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CONFERENCE REPORT:

Models of Perpetration and Transgression: Borderline Cases in Violence and Trauma Research

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In very different ways the Stanford Prison experiment, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, and the intensified media coverage of the prevalence of sexual assault reveal that perpetrators are neither the 'other' of a society often perceived to be non-violent, nor are they to be found only at its margins. How can we develop a transgressive concept of perpetration that does not essentialize, stigmatize, or symbolically dehumanize perpetrator figures, but instead allows for perspectives that reflect the appropriate level of complexity? What is needed is a notion that describes perpetration in terms of *implicatedness* in violence,[1] e.g. as something that can grow out of a victim's position, or as a capability to carry out violence that can in certain situations develop in 'perfectly ordinary people'.[2]

These questions were at the focus of the multidisciplinary conference 'Models of Perpetration and Transgression: Borderline Cases in Violence and Trauma Research' ['Tätermodelle und Transgression. Grenzfälle in Gewalt- und Traumaforschung'], organized by Prof. Dr. Julia B. Köhne and Jan Mollenhauer, held on 19 January 2018 in the Jacob-und-Wilhelm-Grimm-Zentrum at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Talks were given by a wide range of international researchers, each of whom drew on their expertise to call into question crucial elements of how we understand perpetration and perpetratorship. These talks generated a discussion that encompassed the notion of perpetration in its broadest sense, starting with the psychology of victimhood and perpetratorship at the individual level, expanding to media representations that contribute to public discourse on perpetrators, both in terms of smaller-scale acts of violence, e.g. murders, and mass-scale perpetration of political violence, the effects of this discourse, (cultural) historical genealogies and contexts, as well as the traumatic consequences of perpetratorship. The following reflections upon the discussion should serve to inform current research on perpetration in the context of political violence by providing some helpful guidelines for approaching present challenges in this area.

Clinical psychoanalytical therapist Mathias Hirsch delivered the opening talk, entitled 'Perpetrators and Victims of Sexual Violence in a Therapeutic Group. On Transforming Counter and Cross Identification' ('Täter und Opfer sexueller Gewalt in einer therapeutischen Gruppe. Über umwandelnde Gegen- und Kreuzidentifikation'), which illustrated the importance of psychological treatment for the perpetrator as well as for the victim. By providing insights into perpetrator psychology at the level of

1 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).
2 Harald Welzer, *Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2005); Stefan Kühl, *Ganz normale Organisationen. Zur Soziologie des Holocaust* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2014).

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the individual, Hirsch's observations carry significance for the task of understanding perpetratorship on a mass scale. Rather than understanding 'victim' or 'perpetrator' as categories that constitute an identity, psychological interventions instead try to recognize and treat components belonging to both categories in the same individual. This turn in psychology has major significance in the realm of perpetrator research in that it not only challenges, but also exposes the problems caused by traditional dualistic thinking, which currently dominates the political sphere. Instead of clarifying roles and allocating moral superiority in situations of violence, on an individual as well as on a mass scale, this mentality serves only to obfuscate the nuances and complex relations involved in every situation of violence.

Kathleen Heft, researcher in the field of Cultural Theory and History, presented a discourse analysis entitled '(East German) Child Murderesses in Media-Public Discourse' ['(Ost-) Kindsmörderinnen im medial-öffentlichen Diskurs']. In a comparative study of cases in East and West Germany, Heft demonstrated how discourse on child murders has been used to 'other' former East Germany as fundamentally deviant, backward, and dangerously secular. Heft emphasized a process of 'Eastification', following Edward Said: attributing child murders to Eastern Germany facilitated conceiving of a 'normalized' present-day West by excluding the East. Heft's discussion highlighted the importance of media representations: it is not just the acts or perpetrators of political violence themselves that need to be taken into consideration in research. How one society's media presents facts about violence in another's political system has a major impact on how this violence is interpreted, and can thus have significant effects on international perceptions and relations.

Janine Fubel presented the results of her cultural-studies-based research project 'Mortal Agony and Power to Kill. Perpetrator Behaviour during the Evacuation Process from Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp in April/May, 1945' ('Todesangst und Tötungsmacht. Täterhandeln auf dem Räumungstransport aus dem KZ Sachsenhausen im April/Mai 1945'). The focus of her talk was the coercive relationship that existed between the former inmates at the camp and the security guards, as well as the non-persecuted German citizens who also acted extremely violently. A distinct objective of Fubel's research is a careful examination of the perpetrators, particularly the willingness of male and female guards to take part in the displacement, and even mass murder, of concentration camp prisoners during the marches.

