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# Processes of Political Violence and the Dynamics of Situational Interaction

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This paper explores how processual approaches to political violence, which largely focus on patterns of strategic interaction at the meso-level of analysis, can be enhanced by paying closer attention to conditions, patterns, and the micro-dynamics of violence in face-to-face encounters. Discussing characteristic elements of processual and situational approaches, and drawing on brief vignettes of episodes of violence in political conflicts in Peru, Egypt, and Germany, it argues that the theoretical value of this perspective is twofold. Firstly, it allows us to capture unintended outcomes of situational interactions, which can account for the sudden emergence or escalation of violence. Secondly, it argues that situational interaction approaches can refine our understanding of meso-level violent processes because they allow us to examine how these processes shape and “produce” situational conditions and constraints that facilitate and induce violent escalation and thus offer ways to capture and conceptualize complex patterns of enchainment.

**Keywords:** political violence, processual approaches, situational interaction, escalation, transformative events

Research on political violence has, in recent years, seen what can be described as a “processual turn”. Instead of focusing on socio-structural conditions (“root causes”) or individual predispositions, violence has been analysed as part and outcome of processes of radicalization and escalation that result from interactions between protest movements, militant groups, governments, and security forces. While this development included, and was to some extent driven by, theoretical debates across a broader array of fields of research, including terrorism studies and social movement research, it remained conspicuously disconnected from recent developments in the sociology of violence, among them, in particular, micro-sociological situational approaches, which have been advanced most prominently by Randall Collins (2008, 2012).

In this paper, I seek to explore how processual approaches to political violence, which largely focus on patterns of strategic interaction at the meso-level of analysis, can be enhanced by paying closer attention to conditions, patterns, and the micro-dynamics of violence in face-to-face encounters. Specifically, I argue that the theoretical value of this perspective is twofold. Firstly, it allows us to capture unintended outcomes of situational interactions – the way violent encounters develop a “logic of their own”, which can account for the sudden emergence or escalation of violence – thus shedding light on the micro-contingencies that shape broader processes of political conflict. Secondly, and somewhat counter-intuitively, I argue that situational interaction approaches provide analytical tools to refine our understanding of meso-level processual dynamics

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by examining how they shape and “produce” situational conditions and constraints that facilitate and induce violent escalation. One of the key challenges of processual analysis is to specify theoretically, and to capture methodologically, how temporally successive happenings become connected to form sequences in which antecedent events condition, shape, or “cause” subsequent events. “Unpacking” violent events by bringing the micro-dynamics of situational interaction into the analysis, thus, not only allows us to capture the micro-contingencies of armed conflict but also patterns of enchainment beyond strategic interactions and adaptation.

The paper is organized in three main parts, with the first section outlining recent processual approaches to political violence and the second discussing sociological works on the micro-dynamics of situational interaction. The third section, then, draws on three brief episodes of violence, taken from violent conflicts in Egypt (al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya), Peru (Shining Path), and Germany (Red Army Faction), to identify and illustrate some of the ways in which micro-interactional perspectives can contribute to enhancing our understanding of processes of political violence. The concluding section returns to the challenges of processual analysis to summarize the argument.

### 1. The Processual Turn in Research on Political Violence

During the past decade, processual perspectives have become increasingly prominent in various sub-fields of research on political violence, including research on radicalization and terrorism (Bloom 2005; Horgan 2008; Taylor and Horgan 2006), civil war studies (Kalyvas 2006; Wood 2003), and, in particular, research on political violence at the intersection with social movement studies (see for example Alimi 2011; Alimi, Demetriou, and Bosi 2012, 2015; Bosi, Demetriou, and Malthaner 2014; della Porta 1995, 2008a, 2013, 2014; Gunning 2009; Tilly 2003). The latter builds upon a substantial history of theoretical development in research on protest movements, starting with the paradigmatic shift from collective behavior approaches towards resource mobilization and political process perspectives in the mid-1970s (McAdam 1982; Tilly 1978). Emphasizing the role of changing political opportunities and organizational dynamics in processes of mobilization, these works argued that violence emerges from strategic

