



*The Perpetrator Self: Violence, Gender and Emotion in Conflict and Culture in the Long Twentieth Century.* University of Hull; German History Society; Technische Universität Dresden, 17.09.2015—18.09.2015.

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**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (January, 2016)

## **The Perpetrator Self: Violence, Gender and Emotion in Conflict and Culture in the Long Twentieth Century**

Based on the assumption that it is only through understanding how and why individuals perpetrate acts of violence that we can develop strategies for dealing with that violence, this two-day multidisciplinary conference at the University of Hull sought to cast new light on the subject of violent perpetrator subjectivity in the year that marks the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War Two. Organised by Clare Bielby and Michael Gratzke (University of Hull) and Dagmar Ellerbrock (Technical University Dresden), the conference paid particular attention to the categories of gender and emotion — categories that are constitutive to how we think about violence and which have not received enough scholarly attention. The contributions provided valuable insights into recently completed and ongoing research projects that deal with the notion of the perpetrator self from the perspective of different disciplines, in various national contexts and with regard to different examples of violence.

In their welcome remarks, the organisers Clare Bielby and Michael Gratzke introduced the conference theme by reminding us that violence is always meaningful because it takes place within a social space. This meaningfulness, they suggested, is bound up with the fact that violence is not only a destructive, but also a constructive tool of social interaction. The presentations over the two conference days picked up on this core idea in multiple and complex ways.

The first panel focussed on different disciplinary approaches to understanding the perpetrator self. JAMES CONNELLY's (Hull) paper provided a useful introduction to philosophical questions surrounding the notion of the self within a violent context. Assuming that the self is always bound to other selves in a dialectical manner, Connelly argued that the process of understanding the violent self is limited by the moral evaluation of agency to the extent that it is achieved through difference, i.e. by pathologising the perpetrator. This mechanism, so Connelly, is important because it enables us to clearly separate the "I have understood" from the "I who is doing the understanding". However, the problem with this de-emotionalisation of the relation between the perpetrator self and the non-perpetrator other — focusing on explanation rather than understanding — is that it robs us of the possibility of understanding ourselves (better) because perpetrators, Connelly suggested, remind us of our own potential of becoming evil. Coming from a social psychology perspective, JEFFREY MURER (St. Andrews) discussed the challenge of finding the other in the self with regard to the far-right in contemporary Hungary. He argued that acts of violence can play an important role in creating and sustaining a particular group identity if enemy-others are imagined and acted upon, resulting from anxiety and collective insecurity within that group. MELISSA DEAREY (Hull) introduced the concept of choreography of crime to the debate, drawing on both criminological and dance research. Using the

video for 'Elastic Heart', a song recorded by Australian singer Sia 2014, as an example, her paper analysed the construction of childhood sexual abuse through bodily movements (kinaesthesia), arguing that understanding the subjectivities of both victims and perpetrators needs to go beyond a focus on narrative and language. Key aspects of the subsequent discussion included the fluidity of perpetrator and victim selves, and the causal and temporal links between structural and physical acts of violence.

The second panel focused on the relationship between violence and the state. MICHAEL GRATZKE (Hull) discussed the 'fascist' and 'communist' perpetrator as portrayed in the work of GDR playwright Heiner Müller. Gratzke argued that, while Müller's plays offer strong, but rather one-dimensional images of fascist perpetrators, his communist perpetrators are treated within the context of a dialectics of guilt. These characters are caught between Nazism and Communism, evilness and heroism, order and revolution. For Müller, the end of the GDR and hence the loss of any future perspective also meant the end of these dialectics which were replaced by an abyss of non-dialectical guilt. NICKI HITCHCOTT and LAURA BLACKIE (both Nottingham) presented their work on the 1994 Rwanda genocide in which the perpetrators were not only soldiers, but also ordinary citizens. Blackie's paper focused on the question of healing in post-genocide Rwanda. She argued that the concept of 'posttraumatic growth' - a positive personal development as a result of the struggle with difficult circumstances - cannot only be applied productively to victims, but also to perpetrators. According to Blackie, studying how an individual develops positively after s/he has committed acts of violence goes beyond expressions of remorse, while it does (and should) not involve the justification of these actions. Following on from this, Hitchcott analysed the blurring of boundaries between victims and perpetrators in works of fiction in French about the genocide. Drawing on Robert Lyons and Scott Straus's concept of the 'intimate enemy', she offered a fascinating account of the moral implications of attempts to understand the violent perpetrator. The literary and psychological perspectives on questions of perpetration in the context of state violence presented by the three speakers illustrated well the philosophical complexities of the self/other nexus that Connelly had discussed in panel 1. The subsequent debate raised questions in particular about the links between the acknowledgment of guilt, forgiving and the humanising of perpetrators.