Inspired by Heinrich Popitz, Fubel's analysis is based on the consideration that violence is essentially a power act (*Machtaktion*) that leads to the intentional harm of others, and that power to harm (*Verletzungsmacht*) finds its utmost expression in killing. Alongside the kind of structural violence that took place within the borders of the camps, Fubel understands discursive devices that mark an 'other' also to be mechanisms of violence which, in the case of National Socialism, led first to including and excluding individuals based on the concept of a '*Volksgemeinschaft*', then to dehumanization, and finally to extermination.

After tracing the socio-political circumstances of the 'end phase' (April/May 1945), Fubel detailed such processes as identification procedures before and during evacuation, the composition of staff and the practices of the guards supervising the evacuation. She considered possible motives for the behaviour of these guards and of the citizens living in villages passed through along the way. Trauma following the events at Stalingrad and the ongoing bombing of German cities by the Allies are some examples of conceivable motives. Fubel argues that without considering the initial situation confronting the German population, any conclusions drawn about the increasing violence of guards and citizens towards ex-prisoners will be inadequate.

According to her research, the high-turnover group of lower-ranking members, by no means just the SS guards, constituted the main perpetrators. This group was made up of members of the Wehrmacht and their followers, wardens, and *volksdeutsche* volunteers amongst others. Extremely poor care was taken of prisoners during the marches — stepping out of the convoy for example was punished with shooting in roughly a thousand cases, and these shootings were often carried out in plain public sight.

Jan Mollenhauer, co-organizer of the conference and PhD candidate in the research collective 'Configurations of Film' at the Goethe University, Frankfurt, delivered a talk entitled 'Trials, Courtroom Dramas, Screen Memories. 1960–1962' ('Beweisaufnahme. Courtroom Dramas und Screen Memories, 1960–1962'), in which he considered pertinent examples from the history of film. Mollenhauer prefaced his examination of the films by outlining the concept of a 'hauntology of the open secret'.[3] Here he compared *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), *Judgement at Nuremberg* (1961), and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) with specific media arrangements in the courtroom of the Eichmann trial.

He examined the effect of the pictures shown in the films of the concentration camps opened in 1945, which are characterized by a 'hauntedness'—partly present, partly absent. Mollenhauer referred in this context to the 'invisible images' that 'haunt' their visible counterparts—similar to Freud's *Deckerinnerung* ('screen memory'). He saw in the simultaneous interpreting systems that were used in these situations a specific connection between *Judgement at Nuremberg*, the Eichmann trial, and the Nuremberg trials after 1945.

Mollenhauer pointed out the memorable way that, like Eichmann and the translators in the actual historical situation, the interpreters in the films sit in glass booths, and how they seem omnipresent in the media representations of events. These glass booths, like the well-distributed pictures of the faces of the prosecuted and of the audience, serve as screens. Moreover, by way of connecting courtroom and media, *Judgement at Nuremberg* repeats the primal scene (*Urszene*) of the trials against Nazi lawyers. In addition to this, the images from the concentration camps live on in the film through its display of parts of the US documentary *Nazi Concentration Camps* (1945).

3 Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

Researcher in the field of cultural theory and history Ulrike Wagener delivered a talk entitled 'Missionaries as Colonial Perpetrators? Legitimizing Violence and "White Innocence"' ('Missionare als koloniale Täterfiguren? Legitimationsstrategien von Gewalt und "weiße Unschuld"'), in which she addressed the connection between colonial order and physical, psychological, and sexual violence in prison camps in German South-West Africa around 1900. Within this context Wagener focused on constructions of race, gender, beauty, and normality, which are still in effect today. She responded to calls from various anthropologists, including Ann Laura Stoler, to expand discourse analysis of the emergence of bourgeois orders to include the colonies. This branch of research is based on the assumption that social identities in metropolitan areas were covertly but permanently influenced by racial concepts. Wagener examined the conceptions of whiteness, Christianness, and Germanness that emerge from the writings of the missionaries of the Rhenish Missionary Society (*Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft*) in German South West Africa.

