

Randall Collins

# The Invention and Diffusion of Social Techniques of Violence. How Micro-Sociology Can Explain Historical Trends

(doi: 10.2383/35863)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2011

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

# The Invention and Diffusion of Social Techniques of Violence

## How Micro-Sociology Can Explain Historical Trends

by Randall Collins

doi: 10.2383/35863

The micro-macro problem poses a challenge for the sociology of violence. Empirical reality always meets us first of all on the micro level; it is here that human action takes place, and where causal forces must exist. But micro reality spreads out from any instant in time and space, connecting micro-events into larger macro patterns. It is typical for social scientists to abstract away from the micro event, selecting particular aspects and turning them into statistics. Thus comes a disconnect, as statistical trends or other macro-aggregates are explained, not by micro-situational processes, but by positing other macro-social conditions.

In this paper I want to confront a rather good macro-sociological theory of violence, the recent book by Michel Wieviorka, with my own micro-sociological theory. Wieviorka's book contains a micro component, but I will argue that it is hypothetical and typified, not based on the empirical reality of violent situations. In contrast, my argument is based on close observations of situations in which people threaten to fight, to do harm, to kill each other; what we actually see in the immediate interactional situation is a barrier that makes all other theoretical considerations fade into the background. The situation is the eye of the needle through which hypothetical theories of violence must pass; and I will show that most of them, like the camel on its way to heaven, do not pass through very well.

But then I must confront the opposite problem. If the main causality of violence is local, in each little situation of minutes in time, how can we explain big historical shifts, such as long-term rises or falls in the amount and kind of violence? Micro

should add up to macro, but micro theories do not usually cross back over this divide to explain history. I will suggest a theory about micro-interactional techniques of violence, and how these spread, thereby connecting micro-violence to macro patterns.

The strength of Wieviorka's book is its combination of macro-historical theory of violent trends and a phenomenological micro-sociology of the act of violence as lived experience. Wieviorka argues that before 1960 violence was limited by the predominance of regulated conflict, especially institutionalized class conflict. Labor unions and capitalists did not try to annihilate each other, but used well-recognized tactics of limited conflict based on strong local communities which gave meaning and identity. Then came the neo-liberal state, de-industrialization, globalization, immigration and ethno-religious diaspora, all of which undercut the structural basis of class conflict and brought about meaninglessness and subjugation to impersonal forces of the market. This helps explain the world-wide upsurge of crime from the 1960s onwards, supported by an antinomian, rebellious youth culture. At the same time came de-colonization, the construction of failed states, and eventually the disappearance of the restraining framework of the cold war; military conquests became impossible but in their place came the expansion of terrorist violence and the absolutist ideologies that support it.

What Wieviorka omits from his historical picture is the period before the equilibrium of class conflict, that is to say from ancient times until the Nineteenth century, a time of ferocious violence. This early period must be considered as a third type of violent epoch, which combines features of the two later epochs, regulated class conflict and meaningless post-class violence. Pre-modern violence was often fought to military annihilation or enslavement; domestically, it dramatized cruelty to enemies, including public tortures and executions. Norbert Elias thought this cruelty was primal uncivilized human nature. I would say instead that pre-modern violence reflects a world in which group boundaries were strong and defended by public rituals; cruelty dramatized the alienness of the outsider, and terrorized the lower strata into keeping their place. It was a world of strong meanings and identities, expressed not by regulated conflict (as Wieviorka's theory would predict) but by extreme violence.

Historical comparisons reveal the structural pattern: ritualized public displays of cruelty upon helpless victims are most strongly institutionalized in societies combining hierarchic stratification with strongly ritualized group membership. Such are the societies of caste or estate, where honorific aristocrats demand extreme deference from peasants or slaves, and where intermediate classes of gentry, priests, merchants, or craftsmen guard their own ritual boundaries, giving deference upwards and demanding what deference they can from those below. Historically these are the type

of society in which power and wealth are most unequal; unlike tribal societies (and modern gangs) which are relatively flat internally and do their fighting horizontally, we have here a society in which everyday life is vertical, imposing deference upon underlings. But both egalitarian tribes and hierarchies of status groups (to use Weber's term) have this in common, that both of them have a high degree of Durkheimian social density: everything is highly visible, no one is anonymous, the force of public attention is on everyone all the time. In a ritualized hierarchic structure emotional dominance is always at issue; upper classes are full of pride and arrogance, those below them have varying diets of humiliation, with opportunities to pass it along to someone else even lower. These are the societies in which public executions are like carnivals, gaudy displays of torture, mutilation, and prolonged death, even punishment after death. In the long struggles between Scotland and England from the Thirteenth through the Eighteenth centuries, for instance, rebellious chieftains would not only be hanged but their heads displayed on the city walls on pikes [Mackie 1978].

