

Workshop: Representing Violence: History, Politics and Theory (June 10, 18 & 19)

Organized by Jyotirmaya Sharma and Martin van Gelderen

At the Lichtenberg-Kolleg, Göttingen

Despite periodic reassurances, the hope that was promised and guaranteed by the twin processes of modernization and secularization has amounted to very little in the 20th and the 21st centuries. The force of ethnic, racial, religious and national identities remains as potent as ever, transcending, and often nullifying, the combined influence of factors such as reason, science and democracy. It is also ironical that despite the universal claims of the secularization and modernization thesis, the persistence of violence has remained one of the most powerful elements that casts its spell unmindful of ideologies, regimes and nationalities. The works of Hannah Arendt, Georges Sorel, Walter Benjamin, Frantz Fanon, Konrad Lorenz, Ernest Jünger, Ambedkar and Gandhi have been significant attempts in the past hundred years to conceptualize and understand violence. While these texts have enriched our understanding of various textures of violence, we are also constantly assailed by the sheer inventiveness and novelty of forms of violence. The ways in which political regimes and social groups tend to refine, perfect and practice violence seem often to suggest the inadequacy and obsolete state of our conceptual and theoretical apparatuses.

This workshop would be an attempt to take stock of the ways in which we understand violence but also the manner in which our ability to write about violence can be honed and perfected. One way of doing this is to re-evaluate the histories of violence and their efficacy. Do we really need to revisit extant accounts of violence that are already available to us? Are all the orthodoxies, self-images and myths that help in understanding violence been adequately interrogated? Another way of examining the question is to suggest alternative ways of looking at the phenomenon and propose additional tools to make sense of violence and its representation. These two sets of questions can only be answered through a thoroughgoing reappraisal of theories, historiographical practices and conceptual universes within a comparative framework.

Programme

Representing Violence: History, Politics and Theory – Part I – Monday, 10 June 2013

9:00am: Arrival & Coffee

9:15am: Session 1 – Welcome & Introduction: Chair: Jyotirmaya Sharma

9:30am: Charles Briggs – University of California, Berkeley, and Fellow, Lichtenberg-Kolleg – **Infanticide, Narratives, and the Limits of the Human**

Much research on narrative and violence treats their relationship as immanent, an assumption widely shared across professional specializations (media, medical, legal, social-scientific, etc.) and by laypersons. Acts of violence seem to require particular sorts of narratives, whose performance and inscription represents violent events and/or produces particular types of effects, such as the individual and collective acts of healing associated with truth and reconciliation commissions.

This paper views this process of constructing narratives of violence from a problematic location, stories about women and sometimes men convicted of infanticide. My archival and ethnographic research, largely conducted in Venezuela, has followed these narratives through newsrooms, police stations, courtrooms, living room, streets, and prisons. Narratives of infanticide, which generate widespread attention, become stories about stories – narratives that recount how the story of the crime unfolded naturally and automatically from material and corporeal evidence, and the words of relatives, neighbors, doctors, detectives, defendants, and the vox populi. These constructions of discourse about violence create a very limited range of subject positions, generate standardized scripts for persons interpellated in each slot, and make it difficult to advance counter-narratives, thereby inscribing the legitimacy of state institutions. I developed collaborations with women interviewed in prison to construct counter-narratives, not alternative renditions of “the facts” but critical, reflexive accounts of how such narratives get constructed that attempt to open up new possibilities for reentering the realm of the human.

One of the most striking features of these narratives is their mobility – the way they not only move between police stations, courtrooms, newspapers, television stations, social media, the Internet, and informal conversation but often capture the imaginations and the emotions of most Venezuelans in a single day. Here I look at features of particular narratives that appear to imbue them with this quality of iconicity (seeming to be direct reflections of events) and with mobility – at the same time that other narratives, such as

those told by women accused of infanticide, are so readily denied truth values and rendered *immobile*.

Since they have performatively constructed the limits of violence, affect, gender, and the human since the eighteenth century, infanticide narratives can illuminate broader issues of narrative and violence.

