

Examining the Boundaries of Perpetrator Studies: Reflections on the 2024 Perpetrator Studies Network (PSN) Conference

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Introduction

The panels of the 2024 Perpetrator Studies Network (PSN) conference have highlighted that the field of Perpetrator Studies is rapidly evolving, and with it, the boundaries of the ‘perpetrator’ label are becoming increasingly difficult to draw. As Alexander Hinton has suggested, attempting to set and define these boundaries is not without risk: ‘What have “we” excluded by creating certain sorts of conceptual boundaries?’¹ This question illustrates the field’s core principle – the continuous critical reflection on the object of its study. More so, in their response to Christian Gudehus’s critique concerning the parameters along which the field’s analytical scope and categories are determined, the editors of the *Journal of Perpetrator Research* noted ‘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’.² Perpetrator Studies, they continue, therefore must ‘examine the discursive and representational function of the label “perpetrator” in society and culture, historically and transnationally’.³ Thus, the 2024 PSN conference aimed to explore this question and expand the boundaries of the field by inviting a diverse range of scholars to reflect on theoretical and methodological questions of studying perpetrators and perpetration at large. The conference’s broadening of focus, while potentially enriching and necessary in today’s shifting academic world, equally calls for a reflection on the conceptual coherence and definitional boundaries of the field.

1 Alexander Hinton, ‘Foreword: Critical Perpetrator Studies’, in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg. (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. xvi–xviii (p. xvi).

2 Susanne Knittel, Uğur Ümit Üngör, and Emiliano Perra, ‘Response to Christian Gudehus’, *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 33–36.

3 Ibid.

Held at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) on 26 and 27 June, the conference brought together a group of over thirty researchers from various European, American, Asian, and Australian universities in order to facilitate, as its title suggests, *Reflections on the Boundaries of Perpetrator Studies: Looking at Violence, Politics, and Harm*. Organised by ULB's Damien Scalia and Ellen Van Damme, as well as Margaux Coquet (Université du Luxembourg) and Marie-Sophie Devresse (Université catholique de Louvain), the PSN conference was structured around four panels held across two days with the objective to reevaluate the ways in which the field of Perpetrator Studies may be expanded, limited, or redirected. Seventeen speakers with diverse disciplinary backgrounds including history, sociology, law, health services research, and literary studies thus congregated to consider the epistemological challenges of the field, to offer theoretical and conceptual alternatives or advancements to the terminology and methodology of Perpetrator Studies, and to discuss topics that have so far not been the field's primary focus.

The Panels

At the opening panel of the conference, entitled 'At the Frontiers of Criminalization: Highlighting the Ambivalent Relationships Between Criminal Law and Colonisation,' four researchers presented their work on the relationship between criminal law, colonisation, terrorism, and immigration within diverse geographical and historical contexts. The first two presentations consisted of Yukti Saumya's study of archival accounts written by the perpetrators of the brutal Younghusband Mission (the British military expedition to Tibet in 1903-1904), and Jérémie Vervoort's analysis of a recent court case against the Belgian state in connection with Belgium's colonial past in the Belgian Congo, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This was followed by Ahmed Ajil's discussion of the terms 'terrorist' and 'terrorism' within the context of the 'Global War on Terror', as well as Lorenzo Bernardini's legal survey of mass detention practices within the European Union in the so-called 'Migrant Crisis'. The pairing of these two presentations illuminated the means by which criminal law is deployed in western states to manage the perceived threats of racialized groups' political organising or movement, along with demonstrating how its role in shaping public perceptions of security and belonging is rooted in coloniality. The

panel catalysed a dynamic conversation on the meta-narratives surrounding the ways language and law have historically been utilised to reinforce socio-political hierarchies and perpetuate continuous cycles of violence.

