JPR

Response to Christian Gudehus

The Editors

Christian Gudehus has written a thoughtful and constructive response to the establishment of the *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, in particular the editorial introduction we wrote, and we are thankful for his input. He addresses several important issues relating to conceptualization, legitimization, and academic positionality. We would like to take this opportunity to respond to some of the points that he raises.

First and foremost, Gudehus writes: 'The authors define perpetrator, victim and bystander as subject positions. But how is such a position defined? Or to put it differently, how does a researcher know when an individual should be labelled a perpetrator?' The definition and conceptualization of 'perpetrator' differs significantly from discipline to discipline. There cannot be a single, a-moral, non-normative position on this question, and as editors we do not subscribe to a single, clearly circumscribed definition. For some, definitions are praxiological, for others they are ideological, and in our editorial, we laid out a set of parameters to approach perpetration. Definitional diversity and a plurality of approaches only serves to enrich the field of violence studies, and JPR aspires to offer a platform for exactly such exchanges.

Another point Gudehus makes is that to him, 'collective violence' is an analytically more useful term than 'political violence'. As an example of non-political collective violence, Gudehus cites 'slave hunting', which, he writes, 'led to the destruction of entire communities' but 'was mainly economically motivated'. This presupposes a strict separation of politics and economics which appears questionable to us, especially in the context of slavery. And moreover, it appears to restrict the definition of political violence to violence that is politically *motivated*. We would question this restriction and in fact posit that the forms of violence that fall under the purview of perpetrator studies do so because they have political *implications*. It might be possible to find examples of non-political collective violence (rioting at a football game, perhaps?) but these would not be relevant to perpetrator studies unless it could be demonstrated that these acts were in some sense political or that they should be understood in a political context. At the same time, JPR is not interested only in collective violence, but also in acts of political violence carried out by individuals. Assassins of political figures, 'lone wolf' terrorists, or violent actors in race riots all commit forms of political violence, and need to be considered.

Gudehus rightly argues that understanding the behaviour of the targeted group ('victims') and the untargeted groups ('bystanders') is important for understanding the process of perpetration. For one, the apathy and/or indifference of third parties contributes to the victimization of the targeted groups, as it gives a clear signal

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especially to fence-sitters and half-hearted perpetrators that their actions will not be met by protest or resistance. However, it is the organizing top-level perpetrators who are the movers of the macro-process. Without these spellbinders' orders, tacit or explicit, it is likely that the violence would never have started in the first place.

Gudehus argues about our use of the term 'perpetrator' that 'we may be better off conceptualising such processes, relations, events etc. as actions rather than labelling the individuals involved as helpers or rescuers'. This is not the place to revive the chicken-and-egg dilemma of agency versus structure, but suffice it to state that we did not assign primacy to the agency of the perpetrator. In fact, we seem to be in vigorous agreement with Gudehus when we write about perpetrators versus perpetration: 'Whereas the former term refers to the agency of the individuals who have perpetrated forms of mass violence against civilians, the latter concept refers to the process of collective commission of mass violence' (Editors' Introduction, p.11). Also, we would run the risk of posing a false dichotomy if we were to distinguish too sharply between 'action-centered approaches' and 'social categories', since it is the act of murdering that makes someone a murderer, morally, legally, and indeed psychologically.

Writing about the processes preceding the move toward collective violence, Gudehus argues that '[t]he dynamics leading to such norm variations or changes moreover do not necessarily have perpetrators as their agents.' Not necessarily, no, as very often this is within the remit of ideologues and hatemongers, but are they not intimately related to the (later) killers, and are not the perpetrators themselves fundamentally involved in shifting the norms? Was it not explicitly the Nazi party that persecuted Germans as Jews and therefore constructed the social category of 'Jew'? Was it not the Young Turks who ostracized Ottoman Armenians from 1913 to 1915? Without the Bolsheviks' relentless pursuit of imagined enemies, how would hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens even have ended up in the abstract categories of 'wreckers' or 'enemies of the people'? Or would the term 'Turks' (*Turci*) ever have become a deadly target category without the Othering discourse of Serb nationalists in Bosnia?

