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Reply to Kalyvas, Wieviorka, and Magaudda

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Reply to Kalyvas, Wieviorka, and Magaudda

by Randall Collins

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I thank my distinguished colleagues for their thoughtful comments. What we see, altogether, are several distinct research programs. In effect they are perceptual *Gestalts*, with their preferred concepts, languages of discourse, privileged modes of analysis, and preferred research methods. Since each regards the others through the template of its own *Gestalt*, the others appear flawed, overly abstract, incoherent, missing the crucial insights. Michel Wieviorka proposes a criterion for how to adjudicate among them; I will postpone this useful device for a few paragraphs.

Stathis Kalyvas argues for avoiding a contest between micro and macro approaches. I agree, as a general policy; the social world is complex and needs a number of complementary levels of analysis. But here I want to emphasize the special importance of micro-interactional dynamics, not necessarily for all topics, but for violence. Confrontational tension/fear is what we see, pretty much universally, when we examine persons who are at the brink of committing violence, in their immediate social interaction. This is not an overly abstract generalization; it derives from looking empirically, in as much micro-detail as possible, at photos and videos, physiology, subjective phenomenology, and ethnographic observations and interviews focused on interactional sequences. What is particularly important is to observe the situation in the moments before violence breaks out, when violence is threatened by one or another participant on the scene. This enables us to avoid sampling on the dependent variable, concentrating only on those instances where violence is successfully carried out. What we see is that a large proportion of threatening situations abort; violence

is not carried out; or it is carried out by only a small proportion of persons present; and when it happens it is frequently incompetent, hitting the wrong target, or carried on at a length and intensity inappropriate to maximal violent efficiency. All this is congruent with my basic argument: carrying out violence requires that some of the persons present find a way to circumvent the barrier of confrontational tension/fear [*ct/f*]. And even when that happens, a residue of *ct/f* remains, and this makes the performance of violence so generally inaccurate.

My larger book on this topic thus is organized around several pathways around the barrier of *ct/f*: 1) finding weak victims to attack, especially those who are emotionally dominated; 2) support by an audience that encourages the attack, while they themselves do not take part in it; 3) avoiding the immediate confrontation by launching weapons from a great distance where the target cannot even be seen, or through the intermediary of masks and hoods which hide faces, or telescopic sights, which depersonalize the confrontation; 4) engaging in micro-situational dissimulation by pretending that no conflict is happening, up to the last moment when the hit-man pulls the trigger behind the victim's head or the suicide bomber detonates the explosive vest. Kalyvas's list of categories maps readily onto my own – e.g. violence in civil war, in specific battlefield situations, is generally 1); so is violence in riots; bombings by IEDs are a version of 3); honor killings, when examined closely, are not really so honorable but usually are a version of 2). This is necessarily rather briefly expressed here; but I beg those interested to look at the actual analyses in Collins [2008].

Michel Wieviorka has a well-developed theory in which the main causal conditions are on the macro-historical level, transmitted to individuals through consciousness of the impact of these conditions on their lives. Wieviorka questions my emphasis on the interactional situation. True, this would have no special significance if individuals just did what their cultural understandings tell them to do; or expressed their grievances and alienation automatically in violent situations; or (in another theoretical tradition) follow rational calculations from observing costs and consequences in their environment. But micro-empirical observations of what individuals do in immediate situations of possible violence shows that mostly the violence does not happen. Their cultural understandings, grievances, and calculations may well exist: I do not deny this, where the evidence shows it; but these are not sufficient to actually bring about violence. All motives and structural conditions conducive to violence must pass through the keyhole of the situation, and past the barrier of confrontational tension/fear.

It is not the case, as Wieviorka conjectures, that *ct/f* varies a great deal among individuals; wherever we have very detailed evidence (from photos, detailed phenomenology, etc.) it is by far the most common pattern. (I am speaking here of relatively

close confrontations; photos of soldiers launching rockets from a distance of several miles show much less tension – i.e. technique 3) above – and 4) is a method for staging one's self-presentation as if there were no confrontation happening; those suicide bombers who are not good at this give themselves away, as Israeli security agents have informed me). It is true that some kinds of face-to-face violence show the perpetrator in a domineering mode, but taking the interactional situation as a whole, in such situations confrontational tension is very much present, evident in the expressions of the victim; I have argued that persons skilled at face-to-face violence manage to project all the *ct/f* onto the side of the victim.

To suggest a methodological reflection: Wieviorka emphasizes the cultural rationale of persons who commit violence. But interviewing persons who have committed violence is sampling on the dependent variable; what is missed are the situational conditions in which violence does not come off, unless one explicitly asks for the detail of situational sequences, and probes for instances where the prospective violence did not happen. There is also the danger that after-the-fact interviews elicit the ideology, the culturally available account or rationalization, for why this person committed violence; it is a culturally legitimate discourse, circulating perhaps only in a limited milieu, which accounts for the violence in terms of motive. But motives, I have argued on the micro-situational evidence, are insufficient to get the whole causality; and they may even be misleading. For example in an investigation by a Dutch sociologist of hundreds of court cases, the largest number of violent incidents are where a bully-like group of toughs pick out an isolated or socially incompetent target, and proceed not only to hurt him at length but to humiliate him by repeatedly demanding self-denigrating expressions [Weenink 2011]. Such bullies “play the humiliation game” but excuse their violence by the dominant discourse of “he offended me,” while the provocative behavior typically is no more than being nerdy or different. This same research shows there are also cases where the perpetrator was indeed personally insulted or demeaned by the victim; but we need to examine the whole sequence to see when the expressed motive does line up with the behavior, and those where it is merely a rationalization.