It has been argued that these forms of public cruelty were calculated displays; since government power was intermittent and most resistance could not be stopped, authorities made the most of the few malefactors they could catch for token displays of terrifying power. (This is similar to the analysis of Helbling [2006] of violence in pre-state tribal and band societies.) The weakness of this argument is that not only has the strategic context of violence changed, but so have the moral emotions arising from the rituals of everyday life. By the Twentieth century, people living in complex societies preferred to hide the ultimate powers of coercion, and everyone would be shocked by displaying the bloody head of even the worst child-murderer. In historical perspective of previous societies, a remarkable thing about the Nazi death camps was that they were kept secret; Thirteenth century Mongols, Sixteenth century Japanese (and many other peoples) conquering an enemy had their death camps in public, and piled up mounds of skulls to brag about the deed. This is not just a change in the calculating power of states; it is a change in the social boundaries of morality. In traditional societies, cruelty was a public ritual celebrating the stratified public order; in modern times this changed into a new form of morality in which coercion, although still present, is hidden as much as possible, and cruelty is now considered immoral [Smith 2008]. Morality always has its basis in the micro-interactional conditions of life; modern morality comes from the disappearance of publicly enacted vertical deference, and the dissolution of visible horizontal boundaries around groups and their replacement with their opposite, the omni-presence of media displaying distant persons as individuals like ourselves. (My argument here is parallel to Black's [1998] more structural theory of the shapes of social networks in which moral judgments are located.)

Wieviorka's baseline is the period from 1880 to 1940, above all in France, England, and Germany, where labor organization was strongest, made the most inroads into communities and politics, and was tacitly accepted by the upper classes. However we should not overlook that labor violence as well as other kinds was bloodier in Russia and the United States, where class parties did not become institutionalized, as well as in Italy, Spain, Latin America and elsewhere [Mann 1993]. And in Germany, one of the most regulated states, between 1918 and 1934 state breakdown fostered the mobilization of some of the most ferocious kinds of paramilitary violence, where violent radicals of both right and left dramatically distinguished themselves from the more regulated, parliamentary class movements of the earlier period.

What Wieviorka theorizes as new violence is a historically limited period that comes after and contrasts with the Western European democracies at the time of high modernity. The strength of his theory is recognizing the structural pattern underlying the violence that emerged after 1960. Conflict can be limited and regulated only when stable, well-identified groups confront well-defined enemies. But the neo-liberal state and the globally dispersed economy now makes the injuries of capitalism difficult to confront – a few thousand demonstrators can gather at meetings of the G-20 or IMF or the Davos Conferences, but the average youth without job prospects has little concrete that he can fight against. Instead of class communities there is only an invisible enemy and a pervasive malaise. I would add that meaningful institutionalized conflicts are further dissolved by the spread of mass consumption and mass entertainment cultures; these give a surface appearance that everyone is equal, because people dress the same and enjoy the same spectacles; and this is reinforced by the pseudo-democratic style of contemporary life, with a decline in overt status markers, and hence the invisibility of vertical lines of stratification [Wouters 2007]. Class and power differences are larger than ever, but the oppressors are hard to find; whereas 100 years ago Russian terrorists attacked upper class officials, today terrorists attack the amorphous public at large.

Wieviorka argues that the basic instigator of violence is structurally-induced meaninglessness and loss of identity, and that violence is a means of constructing identities out of this condition. Here Wieviorka reminds me of the argument of Albert Camus [1951] in *The Rebel / L'homme révolté*, but with a much more ferocious quality. Here the analysis shifts to the level of individual subjectivity. In principle, the connection of macro and micro is a good one. However, the weakness of Wieviorka's move is to jump from macro-history to the interior of the individual consciousness, without a key micro-sociological component, the situation of immediate social interaction. Wieviorka does have a section on the importance of the situation, in which he mentions that violent individuals frame their action in terms of their own fear of

enemy violence, revenge for past atrocities, and a culture of demonizing the enemy. These are ideologies of violence, but leave open the problem of violent action: what actually happens when people put their words to the test?

I argue for the crucial importance of another situational feature that is specific to violent confrontations: *Humans at the point of violence are gripped by a high level of confrontational tension and fear*. Anger, grievance, and ideology fade into the background in confronting the immediate problem: violence cannot be unleashed unless there is some way to circumvent the barrier of confrontational tension.