interactions between contenders and the state, rather than being a mere behavioral response to socio-structural strain or deprivation. Incorporating, inter alia, Sidney Tarrow’s work on protest cycles (1995), this line of research gave rise to the Contentious Politics paradigm as a sophisticated framework to analyse dynamics of political conflict by focusing on recurrent relational mechanisms (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2007). In a parallel development, and to some extent drawing on this literature, scholars of political violence started during the 1980s to employ processual perspectives to analyse the emergence of militant forms of action and terrorist groups in the context of protest movements and as a result of dynamics of radicalization and escalation (Neidhardt 1981, 1982; della Porta and Tarrow 1986; della Porta 1995).

The purpose of this section is not to discuss each of the various processual approaches in detail. Rather, I seek to outline the basic explanatory logic that they share and point out some common elements that are of particular relevance for the purpose of this paper. There are few texts that summarize the logic of a processual understanding of political violence as eloquently – and as precisely – as Friedhelm Neidhardt’s study on the Red Army Faction (Neidhardt 1981). Questioning the widespread belief that to explain political violence would require identification of its “root causes”, Neidhardt argues:

It seems that the crucial factors/dynamics are found not in individual or societal predispositions, but in process trajectories in which various conditions shape a system of action, and which, in circular interaction, affect each other and themselves. They are cause and effect at the same time, shaped by and depending on the changing constellations in which interactions take place. The search for “root causes” ends up becoming circular. The system becomes its own, best explanation – and our main task is to understand it. (translated from Neidhardt 1981, 244)

At the core of a processual perspective on political violence, then, lies the notion that processes (and mechanisms or sub-processes) *have autonomous causal efficacy* (Bosi, Demetriou, and Malthaner 2014, 3). While process trajectories are influenced by (and to some extent depend on) environmental conditions and individual predispositions at the outset, they are driven and shaped by dynamics that they themselves generate, thereby transforming initial conditions and generating

new goals and motives.<sup>1</sup> Causality, in other words, is conceived not as a relationship between dependent and independent variables, but as a property of a dynamic pattern of development. Violence, then, is emergent to the process, arising in a gradual manner, often displaying continuities with non-violent forms of action (della Porta 2013, 20–21; Bosi, Demetriou, and Malthaner 2014, 2–3). At the same time, violence takes many different forms, and processes of escalation typically consist in gradual shifts from lower-level to more extreme forms. Violence, from this perspective, is not simply a “product” of a (non-violent) process, but part of it, and, in turn, retroacts on processual dynamics as well as environmental conditions, which can give processes of violent escalation a circular character as feedback loops or self-reinforcing dynamics.<sup>2</sup>

Another point that becomes clear from Neidhardt’s text is that the causal efficacy of the process is seen as resulting, in particular, from *patterns of interaction*. While the various authors and approaches mentioned above differ somewhat with respect to the mechanisms and elements they emphasize, they all, in one way or another, conceive the dynamics that drive violent processes as *relational*.<sup>3</sup> Della Porta, for example, argues that “forms of action emerge, and are transformed, in the course of physical and symbolic interactions among social movements and not only their opponents but also their potential allies. Changes take place in encounters between social movements and authorities, in a series of reciprocal adjustments” (2013, 19). In several of the abovementioned approaches these dynamics of interaction are further conceptualized as *recurring mechanisms*, which in varying combinations and concatenations shape the trajectories of violent processes. Examples of such mechanisms include “escalating policing” in the sense of a shift towards more militant forms of action in sequences of mutual adaptation between social movements and security forces; “political outbidding”, where a dynamic of competition for support and attention between

groups within a movement results in shifts towards more radical positions; and “boundary activation”, which entails the reorganization of social interactions around a single us-versus-them boundary (Tilly 2003, 21; della Porta 2013; Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou 2015; Bosi, Demetriou, and Malthaner 2014, 7–10). Thereby, relational dynamics are understood as depending on and shaped by particular *constellations of actors*, which facilitate or trigger certain patterns of interaction (Neidhardt 1981, 244). Constellations in which several militant groups address the same constituencies, for example, produce competition which may lead to radical “outbidding” (Bosi, Demetriou, and Malthaner 2014, 7–10).<sup>4</sup>