Finally, it is obvious that multiple identities and acts can coexist in the same human being, successively or simultaneously. There are significant numbers of Rwandan Hutu who killed systematically outside the house but simultaneously rescued and sheltered one or more Tutsis from a certain death. There are ample examples of one and the same Kurdish tribal chieftain who had Armenians rescued in 1915 but slaughtered in 1921. Individual motivations are multiple, layered, and changeable. This is not to belabour an apparent puzzling tension between 'perpetrator' and 'helper', but to point out that much like every other human being, perpetrators have complex identities, both at one particular time and as a changing aspect of their lives, across time. 'Killer' is only one dimension of their identity (even during the very days of the killing), and perhaps 'father', 'sportsman', 'musician', 'vegetarian' are other dimensions. The role they play as perpetrator is one of many.

In our editorial, we unpack the 'dynamic process of perpetration' (p.11). Gudehus concludes his remarks by arguing that what makes processes of perpetration 'dynamic' is relationality and performativity. To this we can add the influence of changes over time: no process of persecution has ever been static and free of shocks, accelerations, and decelerations of intensity and extent. We can only understand the dynamism of perpetration by looking at how they begin, develop, and end.

Let us return to the question of disciplinarity. If, from a historical or sociological perspective, it can be productive and even necessary to emphasize the act of perpetration and the dynamic processes underlying such acts, in other fields this privileging of action is altogether more problematic. In fields such as literary studies, cultural studies, and memory studies, to name only a few, the object of study may indeed be the *figure* of the perpetrator as a discursive formation or a representational category, and not the abstract processes and dynamics per se. In these contexts, it makes sense to focus on 'the perpetrator' and not on perpetration. That is not to say, of course, that the categories of perpetrator, victim, and bystander are taken at face value or as clearly defined and essential ontological categories, but rather precisely that they are subjected to critical analysis and problematization.

We would also insist that perpetrator studies as a field can and must engage in a constant process of interrogating and questioning the very term that gives it its name. We would be suspicious of any field that took its fundamental concept for granted and considered the matter of its definition to be settled. This also means that perpetrator studies has to be the study of more than the social, psychological, and political dynamics that create the opportunity or setting for acts of collective violence. It must also examine the discursive and representational function of the label 'perpetrator' in society and culture, historically and transnationally. And here it will not suffice to look only at actions. What would it mean for a literary scholar, for example, to focus only on the actions of fictional or fictionalized characters? In a novel like Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* it matters that the acts committed are narrated by a perpetrator, an SS officer. It is, in other words, the subject position of the narrator that makes all the difference, and is what made the novel so controversial. The same genocidal acts could just as easily have been recounted from the perspective of a victim or an omniscient third person narrator, and indeed they have been, in both fictional and non-fictional texts, and hence, to disregard the identity of the narrator would be to miss the point of the novel. All of this might fall under the rubric of 'context', which Gudehus rightly insists is indispensable when studying perpetrators and perpetration. One of the crucial contextual elements is group membership. Gudehus writes: 'Collective violence consists of events, actions, and relations that are based on group-attribution: humans harm and are harmed because they belong to a group or are conceptualized as such.' What is this other than a subject position? No one is saying that these subject

positions (perpetrator, victim, bystander) are predetermined, universal, unchanging, or mutually exclusive. Moreover, self-identifying or being identified as belonging to a particular category is just as often strategic as it is taxonomic. According to Gudehus's model, it would apparently suffice to compare the label to the actions in order to determine whether this or that individual is truly responsible for acts of perpetration. As Ernesto Verdeja and Raya Morag also emphasize in their responses, the aftermath of collective violence can be just as significant as the acts themselves, and here the strategic construction of subject positions is of paramount importance. To cite the standard example, whether someone should be called a freedom fighter or a terrorist is a matter of context, and cannot be resolved by looking at their actions. So again, we seem to be in agreement, just not about the terminology.

In conclusion, in our opening editorial we stated our belief that perpetrator studies is an interdisciplinary field in its own right, covering a broad range of politically-motivated violent practices, that lends itself to a genuinely multi- and inter-disciplinary approach. As the range of perspectives displayed in this roundtable shows, this is precisely what is happening. When we started this project, we knew that JPR would straddle different fields (Holocaust studies, genocide studies, terrorism studies, and so on) and draw on different disciplines, each one of them in turn with their own complexities. We felt then, and we still feel now, that an overly prescriptive framing of the field would have defeated our purpose. We are confident that the wealth of insights presented by the participants in this roundtable discussion vindicates that decision.