Detailed micro-sociological evidence [Collins 2008] from videos, photos, ethnographies, and reports of subjective phenomenology show that violent confrontations between humans are extremely stressful: people's facial expressions and body postures show a high level of tension; physiologically, heart beats often accelerate to 160 beats per minute, as cortisol and adrenaline flood the body; at these levels, fine motor coordination is lost, and people cannot easily control their fingers, hands or feet. Some people freeze up, and are unable to move at all; others go into a frenzy of throwing fists or kicks, which may or may not hit their intended target; people with weapons at close range are surprising inaccurate; for both cops and criminals, gangs and soldiers, far more bullets are fired than hit the target, and 50% of the bullets can miss an enemy less than two meters away.

Micro-sociological evidence shows that violence is difficult, not easy. This is particularly true when it is face-to-face, literally two antagonists looking each other in full-channel social communication. If one surveys instances of hostile confrontations, the most typical pattern is that the confrontation does not rise to the level of actual violence, but stops at bluster, threat, angry insults, and eventually winding down by mutual withdrawal. *For violence to happen, there must be situational conditions which allow at least one side to circumvent the barrier of confrontational tension and fear*. This does not mean that once past the barrier, there is no more tension; high levels of physiological arousal and perceptual distortion remain, which explains why fighters typically fire so many shots and miss with so many of them. Contrary to our popular images of violence as something easy for people to do, violent threats most of the time abort, they do not get past the barrier; and when they do pass the barrier, violence is mostly incompetent, not hitting its target, or often hitting the wrong target, innocent bystanders or even members of one's own side, so-called friendly fire. In short: violence is emotionally difficult to carry out, and having a motivation is not enough.

The motivated subject still needs to find a situational opportunity and an interactional technique that will circumvent confrontational tension and allow violence to proceed. Sociologists learned sixty years ago that most soldiers in combat do not fire

their guns, and the vast majority of those who do fire miss their targets with most of their shots [Marshall 1947]. The same problem exists for terrorists, gangs, and alienated youth. Persons afflicted with meaninglessness, who would like to construct a new identity based on violence, will not automatically be able to do so; they first must learn techniques of how to choose their victims and their moments of vulnerability, how to organize the right kind of social support and how to intimidate or outmaneuver those who would prevent them from being violent. Individuals who are filled with anger at what they perceive as previous enemy atrocities, nevertheless will be impotent to avenge them, unless they can develop a technique of breaking through the barrier of confrontational tension and fear. Humans are largely incompetent at violence; for every act of violence that succeeds, there are many more that fail, and an ever larger number of disgruntled feelings that never go further than talk. Giving such persons an apocalyptic religious ideology does not change the practical situation; they still have to learn how to solve the micro-interactional problem of committing violence.

The rise in violence in the second half of the Twentieth century, then, cannot be explained only by a change in motivations that makes more people want to be violent. Historical changes in violence must be due to changes in situational opportunities and constraints; and to social learning, the spread of techniques that have been discovered to circumvent the barrier of confrontational tension/fear.

My book summarizes four main ways in which this is done: 1) finding a weak victim, especially a victim who is incapacitated because emotionally dominated; 2) using an audience to encourage a small number of performers of violence; 3) remaining at a distance to launch weapons without having to confront the enemy face-to-face; 4) a clandestine approach which pretends there is no fight until the bomb is exploded or the hitman's trigger is pulled at the back of the head.

Earlier, I criticized Wieviorka for omitting the period prior to high modernity, where violence was not regulated but consisted in the ferocious public display of violence. All historical periods are characterized by their own micro-interactional techniques of violence; in traditional societies, too, there is confrontational tension/fear and their specific forms of violence are made possible by techniques for circumventing this barrier. Traditional micro-interactional techniques of violence chiefly build upon the first two forms that I summarized: (number 1) isolating a weak victim who becomes helpless for a ferocious display of cruelty upon his or her body; and (number 2) mobilizing audiences to support the perpetrators of violence.

For understanding modern micro-techniques for circumventing confrontational tension, let us consider a trend in the history of modern warfare. Weapons have become more lethal, more accurate, and more mobile; this is particularly so with the

development of modern long-distance artillery – including guns on armored vehicles and helicopters, and fighter planes firing rockets, all guided by electronic and other high-technology sensor systems [Biddle 2004]. These developments have had several sociological effects on combat.

