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Introduction:
Is a General Theory of Violence Possible?

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"There once was a man who aspired to be the author of the general theory of holes. When asked 'What kind of hole—holes dug by children in the sand for amusement, holes dug by gardeners to plant lettuce seedlings, tank traps, holes made by road makers?' he would reply indignantly that he wished for a general theory that would explain all of these. He rejected ab initio the—as he saw it—pathetically common-sense view that of the digging of different kinds of holes there are quite different kinds of explanations to be given; why then he would ask do we have the concept of a hole? Lacking the explanations to which he originally aspired, he then fell to discovering statistically significant correlations; he found for example that there is a correlation between the aggregate hole-digging achievement of a society as measured, or at least one day to be measured, by econometric techniques, and its degree of technological development. The United States surpasses both Paraguay and Upper Volta in hole-digging; there are more holes in Vietnam than there were. These observations, he would always insist, were neutral and value-free. This man's achievement has passed totally unnoticed except by me. Had he however turned his talents to political science, had he concerned himself not with holes, but with modernization, urbanization or violence, I find it difficult to believe that he might not have achieved high office in the APSA." (MacIntyre 1971, 260)

The editors only stumbled upon this quote by the renowned political scientist Alasdair MacIntyre after having sent out the call for contributions to this special issue "Is a general theory of violence possible?". In fact MacIntyre asked a very similar question in his 1971 article, "Is a science of comparative politics possible?", and as we can imagine from the above quotation, he was not supportive of any such possibility. The response to our call from leading scholars in the fields of violence research and criminology assured us that even if the authors might have been as sceptical as MacIntyre with regard to the answer, they at least found our question sufficiently interesting.

MacIntyre's satirical comment on the impossibility of such an endeavor can of course be confronted with equally well-founded arguments to the contrary, that general theories are not only desirable but also feasible. The model behind such thinking is the model of general scientific theories. Things as different as apples and pears, feathers and leaves, bricks and roofs all fall to the ground, yet it was possible to discover a general "law of falling," which is still regarded as a major breakthrough and one of the great achievements of science. Both Galileo Galilei and Isaac Newton were capable of looking beyond the very different substances and shapes of what fell to the ground to find general principles of "falling." MacIntyre's pessimistic view on general theories takes issue with the desirability and possibility of such theories in the social sciences. Reading through his comment and just substituting the term "hole-digging" with "violence" or "crime" reminds us of the different routes that research into violence has taken over recent years, with results presumably as mixed as those found for a theory of "hole-digging."

However, what is decisive in designing new, better and more comprehensive theories is often the question itself and the way it is asked rather than simply the answers. As various legends have it, Newton was preoccupied not with the differences between the things that fell to the ground, but with the question why they fell to the ground at all. Asking new questions and casting problems in a different way—as

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Charles Tittle reminds us in his contribution—is the route to more encompassing and thus more general theories.

Drafting a general theory of violence confronts us with a number of intricate problems that make this a particularly difficult task. From a criminological perspective, the existence of both legal and illegal violence poses a problem. Although violence shares that characteristic with numerous other types of behaviour (e.g. economic behaviour), it seems to be unique in the way it is both an organized and collective activity and a deeply personal one, both rational and emotional. Indeed, what are the common features of wars and domestic violence, of genocide and street robbery, police violence and a pub brawl? What are the commonalities between an armada of warships and a rioting crowd? How can we make sense of macro-level changes over time and differences between societies, and simultaneous micro-level and situational causes of violence? Is human capacity for violent behaviour invariable over time, and only needs to be teased out as the Milgram experiments would suggest? What are the implications of distinct historical and cultural manifestations of violence like concentration camps, terrorism, or blood feuds for a general theory of violence.

Before adopting MacIntyre's pessimistic view on building general theories in the social sciences (and he explicitly mentions violence), it might be useful to start our inquiry by turning to the body of research on violence. In fact we find that different types of violence are quite consistently related to each other: levels of interpersonal violence decrease during and also often after wars; interpersonal and state violence overlap and are related to specific cultural patterns that can be described as collectivistic and non-egalitarian. Harsh and more violent punishment is found in societies with generally higher levels of violence. Poor societies have higher levels of all types of violence, and poor people in rich societies are more often victims of violence. This very arbitrary selection of facts concerning different types of violence would suggest that there are particular links between them, and raises the possibility of the existence of common mechanisms. That would point towards the possibility and feasibility of a general theory of violence.