It should be emphasized that the relational dynamics or “dynamics of interaction” mentioned here include a number of different things. They may refer to patterns of strategic interaction (Jasper 2004) as well as patterns of mutual adaptation in tactics and repertoires of action. But they also include discursive and interpretative processes, in particular the transformation of identities, boundaries, and shifts in perceptions, as well as changes in relational configurations (such as “boundary activation”). Processual dynamics, in other words, can involve the transformation of the constellation of actors from which particular patterns of interactions emerge, thus changing the “system of action” that shapes the conflict.

## 2. Situational Approaches to Crime and Violence

Processual approaches of the type described here refer mainly to the meso-level of organized actors and strategic interactions. The field of actors that they examine includes, for example, social movements, militant groups, and state security forces. And interactions are understood as sequences of action and reaction that may extend over periods of weeks or months. One important point of criticism is that as a result, the fact of violence as situational interaction between co-present actors, as bodily harm-doing in face-to-face encounters, is not

<sup>1</sup> That violent processes transform initial conditions and motivations is, interestingly, an observation made in research on clandestine political violence and terrorism (della Porta 2013; Neidhardt 1981) as well as civil war studies (Kalyvas 2006; Wood 2003), and the sociology of violence (von Trotha 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Self-reinforcing dynamics of violence have been discussed in particular with respect to civil wars

(Waldmann 1995; Genschel and Schlichte 1997; Deißler 2016). On violence in general see von Trotha (1997); on the autonomous character of social processes in general see Mayntz and Nedelmann (1987).

<sup>3</sup> According to Tilly, a relational perspective on violence focuses on “interpersonal processes that promote, inhibit, or channel collective violence and connect it with non-violent politics” (2003, 20).

<sup>4</sup> See Mayntz and Nedelmann who, in their analysis of self-reinforcing dynamics in social processes, argue that certain types of interaction emerge from particular “action constellations” (1987): della Porta uses the term “fields of actors” (2013); Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou refer to “arenas of interaction” (Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou 2015). See also Deißler (2016).

properly taken into consideration. This is relevant, in particular, as sociological research on violence has pointed out that violent action at the micro-level has a particular logic of its own and is to a significant degree shaped by situational dynamics.

Among the first to emphasize dynamics of situational interaction in the emergence of violence were criminologists influenced by symbolic interactionism, like Richard Felson and Jack Katz (Felson and Steadman 1983; Felson 1984; Felson and Tedeschi 1993; Katz 1988; see also Birbeck and LaFree 1993). Felson and his collaborators examined patterns of aggressive interaction, pointing out that the outcome of these encounters is “not predetermined by either the personal characteristics or the initial goals of participants; rather they are at least partly a function of events that occur during the incident” (Felson and Steadman 1983, 59–60). They found that interactive processes leading to violence often begin with insults or other “identity attacks”, followed by a verbal conflict and mutual threats that then end in violent attacks, which are subjectively interpreted as retaliation or punishment (Felson and Steadman 1983, 59–60). Drawing on Black’s notion of crime as social control, Felson showed in his subsequent work that many aggressive interactions begin with social control situations, in which a person is reprimanded, threatened, or attacked by others in response to a perceived violation of norms or orders. After the initial (“punishment”) attack, identities and face-saving become involved, increasing the likelihood of further violent attacks (Felson 1984, 113). Felson and his collaborators insist that violence is in general used instrumentally, as a way to produce compliance, to punish, or to assert and protect social identities (Felson and Steadman 1983, 59–61; Felson 1984; Felson and Tedeschi 1993). While similarly pointing out the autonomous causal dynamics – and contingencies – of situational interaction, Jack Katz pursues a slightly different line of analysis, emphasizing the “lived experience of criminality” (1988, 3) and the way individual interpretations, emotional dynamics, and the attractions of crime shape engagement in violence and the patterns in which it unfolds. Interrelated bodily movements and what he calls “interactive awareness” (Katz 1991, 416) are crucial to violent encounters, and he particularly emphasizes the way emotions, individual subjectivity, and intentionality become intertwined in lines of