Here we come again to the point already mentioned, that one of the pathways around confrontational tension (I referred to this as pathway number 3) is to fight at a distance, without having to see the enemy close-up as a human being. Armies have become much more competent at killing and wounding enemies; and armies have become smaller, since modern high-tech troops carry the firepower of much larger forces of older history, and can deliver it with much greater accuracy. Another point is that armies have reacted to this increase in the lethality of long-distance weapons by dispersing and hiding; it is suicidal to concentrate too many forces in one place where they could be destroyed by one attack; battlefields now spread out over hugely greater territories. Richer and more high-tech armies disperse by using long-distance air transport, hardened bases, and electronic surveillance. But poorer armies do much the same thing, dispersing as small guerrilla or terrorist units, making brief or clandestine attacks, and hiding in the civilian population. Both of these developments make combat more prolonged, less decisive-- hence less likely to be terminated by ceremonial surrenders and peace agreements. And these developments blur the distinction between civilians and combat soldiers, and increase the amount of civilian casualties.

It is not necessarily the case that contemporary or postmodern fighters are alienated, more concerned with constructing identities out of meaninglessness, more ideologically fanatical than in the past; certainly ideological fanaticism was raised to a high point by movements such as Nazis and Communists in the decades leading up to World War II. The ferociousness of contemporary combat, and its pervasiveness, can be explained by changes in the organization of violence, whether or not they are accompanied by ideological and existential changes in subjective motivations.

The line of argument I suggest is that some people learn specific techniques for overcoming confrontational tension, and thereby become specialists in violence. For instance there are techniques for being a burglar, an armed robber, a school bully, or a gang member; if one does not learn these techniques – which are primarily techniques of social interaction, of knowing how to choose one's victims, the right moment for attacking them, and the dramatic show which intimidates resistance – if one does not learn these techniques, one becomes a failure at violence, a wannabe, not a real thug or a real terrorist. A major component of the history of violence, therefore, is the invention of new techniques of circumventing confrontational tension, and the spread of these techniques by diffusion.



This is, so to speak, the evolutionary selection and propagation of the techniques of evil. An example is the invention of suicide bombing, which began in the mid-1970s with the Tamil Tigers, and spread to the Middle East and elsewhere [Gambetta 2005]. The technique proved to be the most accurate and effective way of causing casualties per amount of explosives, because they are delivered by a human being directly to the target. In terms of micro-sociology, suicide bombing is clandestine violence, pathway number 4 for circumventing confrontational tension by pretending the conflict does not exist; it is emotional control by Goffmanian situational impression-management. The technique has spread because people can see that it works; and it appeals to terrorist groups because it does not need a large organization to carry it out; lacking the resources to create a high-tech modern army, they fight such armies effectively by using an equivalent technique of dispersed and clandestine combat.

A number of such techniques were invented and spread throughout the Twentieth century. These include the tactics of urban youth gangs, and other social inventions combining group solidarity and the dramatics of intimidating carefully selected opponents (a combination of techniques number 1 and 2). Let me compare this with a relatively peaceful invention for social conflict. Charles Tilly [1995, 2008] has shown that the modern social movement was invented in England and France in the period around 1760-1820; it included such techniques as petitions, marches, city illuminations, and displaying visual symbols of their cause, all of which were designed to send a message to authorities, that the movement represented people who were worthy, unified, numerous, and committed. Wieviorka's golden age of regulated class conflict was when workers used Tilly's classic social movement techniques, dramatizing their demands – and simultaneously their collective identities – with relatively little violence. As Tilly documents, authorities recognized the symbolic messages of protest rituals and reacted with relatively limited violence of their own.

But newer inventions of social techniques of public confrontation did not stop with Tilly's classic model. In the period between 1900 and 1920 in Russia, and again in Germany from 1919 to 1933, the repertoire of social movements greatly expanded [Klusemann 2010]. Rival movements experimented with various techniques of dramatic violence, not just with peaceful demonstration, but also with assassinations; assassinations did not turn out to be very effective organization-building techniques, and the more successful organizations were those which grew by means of techniques which gave them a distinctive niche in the field of rival movements: for instance the Bolsheviks used a combination of small-group solidarity and clandestine excitement to build secretive high-commitment parties [Selznick 1960]. A different movement niche was taken by Italian and German paramilitaries dramatizing themselves in public space by breaking up opponents' meetings and marching into rival's neighbor-

hoods to pick fights. No longer were they protesting to authorities or appealing to the public, but increasing the intensity of violence by fighting with each other.