The papers in panel 3 examined the implications of revolutionary political violence. First, CLARE BIELBY

(Hull) questioned the centrality of masculinity for imagining violence in the context of West German left-wing militancy. Based on her analysis of two examples of 1970s post-terrorist life-writing by former male militants, she argued that violence is narratively constructed through the categories gender, class and emotion. KATHARINA KARCHER's (Cambridge) paper explored the relation between gender and silence by looking at trials against three female political militants in the Federal Republic of Germany between 2007 and 2015. Karcher argued that, although the defendants's political motives, intentions and use of violence were very different, their silence in the courtroom could be perceived as an act of resistance against the gendered expectations of female militants. CARRIE HAMILTON (Roehampton) also picked up on the question of gender in violent contexts and discussed the role of Dolores Gonzalez Katarain ('Yoyes') in the Basque armed organisation ETA. Based on an analysis of a book that gathers excerpts from her diary as well as testimonies from friends and family, Hamilton argued that this text can be read as a 'window' on Yoyes as a perpetrator self that raises questions about the dialectics of activism and terrorism, heroism and victimhood, leadership and motherhood. All three papers demonstrated that narrative constructions of violence are inherently gendered and that this also has an impact on the process of justifying violent activity.

The second conference day began with the presentation of an installation based on a recently completed PhD research project supervised by Jeffrey Murer. For his thesis, John Tsukayama had interviewed fourteen American soldiers who had been involved in acts of abusive violence during the US counter-terrorism campaign in Iraq. The installation combined a 3D animated video with audio recordings of some of the interviews, confronting the audience with perpetrator testimonies that were both very detailed and emotionally challenging. DAGMAR ELLERBROCK (Dresden) addressed this emotional dimension of collective violence, arguing that the ubiquity of violence across time and space can be explained by the fact that being integrated into a group raises emotional levels and makes the use of violence attractive. Echoing the arguments about the complex relationship between individual perpetrators and the collective that Jeffrey Murer, Nicki Hitchcott and Laura Blackie had made earlier, she suggested that the link between emotions and collective violence has important implications for the conception of the self and violence research more generally.

The presentations in Panel 4 engaged with the topic

of social violence. ALEX DYMOCK (Royal Holloway) paper examined the phenomenon of the perverse female criminal, focusing on the case of Joanna Dennehy in the UK. She argued that within the context of criminal justice, understanding perversion of female perpetrators is still either tied to the idea of monstrosity or linked to medical conditions, whereas men continue to be seen as being rationally responsible for their crimes. Dymock's criminological analysis thus added a new perspective to the consideration of female perpetrators in the courtroom that Karcher had introduced earlier. SARAH COLVIN (Cambridge) continued the discussion by looking at how and why ideologically motivated perpetrators narrate their own identities differently to (other) criminals. With reference to a number of concrete examples, she showed how perpetrators use different narrative tools and techniques, depending on whether they want to excuse violence or justify their right to use violence. The third paper was given by JOSEPHINE METCALF (Hull) and examined the case of English-born Shaun Attwood who had been imprisoned in the US for drug-dealing, following on from a stockbroker career in Arizona. Analysing a trilogy (2012-2014) that depicts his violent experiences in prison as well as interviews with Attwood himself, Metcalf discussed the politics behind these violent representations and how the text succeeds at legitimising violence to a certain extent. What the three papers had in common was the observation that violence can be interpreted from both in- and outside, thereby offering empirical support for the notion of contextualised and meaningful violence introduced at the very beginning of the conference.

The final panel explored the perpetrator self from the perspective of museum exhibitions. BIRGA MEYER (Göttingen) analysed representations of National Socialist male perpetrators in Austrian, Italian and Hungarian museums. She identified several ideal types of perpetrator selves within this context and argued that these exhibitions explicitly try to prevent an identification of the visitor with the perpetrator. Her assessment that this practice has a negative impact on the process of understanding and that a radically subjective approach is required instead, further substantiated the argument, made by other presenters, that new ways of understanding the perpetrator self need to be found in order to develop strategies for dealing with violence. GABRIEL KOUREAS (Birkbeck) paper turned to another aspect of museum work which is the representation of war experiences. Focusing on the Imperial War Museum in London, he discussed how the attribution of importance in

the present to conflicts of the past is reflected in the exhibition and how this results in a hierarchy of empathy towards different experiences of war. LISA TRAYNOR and JONATHAN FERGUSON (both Leeds) then looked at the relationship between individual exhibition objects and the violent perpetrator from a practitioner's point of view. As curators for the Royal Armouries Museum their work focuses specifically on the technological aspect of weapons and armour. Yet, they argued, it also needs to engage critically with the role of the perpetrator who killed with these tools – a key challenge that the museum has engaged with in creative ways.