action that, once initiated, constrain the actor (Katz 1988, 6–8; see also Katz 1999). While situational approaches from criminology had only limited influence on research on political violence and the broader sociology of violence, a number of converging developments did appear, for example in German sociology in the 1990s, where scholars like Wolfgang Sofsky and Trutz von Trotha argued that, rather than looking for “root causes”, violence research needs to put “violence itself”, that is, phenomena of violence as they unfold at the micro-level, at the centre of the analysis, arguing in favour of a dense and detailed reconstruction of violent events (Sofsky 1993; von Trotha 1997).

More recently, and most prominently, it was Randall Collins who has put situational micro-dynamics at the centre of his general theory of violence, arguing that the occurrence of violence is determined not so much (if at all) by preceding or contextual factors, but by patterns of micro-interaction in confrontational encounters (Collins 2008). He argues that these situations are shaped, above all, by debilitating confrontational tension or fear, which more often than not leads to stalemates and makes most violence incompetent and ineffective. Violence, in other words, is difficult, not easy. What enables individuals to actually commit violence, and shapes the forms it takes, are thus “pathways” or situational constellations that allow actors to overcome or circumvent confrontational tension. These “pathways” include situations in which crowds or groups attack a far weaker, helpless victim (attacking the weak), staged fights in which participants focus their attention on an audience rather than on their opponent, violence carried out at a distance or using deception, and, finally, absorption in technique, which is a learned skill of some violent specialists (see Collins 2009b, 11–16, 2008). One important manifestation of “attacking the weak” is what Collins calls *forward panic*, which emerges when a situation of prolonged tension and apprehension suddenly turns into weakness on one side, triggering a “hot rush” on the dominant side, an aggressive one-sided frenzy that often ends in excessive, large-scale violence, which in its emotional dynamic is mirrored in the paralyzing terror of the victims (Collins 2008, 85–94; 2009a, 571–72).

Building on Collins's work, a number of researchers have recently begun to examine phenomena such as riots and violence in the context of protest demonstrations from a situational interaction perspective (Nassauer 2016a, 2016b; Tiratelli 2017; also Sutterlüty 2015). Nassauer, for example, identifies patterns resembling "forward panics" – the breaking-up of lines, being outnumbered, and falling down – in the dynamics that lead to outbreaks of violence in otherwise peaceful protest marches (2016a, 522–24). In addition to drawing upon Collins's theoretical contributions, some of these works also apply the method of meticulously analysing photographs and video recordings of violent encounters to trace sequences of interaction and bodily expressions of emotional dynamics; an approach used by Katz (1999) and refined and popularised by Collins (2008; see Nassauer 2016a; Tiratelli 2017).

### 3. Violent Processes and Patterns of Micro-situational Interaction

The purpose of this paper is to explore how a micro-level social interactionist perspective can contribute to refining existing (meso-level) processual approaches to political violence. As mentioned at the beginning, this includes accounting for the way violent events are shaped by situational dynamics, but also examining how patterns of situational interaction are interlinked with broader violent processes: how violent events shape process trajectories and how broader processes of armed conflict "produce" particular situations and shape patterns of violent interaction. Taken together, I argue, this allows us to develop a more precise understanding of how violence emerges and is shaped in processes of armed conflict, complementing and refining notions of (meso-level) strategic interaction and adaptation. By way of illustrating my argument before I move on to develop these points in more detail, I present three brief episodes taken from the violent insurgencies in Egypt (1981–1999) and Peru (1980–1999), and the German Red Army Faction (1970–1998).