To this end Wagener applied the concept of 'white innocence' in relation to colonization — originally used by gender scholar Gloria Wekker in her research on the case of the Netherlands — to the German missionary work in Africa and to today's ideas of Germany as a colonial power and as an original site of perpetration. Wagener drew connections to Germany on the one hand in relation to its desired state of innocence, which stems from its Christian character, and on the other hand in relation to the extent to which it was ostensibly involved in colonialism: very little. Its small size tends to be associated with innocence. Thus, compared to other colonial powers, Germany presents itself as smaller and therefore less aggressive. A further consideration is how the word 'innocence' elicits connotations of not knowing and not wanting to know, and how using the word in certain contexts thereby implies a denial of racist structures and the promotion of privilege, thus indirectly facilitating violence.

Wagener went on to examine the role of missionaries as supposed 'advocates of Africans' and their narratives to justify violence against Africans. She demonstrated how missionaries played a major role in national colonization. Until 2017, however, the participation of the Rhenish Missionary Society in the construction and administration of the concentration camps had been contested. Although Wagener's investigation confirmed that the missionaries were not formally involved, it highlighted their 'collective work,' which led to the transfer of refugees to the military. Military and missionary sources clearly confirmed that the internment of Africans, which often led to their being wounded and killed, would not have been possible without the assistance of the missionaries.

Laliv Melamed, postdoctoral researcher in the research collective "Configurations of Film" at Goethe University, Frankfurt, returned to the theme of visual media, this time examining their role in forming collective memory in the context of Israeli remembrance culture. In her talk, entitled 'Bring the Boys Back Home? Family Media

Practices and Intimate Memories as Forms of Complicity', she demonstrated how everyday media in Israel contributed to shaping a collective narrative in which the categories 'victim' and 'perpetrator' in certain contexts were obscured or even inverted. Melamed focused on private memorial home videos, produced since the 1990s by the families of Israeli soldiers that died in the Israel-South Lebanon conflict. These commemorative videos were broadcast once a year on national television, allegedly as a gesture of solidarity. While the videos had the potential to generate a new political voice, they instead led to emotionalizing the violence and victimizing those who carried out violence on the Israeli side. Melamed's research suggests that the content, dramaturgy, and aesthetics of the films led to the violence being legitimized and normalized, and prompted viewers to justify the ongoing militancy.

Using this example, Melamed highlighted the necessity to reconsider how we categorize 'victim' and 'perpetrator': the binary structure of the current model does not reflect the complexity of the history of violence; it incorrectly and dangerously simplifies complicated discourses and realities, reducing them to a distorted narrative in which one side seems entitled to claim moral superiority. It is therefore essential that we find a more productive approach: a concept of perpetration that avoids this problematic essentialization is urgently required.

By considering models of perpetration in relation to various historical incidences of violence, Michael Rothberg, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at UCLA, criticized traditional classification systems and patterns. In his interview with Mollenhauer, 'Trauma, Multidirectionality and Implication', Rothberg argued for the revision of memory models in trauma research, in order to develop a transgressive concept of perpetration. In the first part of the interview, Rothberg discussed his book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*,[4] and in the second part outlined his current research project on his concept of the 'implicated subject.' As one element of his research in memory studies and trauma studies, he considered the Freudian notion of 'screen memory', which he argued can be used to illuminate connections between traumatic events in very different contexts. He questioned the assumption that different historical moments in collective memory generally 'compete for position' with each other, indicating that this way of thinking does not contribute to a productive discourse. Probing the interplay between various histories has the potential to reveal new perspectives and to enable innovative modes of narration.

Rothberg put forward an alternative perspective, which would serve as an advance beyond the traditional perpetrator/victim dichotomy: his proposed model highlights how subjects or collectives are implicated rather than guilty. All subjects, even if not directly involved in the violence, share a certain responsibility for it because of either

4 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

passively or indirectly facilitating it or profiting from it. An essential step in shaping a more productive discourse is to emphasize the concept of (shared) responsibility instead of culpability. This more nuanced model reflects the appropriate degree of complexity and gives rise to a transgressive notion of perpetration that may help to circumvent such current problems as essentialization, stigmatization, and feelings of moral superiority.

The Berlin conference focused on perpetrators in different temporal, spatial, and media contexts and considered the various dimensions of perpetration from the level of individual psychology, to intersubjective accounts, through to collective perspectives. By doing so, the conference facilitated an in-depth discussion about the problems and limits of the existing accounts of victimhood and perpetration in violence and trauma research. It became apparent that the time has come to discard any seemingly unambivalent dividing line between 'perpetrators' and 'victims' that seeks to enable distinct categorization. A constructive analysis of violent situations must include all subjects involved, whether directly or indirectly. Especially it must include transgressive conceptions of perpetration, so that our understanding is not limited from the outset by moralistic or self-righteous presumptions.

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