The hybrid of political party and paramilitary movement, which triumphed with the Nazis, was a step along the way for the development of further social techniques for organizing violence. Youth gangs, football hooligans, and terrorist bombers are part of an on-going evolution of specialized social techniques of violence, expanding into available niches. These techniques are a considerable shift from Tilly's repertoire of social movements sending messages upwards to receptive authorities. Now groups seek violence horizontally with other groups that respond in kind.

The underlying structural change of the Twentieth century is not just the disappearance of the conditions that Wieviorka has outlined, for regulated and limited conflict. It is true that these conditions have weakened, but also there have been a series of changes in the structure of opportunities for groups and individuals to invent new techniques of violence. A theoretical task before us in the sociology of violence is to understand what structural features open up what opportunities for micro-interactional styles.

Let me illustrate this point by critiquing my own hypothesis. If there is an evolutionary progress in violence, as effective new social techniques are invented and imitated, the trend should be a continuous increase in violence. But how could a social learning theory explain periods of decline in violence, such as the decrease in violent crime in the US in the 1990s? An answer is to look at violence as a series of conflict between rival sides, both of which engage in innovations. Policing has shifted, in parallel to the military, with increased use of high-technology surveillance, video cameras, rapid computerized identity-checks, drones, and the like. Some kinds of violence decline because their social organization is vulnerable to these kinds of counter-techniques by authorities. This is not necessarily an optimistic prospect, since it points the way toward an Orwellian authoritarian omni-surveillance. The social construction of violent techniques and counter-techniques will likely go on for a long time in the future.

## References

Biddle, S.

2004 *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Black, D.

1998 *The Social Structure of Right and Wrong*. San Diego: Academic Press.

Collins, *The Invention and Diffusion of Social Techniques of Violence*

Camus, A.

1951 *L'homme révolté*. Paris: Gallimard.

Collins, R.

2008 *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gambetta, D. (ed.)

2005 *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Helbling, J.

2006 *Tribale Kriege: Konflikte in Gesellschaften ohne Zentralgewalt*. Frankfurt, New York: Campus Verlag.

Klusemann, S.

2010 *After State Breakdown: Dynamics of Multi-party Conflict, Violence, and Paramilitary Mobilization in Russia 1904-1920, Germany 1918-1934, and Japan 1853-1877*. PhD. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

Mackie, J. D.

1978 *A History of Scotland*. London: Penguin.

Mann, M.

1993 *The Sources of Social Power*. Vol. 2. *The Rise of Classes and Nation-states, 1760-1914*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Marshall, S.L.A.

1947 *Men Against Fire. The Problem of Battle Command*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Selznick, P.

1960 *The Organizational Weapon. A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics*. New York: Free Press.

Smith, P.

2008 *Punishment and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tilly, C.

1995 *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

2008 *Contentious Performances*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wieviorka, M.

2009 *Violence: A New Approach*. London: Sage.

Wouters, C.

2007 *Informalization. Manners and Emotions since 1890*. London: Sage.

## The Invention and Diffusion of Social Techniques of Violence

### How Micro-Sociology Can Explain Historical Trends

---

Abstract: How explain macro trends in violence, such as historical shifts in rates of crime, while using a micro-theory of situational interaction? Wieviorka argues that the world-wide rise in crime rates since the 1960s resulted from the combination of a macro cause – the breakdown of regulated and limited class conflict – plus a micro process of individual meaninglessness, so that violence became the new means of constructing identities. Wieviorka's theory clashes with evidence that on the micro level, humans are not proficient at violence. Violence is largely shaped by an emotional barrier of confrontational tension/fear [ct/f], so that most conflict goes no further than blustering gestures and words. Violence is messy, imprecise, and atrocious, because it happens only when local conditions allow pathways to circumvent ct/f. But how can this theory explain rising or falling macro-trends in violence? Interactional techniques are invented: such as football hooligans style of overwhelming police by maneuvering to assemble where they have huge local superiority of numbers; or another kind of technique, the clandestine approach to delivering a close attack by a suicide bomber. These techniques can be charted as they spread from one place to another. To complete the picture, authorities' counter-techniques of violence control also evolve and spread; the balance between these two sides results in the historical macro-trends of violence.

---

*Keywords: Violence; interaction; confrontational tension; control.*

---

**Randall Collins**, PhD from University of California Berkeley in 1969, is author of numerous books including *The Sociology of Philosophies* (1998), *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004) and *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (2008). He is currently President of the American Sociological Association.