*Egypt, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya, early 1986.* The university of Assiut, a provincial capital in Upper Egypt, had been in turmoil since 1985, when authorities intervened in campus elections

to curb the growing influence of *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* (literally "The Islamic Group"), a radical Islamist movement that had gained a considerable following among students and local residents alike. On the morning of 31 March 1986, two student activists went to a low-cost housing project at the margins of the city to put up posters announcing a public lecture by a well-known Islamist preacher. They were confronted by several plain-clothes police officers patrolling the area. The encounter quickly escalated, with a sharp exchange of words followed by a scuffle. One of the officers drew his service revolver and fired several shots, allegedly intended as a warning. One of the students, Shaaban Rashed, was hit in the head and severely injured, and died two weeks later. "Vengeance for the murder of Shaaban Rashed" became a rallying cry for the movement and during the following months regular Friday prayers at the Islamists' mosque became shows of public defiance, with the students praying in the streets surrounded by hundreds of riot police, on several occasions escalating into clashes followed by mass arrests.<sup>5</sup>

*Peru, Shining Path (PCP-SL), 1983.* By early 1983, the conflict between the Maoist Shining Path guerrilla and government forces had escalated into a violent insurgency, answered by a brutal campaign of state repression in which hundreds of alleged "terrorists" were killed or disappeared, among them many civilians. When the mayor of Uchuraccay (Huanta province, central Peru) was killed by Shining Path, a group of leading villagers decided that they had to confront the guerrilla themselves and purge their community of its local followers. Not only did the military in Huanta fail to provide any effective protection against the threat from the insurgents, but the danger of becoming a target of the counterinsurgency campaign also meant that the presence of "terrorist sympathizers" in the village had to be kept a secret. In January 1983, *comuneros* from Uchuraccay participated in several attacks on presumed guerrillas. Afraid that the insurgents would take violent revenge, the villagers set up a vigil and patrolled the area. On the morning of 26 January 1983, they detained a young local man whom they accused of collaborating with Shining Path.

<sup>5</sup> Personal interview with al-Jamaa student leader in Assiut, conducted in England, May 2006. See

also Buccianti (1986); Malthaner (2011, 132); Springborn (1989, 226–27).



He was freed after local members of his extended family intervened, but not without being severely beaten, and he was made to pay a “fine” in the form of liquor. Around noon that day, a group of leading villagers were sitting together, drinking and discussing the threat from Shining Path sympathizers within the community, when alarm was raised that a group of men was approaching the village. The men were journalists who had come to investigate reports about the killings. The villagers rushed to round them up and started to shout at them angrily, convinced that they were “terrorists”. Despite the presence of Spanish-speakers among the villagers, and although the journalists’ guide spoke Quechua, the two groups seemed unable to communicate and the journalists’ explanations and pleas were not heard. The seven journalists and their local guide were beaten to death by a group of around forty villagers, women as well as men. Due to the identity of the victims, the incident received nation-wide attention and resulted in several investigations. During the following twelve months, Uchuraccay was attacked three times by Shining Path, and the stigma of being “journalist killers” also made them a target for military and paramilitary groups. By mid-1984, out of a population of 470, 135 villagers had been killed and the rest had fled to the provincial capital or to Lima (CVR 2003: 121–79; see also Sánchez 2012).

*Germany, Red Army Faction (RAF), 1975.* After the death of Holger Meins, one of the group’s founding members, during a hunger strike in November 1974, the remaining members and followers of the Red Army Faction were under intense pressure to avenge what they interpreted as “state murder” and to free their leaders from prison. On 24 April 1975, a group of five RAF militants seized the German embassy in Stockholm, taking twelve hostages. The Swedish police arrived shortly after, entering the building and taking positions below the floor where the RAF group had barricaded themselves in. When the police refused to withdraw, even after four ultimatums, the hostage-takers killed one of their hostages, compelled, as one of them later explained, by the logic of the power struggle in this situation. Failure to assert themselves in that moment by forcing the

police to comply with their wishes would have meant the loss of the whole operation. This killing, at a relatively early point in the negotiations, in turn reinforced the German government’s resolve to rule out any negotiations with the hostage-takers. When notified that their demands had been rejected, the RAF group killed another hostage; an act which even they themselves experienced as a helpless and “blind” reaction. They then released all the remaining hostages and shortly afterwards, probably unintentionally, triggered explosive devices they had installed for their protection, killing two of the five hostage-takers.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.1 The Micro-dynamics of Violent Situations (and How Events Shape Processes)

