reflections and so forth play. I would therefore argue that action theories are adequate tools to evaluate the chances and restraints of individuals making moral decisions.[17]

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15 Critchell and others, 35–6.

16 Ibid., 36; Ernesto Verdeja, 'Response to Christian Gudehus', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 9–12 (p. 10).

17 For more details, especially on the question of responsibility, see: Christian Gudehus, 'Gewalt als Handlung', in *Zwischen Tätern und Opfern: Gewaltbeziehungen und Gewaltgemeinschaften*, ed. by Philipp Batelka and others (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), pp. 23–46 (pp. 44–6).

Beyond Perpetrating Actions

As a consequence of what I have said so far, it should come as no surprise that I agree with large parts of Christoph Busch's essay. I have much sympathy for his suggestion 'to combine all ideas together into systems and to approach them in a systemic rather than sectoral fashion'.[18] I made a similar case in the context of research focussing on those helping the persecuted.[19] What is more, events of collective violence do not consist only in actions that are violent – they do not even consist in actions (or practices) that facilitate it. Resistance, flight, counterviolence of those attacked or persecuted are as much an integral part of events of collective violence as are activities involved in helping the persecuted. Events consist of relationships, actions, practices, environments, temporal progressions and much more. Consequently, they are highly dynamic and often no less complex. Focusing on perpetrators, even on deeds, cannot account for either. As mentioned above, I sympathize with Busch's arguments. Even though I find his point theoretically sound, it remains open for discussion how successful authors who have tried to combine all perspectives have been in practice.

18 Christoph Busch, 'Some Remarks on the Complexity of Collective Violence: Understanding the Whole', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 26–32 (p. 30).
19 Christian Gudehus, 'Helping the Persecuted: Heuristics and Perspectives (Exemplified by the Holocaust)', *Mass Violence and Resistance*, 7 March 2016, <http://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/helping-persecuted-heuristics-and-perspectives-exemplified-holocaust> [accessed 13 January 2020].

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