However, these empirical observations, of which the authors in this special issue provide many more, bring the difficulties of a general theory of violence to the fore. How can we define violence in a way that encompasses its diverse manifestations and combines them into a singular explanandum for a single theory to explain? From which level should the necessary process of categorization proceed? Should it start from general features of violence, subsuming violence under general categories and theories of behaviour, like rule-bound or instrumental behaviour? Or should it start from unique features and aims of violence like retaliation, revenge, and protection? Should it focus on the micro-level of violent encounters and distil the micro-mechanisms and the micro-management of violence into essential characteristics that apply to all different types of violence? Is it necessary to include intentions, motivation, and harm done into the conceptual framework on which a general theory can be built? Do we need to conceive violence as interaction—even in an age of long-range weapons and nuclear warfare?

The authors in this special issue have all chosen their own route towards a general theory of violence; even if they are sceptical about the endeavour, they give an indication as to the direction and building blocks of such a theory. Consequently, they differ on many of the issues raised above, and often contradict one another. Nor do they concur on the prospects of developing a general theory of violence, though most would entertain the possibility; some are more optimistic, others less. Perhaps Randall Collins best grasps the general mood at the end of his contribution: "We are not nearly in sight of our end, a comprehensive theory of violence in all its forms. But, as Winston Churchill said, we may be at the end of the beginning" (p. 21). Even if a general theory of violence might not be the final achievement, the fine examples of theory building in this issue offer major insights for criminology, sociology, and other social sciences.

From the outset, the authors of this volume take two different routes, which characterize the theories they develop. Randall Collins and Manuel Eisner develop their theoretical approaches outside of general theories of crime, excluding the distinction between legal and illegal violence. Instead they draw on interaction theory (Collins), and

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evolutionary theory in a wider sense (Eisner). Martin Shaw rejects the possibility of ahistorical general theories of violence all together. His focus is on organized violence—from war to revolution, genocide, and terrorism—and he argues that understanding these types of crime and their relation to power is decisive for building a general theory of violence. Richard Felson situates a general theory of violent crime within the dual framework of theories of deviance and aggression. He argues that it is of utmost importance to make correct use of both theories when explaining violent crime. The contributions by Charles Tittle and by Per Olof Wikström and Kyle Treiber start from general theories of crime, thus focusing on illegal violence or violent crime. Per Olof Wikström and Kyle Treiber argue that violence can best be understood as moral action, i.e. based on decisions informed by moral rules about the use of violence. Their Situational Action Theory was originally developed as a general theory of crime but applies equally to violence, as on either side of the legal/illegal divide the use of violence implies moral decision-making. Charles Tittle, finally, identifies the stepping stones and building blocks of general theories in the social sciences, on the basis of his study of the development of general theories in criminology and his own Theory of Control Balance. He proposes that a general theory of violence can be built within the framework of general theories of crime.

Notwithstanding their very different approaches, the authors develop their suggestions within the broad framework of theories of action, and—perhaps with the exception of Martin Shaw—take as their starting point the interactional nature of violence. This is most pronounced in the first contribution by Randall Collins, which is based on his latest book: *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (2008). He starts from the proposition that violence is a mostly unsuccessful rare event, and therefore a dangerous and risky choice which human beings try to avoid. He builds his analysis on a "key feature of interaction in violence-threatening situations: confrontational tension and fear," and concludes that these are the dominant emotions in violent interactions. The successful use of violence requires that this fear be overcome, using "pathways" to get around the barriers of tension and fear. He identifies the following strategies: attacking the weak; audience-oriented staged and controlled fair fights; confrontation-avoiding remote violence; confrontation-avoiding by deception; and confrontation-avoiding by absorption in technique. In his contribution he demonstrates how these interaction patterns apply to the whole range of violence, from domestic violence to fights between gangs and the breakdown of whole armies and societies in the situation of defeat in war.