Violence is bodily harm-doing occurring predominantly in interpersonal encounters or micro-situational interactions. The term “situation” can obviously be conceptualized in very different ways. I use it here to refer, broadly, to the immediate setting in which face-to-face interactions of co-present individuals occur (see Birkbeck and LaFree 1993, 115; Collins 2004, 5–6; 2009, 11). Adopting a micro-situational perspective thus implies paying attention to the details of violent interactions in face-to-face encounters as well as to the situational setting (see Hartmann 2013, 118) as a particular micro-constellation of actors and situational roles and identities. Thereby, and most fundamentally, what these approaches argue is that micro-situational interactions *have a logic of their own*, which has to be taken into account

At first sight, it might seem that situational dynamics are less relevant to phenomena such as insurgencies or “terrorist” attacks than they are, for example, to riots, because the former represent not spontaneous outbursts but premeditated attacks embedded in broader political struggles in which violence is, at least to some extent, used intentionally and strategically. Yet, as the episodes sketched above illustrate, in these processes of political violence, too, there is a distinct situational dynamic to the way violent incidents unfold, which is, to some extent, independent from (or even conflicts with) the actors’

<sup>6</sup> Personal interview with former RAF member, Hamburg, May 2017. See also BGH, 01.03.1978, Az.: 3 StR 24/78 (S); Dellwo 2007.

strategic considerations and concerns not only the emergence of violence but also its forms and effects. What these examples also show, however, is that dynamics of situational interaction can shape violent incidents in quite different ways. Firstly, as the case of al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya in Assiut shows, situational interactions in routine and initially non-violent encounters can unexpectedly escalate into violence, apparently without this having been the intention of any of the parties involved. The encounter in Assiut closely corresponds to the pattern described by Felson and Steadman, in which a social control situation escalates in a dynamic of aggressive interactions (Felson 1984, 113; Felson and Steadman 1983, 59–61). Secondly, even in premeditated attacks, the way violence actually unfolds can be significantly shaped by situational dynamics. In Uchuraccay, violence was intentional and based on a collective decision to confront the insurgents, but the conditions that facilitated the attack and the form it took arose during a very short timespan before and during the encounter. In order to understand the excessive use of violence in this case, Collins's notion of *forward panic* seems helpful, as it captures the dynamic of a frenzied attack that occurs when perpetrators, after a phase of tension, suddenly face a weak victim (Collins 2008). The Stockholm case, finally, seems to occupy the opposite end of a "spontaneous/premeditated" continuum, as the RAF group carried out a carefully planned violent operation. Yet, here, too, the situation developed an unforeseen dynamic of its own that compelled and constrained their actions, resulting in an unplanned use of violence and, eventually, the failure of the operation.

So, how can a micro-situational perspective contribute to enhancing our understanding of processes of political violence? Most basically, by drawing our attention to the reality – and distinct dynamic – of violence as it unfolds in interpersonal encounters. It allows us to analytically capture some of the "micro-contingencies" (Collins 2012, 133) of violent processes: how violence emerges unexpectedly from non-violent encounters, why it unfolds in particular patterns, sometimes leading to violent excess, and why in some instances it does not happen. In the overall process, the unexpected situational emergence or excess of violence, then, can lead to sudden "leaps" of escalation (Neidhardt 1981), elevating patterns of violence