To return now to Wieviorka's suggestion for how to adjudicate between rival research programs: examine their practical consequences for action to alleviate violence. This is a good criterion, and I accept the challenge. If violence is difficult to carry out because of the situational barrier of *ct/f*, a practical application is to try to enhance *ct/f*, and to reduce the possibility of getting around the barrier. Audience support is very important in whether violence will proceed and become severe; especially in relatively small groups, there is good evidence that audiences that express their disapproval, and that intervene, are generally quite successful [Levine *et al.*

2011]. This could be publicized and encouraged. Similarly with the type of attacking the weak that I have called “forward panic”: here, spreading knowledge to police and soldiers about the numerical configurations and time-sequences that trigger forward panics can help prevent them. There are quite a few types of violence and I cannot give an exhaustive list here. But on the whole, the micro-situational model is an optimistic one: since violence often aborts, what practical sociological wisdom needs to do is to enhance this tendency. In that respect, *ct/f* is on the side of peace.

Theories in which the prime movers are on the macro level are on the whole much more pessimistic. If alienation from the prevailing structures of race, class, or religion are the ultimate motives for violence, the implied solution is to overcome racism and create economic equality. Difficult tasks, indeed! Certainly all the trends of the last forty years have been in the opposite direction from equalizing economic conditions. This bodes for a pessimistic future. The growing crisis of capitalism in future decades of the Twentyfirst century seem likely to exacerbate the problem. I doubt whether a certain amount of violence can be avoided, but to the extent that we have room for practical maneuver, it is the application of micro-sociological advice, one situation at a time, that is more promising.

Coming finally to Paolo Magaudda’s development of a theory of the circulation of violent techniques. It is a promising approach to apply the sociology of techniques and practices to the special case of violence. I will comment on some points of detail. It may be somewhat misleading in this case to say that techniques are based on society, if this is taken to mean society as a whole. Violent techniques – i.e. how to circumvent *ct/f* – are not held by everyone, but by a relatively small proportion of persons, a violent elite. Sometimes violent techniques are deliberately monopolized by an elite group; for instance, in Japan during the Tokugawa period, only samurai were allowed to wear swords; and in many male-dominated tribal societies, women and children are prohibited from the men’s house or secret society where the weapons are kept. But this does not appear to be the method by which violent techniques are confined to a relatively small group (I have estimated on the order of 15% or less in most conflict-engaged sub-populations). I have argued that the key to most techniques of violence is not the weapons themselves, but the micro-interactional style of how to dominate emotional attention space, and how to deal with ones own emotions (expressed in bodily physiology). These techniques are largely tacit, and there may be a kind of “natural monopoly” in possessing them. This is because the techniques are difficult to learn except by experience and by close association with others who know the techniques.

How are violent techniques learned? We have relatively little empirical research on this; only very recently (chiefly in US and UK military training) are social/ psychological findings explicitly applied to increase the rate of accurate firing and other as-

pects of group performance in close combat [King 2005]. There are some indications in the ethnography of particular types of violent techniques. British soccer hooligans, who evolved techniques for evading security forces and locating vulnerable targets, were imitated by observers from the Continent – initially from Holland and Germany – who took these techniques back home [King 2003]. Certain types of Latino gangs in Los Angeles, creating large-scale alliances and rivalries through symbolic membership displays and taunts of rivals, exported these organizational techniques to Central America, chiefly through gang members who were deported by US authorities [Brenneman 2012]. The technique of suicide bombings by clandestine approach was pioneered in Sri Lanka by the LTTE, and spread through specific geographical channels to Lebanon and elsewhere [Hapgood 2005; Ricolfi 2005]. This pattern of diffusion of violent techniques through networks of those with personal experience fits also what we know about the diffusion of scientific research techniques, again through networks of hands-on experience. [Shapin and Schaffer 1985; Collins 1998, 535-538]. The contrast is to diffusion of techniques through distant media, by reading or by hearsay – which are ineffective ways of learning techniques, both at the scientific research front, and in violence.

In conclusion, I would emphasize again that there is considerable variety of techniques of violence; they all have a crucial component of micro-interactional behavior, that needs to be transmitted in order to make the technique effective. It will take big research effort to examine how, when and where these techniques were invented, and how they diffused. And since violent techniques range in effectiveness – some being only episodically and partially successful – there is much room for an ongoing competition of violent techniques and counter-techniques. The micro-level of the violent interactional techniques themselves must be complemented by macro-mechanisms – both the collective shaping of motives for violence, and the networks through which violent micro-techniques spread across the social landscape.

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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.