In the final discussion, participants agreed that, although violent perpetrator subjectivity is indeed still under-researched, it is difficult, if not impossible, to approach the perpetrator in an isolated manner. Instead, a relational approach that helps to define violence as a productive phenomenon was suggested. Only by studying the perpetrator self as one key element of the dynamic relationship between perpetrator(s), victim(s) and the social context in which they interact can we arrive at findings that enable us to develop strategies for dealing with violence. This perspective problematises the relationship between the individual and the collective, and questions relations of power between the various actors: Who defines the perpetrator or the victim? Researchers who focus on perpetrators are often confronted with the challenge of having to defend their work. It needs to be made clear that a focus on the subjectivity of the perpetrator does not take the focus away from that of the victims of violence. Rather, perpetrator and victim interact in complex and dynamic ways within a given social context. Understanding the perpetrator self also opens up new perspectives on the victims and societies more generally. At the same time, researchers also need to balance in-depth research and professional distance when studying how and why individuals perpetrate acts of violence.

In summary, further inquiry into how scholars and practitioners can conceptualise and approach the violent perpetrator self is needed. The organisers hope to continue the exchange on ideas about violence, perpetration and the self through the establishment of a research network and the organisation of further events that deal with these questions.

#### **Konferenzübersicht:**

*Welcome/Introduction*

Clare Bielby and Michael Gratzke, University of Hull

1. Panel: *Understanding the Perpetrator Self: Criminological, Psychological and Philosophical Approaches*

Chair: Michael Gratzke (University of Hull)

James Connelly (University of Hull), *Evil Be Thou My Good? Understanding the Violent Self*

Jeffrey Murer (University of St Andrews), *Killing the Other in the Self: Anxiety, Social Dislocation and the Violence of Scapegoating within Proxy Narratives of Loss among the Contemporary Hungarian Far Right*

Melissa Dearey (University of Hull), *Understanding Triggers of (Childhood) Sexual Abuse in Contemporary Popular Dance: Toward a Choreography of Crime*

2. Panel: *State-sanctioned Violence*

Chair: Annie Ring (University College London)

Michael Gratzke (University of Hull), *The Dialectics of Guilt: Perpetrator Perspectives in the Works of Heiner Müller*

Laura Blackie (University of Nottingham), *Looking for Post-traumatic Growth in Perpetrators of the Genocide in Rwanda: Theoretical and Ethical Considerations*

Nicki Hitchcott (University of Nottingham), *Intimate Enemies: Understanding Perpetrators in Literary Responses to the Rwanda Genocide*

3. Panel: *Revolutionary Political Violence*

Chair: Sarah Colvin (University of Cambridge)

Clare Bielby (University of Hull), *For Me, Using Violence Was Absolutely Ok, I Never Had a Problem With It: Violence and Gender in German Post-Terrorist Life-Writing*

Katharina Karcher (University of Cambridge), *Silence in the Courtroom: The Trials against Beate Zschäpe, Verena Becker and Adrienne Gähler*

Carrie Hamilton (University of Roehampton), *A Window on the Perpetrator Self? The Collective Construction of a Murdered Female Basque Armed Activist*

*Installation*

Jeffrey Murer (University of St. Andrews), *Hearts and Minds: The Interrogations Project, a Virtual Reality 3D Artwork Based on Interviews of American Soldiers, conducted by Dr. John Tsukayama*

Dagmar Ellerbrock (Technical University Dresden), *Between Fun, Anger and Belonging: The Emotional Dynamics of Collective Violence*

4. Panel: *Social Violence*

Chair: Clare Bielby (University of Hull)

Alex Dymock (Royal Holloway, University of London), *Constructing the Perverse Feminine Perpetrator*

Sara Colvin (University of Cambridge), *Justified Sinners. When Is a Perpetrator Not a Perpetrator?*

Josephine Metcalf (University of Hull), *Banged up Abroad: Narrating the Culture and Politics of Transatlantic Prison Violence*

5. Panel: *Exhibiting the Perpetrator Self*

Chair: Katharina Karcher (University of Cambridge)

Birga Meyer (Museum Friedland, Göttingen), *Identifying with Mass Murderers? Representing Male Perpetrators in Museum Exhibitions about National Socialism*

Gabriel Koureas (Birkbeck, University of London), *Selective Empathy in the Re-Designed Imperial War Museum London*

Lisa Traynor and Jonathan Ferguson (Royal Armouries, Leeds), *Death on Display: Weapons and the Violent Perpetrator in Museum Interpretation*

*Roundtable Discussion*

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Josefin Graef. Review of , *The Perpetrator Self: Violence, Gender and Emotion in Conflict and Culture in the Long Twentieth Century*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45997>

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