to another level in subsequent encounters and representing processual "turning points" (Abbott 1997) that fundamentally change the subsequent course of events. Thus, micro-situational perspectives can inform processual approaches to political violence by helping us to unpack the "internal logic" of violent events and the way they impact upon the broader process. Thereby, the impact of particular events not only results from shifts in the forms and intensity of violence, but also from interpersonal emotional dynamics and the lived experience of collective action. Collins, who builds his theory of "interaction ritual chains" on the notion that symbols (and shared understandings) are created in situational encounters, refers to Durkheim's concept of *collective effervescence* to describe the particular dynamic of intense collective encounters in generating shared emotions (and emotional energy) and identities (2004, 2011, 2012). In other words, violent encounters, in their quality as situational interaction, are in themselves sites of powerful social dynamics that can transform movements or communities, particularly when they involve larger groups of people as either participants or audiences. In that sense, too, they impact upon the process. Drawing on William H. Sewell's notion of an "eventful sociology" (1996a, 1996b), more recent works in the field of social movement studies have started to examine this role of "transformative events" as instances of spatially and temporally condensed collective encounters that reshape perceptions and identities, invoke feelings of group solidarity, and create strong social ties among participants (della Porta 2009).

### 3.2 How Processes Create Violent Situations (and Emerging Patterns of Enchainment)

As mentioned above, while situational dynamics are essential to analytically capturing how violence actually unfolds and what forms it takes, the purpose of this paper goes beyond that, arguing that micro-interactional approaches can also inform our understanding of processes of political violence more generally, and how they generate particular forms of enchainment beyond patterns of direct strategic interaction. Firstly, processes of armed conflict frequently create particular types of situation that facilitate (or induce) violent escalation in micro-interactional encounters independent of the actors' initial



intentions. For example, taken out of context it might seem pure coincidence that the interaction between Shaaban Rashed and the police ended in violence. Yet, within the broader conflict between the Islamists and the government, the encounter had the significance of a “loaded” social control situation, in which putting up posters for an Islamist preacher was seen as a provocation and the students saw the police as an illegitimate repressive force. In other words, the broader process shaped daily encounters that were particularly prone to escalation because they involved contested normative claims and struggles over authority and control. Normative claims and counter-claims as well as strategies of control based on imposing rules of conduct or enforcing spatial or social boundaries are in fact an almost omnipresent feature of political conflict, and also shape the relationship between militant movements and the population. In Assiut, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya started to enforce the separation of male and female students and prohibited music and theatre performances in an attempt to create (their vision of) an Islamic society and to assert control over the campus. Encounters in which the Islamists reprimanded male students or staff for interacting with women frequently escalated into scuffles or fights made subsequent situations even more “loaded” and led to more aggressive attempts to assert control and in turn to increasing resistance (see Malthaner 2011).

Secondly, in processes of escalation, preceding confrontations reshape subsequent encounters in a pattern of adaptation resulting from past experiences visible, at a micro-interactional level, for example in the form of increasing preparation for (and expectation of) violence, which, in turn, creates situations “prone” to violence. In Assiut, after the first clashes around the mosque, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya members started to come to protest events carrying iron bars and bicycle chains, while, on the other side, ordinary police were replaced by riot police, who reacted to the first signs of militant protest by dispersing tear gas and arresting large numbers of demonstrators. In case of Uchuraccay, the constellation in which the villagers’ decision to use violence arose was shaped by the emergence of an existential threat – and past experience of violent attacks by the insurgents – and a situation of great uncertainty, which

created the preconditions and readiness to engage in a spontaneous attack on the group of journalists approaching their village.

The point here is that processes of political violence are not only shaped by patterns of strategic interaction between organized actors, in which one side responds to the other, but also by more diffuse and dispersed dynamics which operate by reshaping, within a certain social and spatial realm, situational conditions for a broader array of individuals and groups directly or indirectly involved in the conflict, facilitating or inducing violent escalation in different ways. As these processual dynamics exert their effects at the situational level they can be analytically captured, in particular, via the patterns of situational interaction they induce.