Manuel Eisner takes the opposite approach to Randall Collins, starting from the rewards of violence. Though violence might be a risky and dangerous choice, it is extrinsically and intrinsically rewarding. Thus violence is instrumental in attaining goals. Eisner bases his argument for a general theory of violence mainly on evolutionary theory, where violence is seen as a mostly successful functional and adaptive strategy of action (in stark contrast to Collins who deems violence to be mostly unsuccessful). Eisner also explores general social theories like Elias's "Civilization Process" and criminological theories like Sykes and Matza's "Techniques of Neutralization" and seeks to realign these with evolutionary theory. He draws on a wealth of data from violence research on phenomena as diverse as domestic violence, blood feuds, gang wars, and genocide to demonstrate the commonality of the reward mechanism in these various types of violence.

Richard Felson bridges the divide between crime and violence. He focuses on violent crime, arguing that it implies both harm-doing and rule-breaking. Like Eisner, he sees both behaviors as instrumental, and a rational choice approach as most suitable for building a general theory of violence. As a consequence, theories of deviance/rule-breaking and theories of aggression are both needed if we are to understand violent crime. However, theories of crime are not capable of explaining differences in violent criminal behavior between different individuals or between different groups, and theories of aggression will not help to explain differences between violent and other types of crime. It is therefore important to establish the relationship between crime (including non-violent crime), harm-doing, and violence. Not all crime is intended to harm the victim (predatory perpetrators, at least, are indifferent to the harm caused). Harm is intended mainly in dispute-related violence. Carving out its explanandum through this relation-

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ship is a major stepping stone towards a general theory of violence.

Per Olof Wikström and Kyle Treiber define violence as "situational action," implying that acts of violence are moral actions and therefore need to be explained within a framework that explicitly takes moral decision-making into account. Arguing that violent behaviour is always bound by rules (if not always by moral rules), they propose their Situational Action Theory as a general theory of violence. Situational Action Theory focuses in particular on the regulated nature of violence in societies. Wars, gang violence, and massacres all imply rules, compliance with rules, and also the breaking of rules. It is the regulation of violence that turns a general theory of crime into a general theory of violence.

Charles Tittle explores the possibilities of general theories of misconduct and deviance within a wider framework of the "maneuvers" of theory building. He argues that "general theories explaining misbehavior already exist, although none yet passes the test of adequacy, and that they apply as well to socially disapproved violence as to any other misconduct, making special theories of violence unnecessary" (pp. 62–63). He opens up a tool-box of theory building, focusing on "tools of abstraction" concerning offences, individual perpetrators, and social relationships. He explores different general theories of crime and analyses how they accomplish the different tasks of abstraction. Such theories provide models for building a general theory of violence, which has similar problems of abstraction to solve (like the diversity of manifestations of violence, of intentions and motivations of actors, and of the social relationships in which violence occurs). Tittle's own Control Balance Theory certainly has the potential to provide the foundation for a general theory of violence, in particular as power relationships and differentials are amongst its conceptual tools. Our

readers will find that the authors indeed use Tittle's tools of abstraction: Randall Collins focuses on social relationships, and Felson on the offender and his/her intentions, as well as on types of crime and violence.

Martin Shaw is renowned for his work on war and genocide. He has chosen the most exceptional starting point for his explorations of a general theory of crime, arguing that our understanding of violence needs to proceed from "organized violence" and its relation to power. Organized violence is a source of power, but also negates it (Arendt). Shaw discusses war as the archetype of organized violence, and argues that the division between combatants and civilians—though a most recent achievement in human history—is crucial for understanding all types of organized violence. As power relations change so does organized violence, and in his paper Shaw traces the most recent changes in warfare from what he terms "industrialized total war" to "global surveillance war." In embedding his analysis in the tradition of social-historical theory-building, he is clearly the most pessimistic as to the possibility of a general theory of violence, which would have to span known human history and encompass all societies and cultures.

Even if we are "not nearly in sight of our end, a comprehensive theory of violence" (Collins, p. 21), it was certainly useful and worthwhile to pose the question. Our authors have teased out fresh theoretical approaches, fascinating categorizations, and useful tools of abstraction. The issue brings together theoretical perspectives that have great potential to integrate the most diverse types of violence, perpetrators, and violent interactions. The authors present a wealth of data, and establish new links between the different manifestations of violence. Even if these different approaches are not incorporated into a general theory of violence, each of them certainly contributes to new ways of understanding violence.

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