10:30am: Coffee Break

10:45am: Dirk Moses – European University Institute, Florence – **Combining Structure and Affect in Explaining Political Violence**

A feature of recent work on genocide has been global mapping of violence, whether since antiquity of the European middle ages (e.g., Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* [2009]; Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation-State*, 3 vols. [2005-]). Inspired by the realist intuitions of (some) international relations scholars scholarship and Wallerstein's world systems theory, Levene, for instance, posits the 'rise of the west' as the dynamic agency that forces other states, especially declining empires or semi-peripheral nation-states, to drastic measure to maintain or regain their geopolitical status in a competitive international system. One of these measures is the environmental devastation that states cause when they desperately exploit natural resources to sustain their vulnerable economies. Another is genocide, whether caused by forced modernization, as in the Chittagong tracts in Bangladesh, or against minorities accused of colluding with neighbouring enemies at crisis moments. Another approach is the methodological individualism of psychologists who explore the structural creation of perpetrators only in relation to peer pressure and obedience to authority in local contexts (Erwin Staub, *The Roots of Evil* [1989]); Leonard S. Newman and Ralph Erber (eds.), *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust* [2002]; James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* [2002]; Steven K. Baum, *The Psychology of Genocide: Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Rescuers* [2008]). Before them all, Hannah Arendt and the Frankfurt School attempted to bridge the structure/agency (affect) binary by resorting in different and often contrary ways to various concepts, ranging from the 'banality of evil' and psychoanalysis ('the authoritarian personality'). In India, Ashis Nandy has also attempted to link broader process of modernity, including colonialism, to the psychic lives of oppressors--perpetrators and victims. This paper will critically explore these attempts and relate them to contemporary approaches trauma in the psychological and psychiatric literature.

11:45am: Coffee Break

12:00: Michael Puett – Harvard University – **Myths of Violence in China**

This paper will explore indigenous Chinese notions of violence. I will begin by discussing the visions of violence that underlay several myths in China concerning humans, ghosts, and gods. I will then turn to the different ways these narratives have been appropriated in Chinese history. I will argue that by doing so we will get a glimpse of some of the complexities of visions of violence in China. I will conclude by suggesting some of the theoretical implications of taking these indigenous notions of violence seriously.

1:00pm – Lunch

Session 2: Chair: Martin van Gelderen

2:30pm: Peter van Nuffelen – University of Gent, and Fellow, Lichtenberg-Kolleg – **The blood spilled before altars: Ancient mirrors and modern masks.**

The category of religious violence is in scholarship closely linked to the period known as Late Antiquity (AD 300-600), when Christianity established itself as the dominant religion in the Mediterranean. Since the Reformation, the assessment of the role played by violence in this process lies at the core of understandings of Christianity and its history. Late Antiquity is therefore often a vicarious battleground for modern concerns. This problematic situation is not helped by the fact that little reflection is spent on the notion of violence, its representation, and its meaning in this period. As modern concerns are imported into the period, so are modern conceptions.

This paper tackles these issues from two angles. Modern problems of interpretation will be illustrated in the first part of the paper with a discussion of the modern concept of voluntary martyrdom, which has become extended to encompass all forms of martyrdom: all martyrs are sometimes said to present themselves voluntary to their executioner. Such a view rests on very modern ideas about human behaviour, and disregards the textures of meaning that violence was seen to inscribe on late ancient bodies.

In its second part, the paper will analyse two classical, early fifth-century representations of religious violence: Severus of Minorca's account of the conversion of the Jews of Minorca; and that of Rufinus about the destruction of the Serapeum. It shall be argued that modern analyses tend to project patterns of causality and categories of violence onto these texts. What happens especially in modern analyses is a homogenisation of violence, whereas these texts consciously construct different forms of violence.

3:30pm: Coffee Break

3:45pm: Jyotirmaya Sharma – University of Hyderabad, and Fellow, Lichtenberg-Kolleg – **'My religion is less violent than yours': Myth, history and the Representation of Violence**

In an essay titled 'Which religion is more peace-loving?', V.D. Savarkar, the Hindu nationalist thinker, argues that Gandhi's portrayal of Islam as essentially a peace-loving faith contradicts history and experience. Selectively using a letter Gandhi wrote in *Young India*, Savarkar argues that Hinduism alone has the credentials to be primarily a religion of peace, while the history of Islam in India and elsewhere has been one that is red in tooth and claw. In the case of Gandhi and Savarkar, what is in contention is not only the manner in which individuals and societies recall the past and engage with their own histories, but also the ways in which violence tends to be represented. Such histories and representations become part of shared myths and are pressed into service at times of crises and conflict. The violence at the time of the Partition of India and in independent India can be seen as the tension between two ways in which memory and myth come face to face and, one of these triumphs.