When examining how processes of armed conflict shape situational encounters, it is, of course, essential to take into account the ways events are embedded in discursive processes which generate the frames of interpretation and normative dispositions that govern situational interactions (Apter 1997; Bosi, Demetriou, and Malthaner 2014; Sutterlüty 2015). A micro-interactional perspective allows us to capture the way discursive processes are intimately intertwined with situational encounters and the lived experience of violence inflicted and suffered, connecting sequences of events and creating particular patterns of enchainment in patterns described most succinctly by David E. Apter:

When people do try to take control, and by means of interpretive action, then the iconography of violence, the choreography of confrontational events, the planning of actions based on interpretation and interpretations deriving from actions becomes a process. The process enables one to shuttle back and forth between violent acts and moral binaries. (Apter 1997, 4)

In Assiut, the discursive construction of Shaaban Rashed’s murder as injustice symbol was closely intertwined with a succession of militant protests, in which the gradual transformation of frames of interpretation was closely intertwined with experiences that “proved” and reinforced more radical perspectives. As Collins shows, particular micro-dynamics of violent interaction can reinforce the radicalization of discursive processes (2012, 2–6). As a result of confrontational tension

and fear, when violence actually occurs this is often in asymmetrical situations, where one side is weak or defenceless, and sometimes in the form of “forward panics” and violent excesses. This mechanism creates a tendency to perceive acts of violence suffered at the hands of the enemy not just as violence, but as *atrocities*, leading to polarization and emotionally charged mobilization: “Most violence is thus easily perceived as atrocity, to be avenged by further violence, which the other side, in turn, also perceives as atrocity” (Collins 2012, 4).

#### 4. Conclusions: a Micro-situational Perspective on Violent Processes

The purpose of this paper is to explore ways – and to demonstrate the explanatory benefits – of linking micro-interactionist approaches into a (meso-level) processual perspective on political violence. One way of doing this is to complement the analysis of strategic interactions by taking into account the fact that the way violence unfolds in face-to-face encounters is shaped, to a varying but often considerable extent, by situational dynamics; or as Jack Katz put it: “Whatever the relevance of antecedent events and contemporaneous social conditions, something causally essential happens in the very moments in which a crime [violence, S.M.] is committed” (Katz 1988, 4). Not only can violence emerge unintendedly from situational escalations. But intentional and premeditated violent attacks are also shaped by the “logic of the situation” and unforeseen dynamics of interaction beyond the control of the perpetrators, which may lead to violent excess and can result in “leaps” of escalation in the overall conflict process. Bringing the micro-dynamics of violence into the analysis thus allows us to at least partially capture elements of contingency in violent processes. Moreover, what the micro-social perspective also brings to the analysis is attention to the lived experience of violent events and the way symbols and identities are formed “in the moment” of collective encounters.

Another, less trodden path is to use a micro-interactional perspective to examine the ways in which broader processes of political conflict shape particular types of violent situations and link sequences of events. Instead of reducing violent processes to strategic interactions between organized actors, this approach allows us to capture the more diffuse and dispersed

patterns in which processual dynamics – within a certain social and spatial realm – constrain and compel individuals and groups linked to the conflict in various ways. The idea is thus that meso-level processual effects materialize and assert themselves – and as such become “visible” – at the level of micro-interactions. To be clear: this is not so much a claim about any primary “location” of causality (i.e. at the micro level), but about the observability of interconnectedness.

Any claim about endogenous causal dynamics in processes of violence – as in social processes in general – is a claim about patterns of enchainment. As mentioned at the beginning, one of the fundamental challenges of analysing phenomena of political violence from a processual perspective, therefore, is to methodologically capture and analytically specify the ways in which causal dynamics connect sequences of events and are, in turn, produced by these connections. What this paper seeks to show, then, is that paying attention to patterns of micro-situational interactions offers a way to capture particular connections. It is from here – from the perspective of actors and in the details of their encounters – that we can trace and disentangle the causal effects of processual dynamics: via the way situational interactions are shaped by and produce discursive processes; by capturing how actors intend, experience, and interpret their actions and encounters with reference (and in response) to prior events; and by examining the way processes of violent conflict constrain and compel individual action at the micro-level.

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