The second panel of the day, 'At the Frontiers of Perpetrators: Questioning the Differential Apprehension of the Individuals Concerned by Mass Criminality,' was composed of five presentations. The panel considered the ways in which the perpetrators of various crimes in, again, vastly diverse geographic and historical contexts were apprehended or treated by the judicial systems of the states in which their activity garnered a criminal status or the 'perpetrator' label. Three speakers examined the legacies and effectiveness of Transitional Justice mechanisms within the Latin American context; Michael Humphrey and Estela Valverde reconsidered the Argentine dictatorship (1976-1983) through the conceptual prism of the 'restless event', while Kerstin Carlson discussed the process of Colombia's state-building in light of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP). The two presentations foregrounded the historical and present-day obstacles encountered in the adequate commemoration of victims of mass violence in Argentina and Colombia, as well as the difficulties of stabilising official, state-mandated narratives about the countries' pasts. What appeared as a novelty in the field, however, was the discussion of domestic abuse. Three papers engaged with this topic from different disciplinary positions and through different case studies, comprising: (1) Miltonette Olivia Craig and Talisa J. Carter's discourse analysis of the media coverage of the criminal prosecutions targeting Black female domestic violence victims who acted in self-defense; (2) Helen Cramer's health service research on male domestic abuse perpetrators in England; (3) and Rasha Hamid's stylistic and sociological analysis of the language used in the prosecutions of domestic abuse perpetrators in the British context. This intersection of legal, sociological, and media-focused approaches not only underlined the evolving boundaries of the 'perpetrator' label within the field, but equally flagged the difficulty in translating the concept across diverse disciplinary perspectives which might privilege different contextual factors and ethical considerations. While the intent to broaden the scope of Perpetrator Studies is valuable and readily called for by the field's inherent interdisciplinarity, it nevertheless raises questions about the coherence of including interpersonal violence structurally distinct from mass atrocity. The panel discussion thus brought to light how varying contexts can shift the interpretation of the 'perpetrator'

label, potentially blurring the lines between state-sanctioned mass violence and individualised criminal behaviour in ways that may merit further scrutiny.

'At the Frontiers of Perpetration: Rethinking the Definitions and Dynamics of Participation,' the third and most thematically varied panel, set off the second day of the conference. Two of the five presenters proposed new theoretical avenues for Perpetrator Studies. This included, firstly, Timothy Williams' systematisation of digital violence and violent actors – based on a revision and further development of existing conceptualisations – which foregrounded the role of social media (algorithms) in physical or digital infliction of political harm and, secondly, Nusrat Jahan Nishat's discussion of the epistemic affordances that the (re-)appropriation of the 'Domino Theory' would bring to the field. Additionally, Benjamin Gaches reported on the pedagogical potential of 'conflict simulating' games in higher education with respect to the insights that these could provide to the unfolding of mass perpetration and the motivations of various implicated actors. The final two presentations reviewed the participatory structures of organised crime: Emilia Ziosi examined the decision-making processes of cocaine traffickers operating in Colombia and Italy along with the specificities of their group dynamics, and Stephan Parmentier scrutinised the historical development of the 'Joint Criminal Enterprise' doctrine as well as the insights it generated for the fields of Transitional Justice and Perpetrator Studies. The thematic diversity of this panel underlined both the richness and the complexity of expanding the field. As Perpetrator Studies embrace indirect and networked forms of violence, such as algorithmic harm and organised crime, it prompts valuable questions about our engagement with and understanding of agency and accountability in perpetration. This theoretical development thus pushes the conceptual boundaries of not only the possible actors of mass violence, but equally of the role algorithmic and technological mediation may play in the perpetuation of violence that allow for responsibility and accountability to become muddled.

The fourth and final panel, 'At the Frontiers of Perpetrator Studies: Shifting the Perspective from Legal Categories to Individual Stories,' was composed of two presentations within the domain of humanities, both of which were situated in the German context and concentrated on political violence, albeit ideologically different. Clare Bielby discussed autobiographical writings of left-wing 'terrorists' active in postwar Germany and the ideas of terrorism and the self that emerge

in these texts, while Deborah Brostaux revisited Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* (1977) whereby the question of fascist desire, in the *Freikorps* and more generally, was reconsidered in light of more recent scholarship in the field. As compared to the previous three, this panel was more in line with the established delineations of Perpetrator Studies given that it returned to the examination of individual narratives and ideological constructs traditionally associated with the notion of perpetration in the field. By centring on personal accounts and psychoanalytic interpretations of political violence within specific historical and ideological contexts, the panel underscored the enduring relevance of humanities-based approaches in understanding the complex identities and motivations of perpetrators, offering a reflective counterpoint to the broader thematic and disciplinary expansions observed in earlier discussions.

Reflection

As the 2024 PSN conference has made apparent, Perpetrator Studies has developed into a deeply interdisciplinary field, allowing for the figure of the perpetrator to become a multi-dimensional subject which defies simplistic categorisation, and which may operate in a wide array of contexts – ranging from historical atrocities and state-sanctioned violence to more individualised forms of harm such as interpersonal violence or those associated with health and social systems. As Knittel and Goldberg make clear, within our current political, cultural, and historical time, 'it is all the more important that we critically re-examine categories such as perpetrator, bystander, and victim'.⁴ Obtaining a nuanced understanding of these terms, they argue, requires a confrontation between disciplines that can generate 'new concepts, insights, and, crucially, new questions that might not have arisen within a mono-disciplinary setting'.⁵ Nevertheless, such interdisciplinarity may produce challenges in the field's engagement with perpetration at large as its foundational understanding – rooted in the study of political (mass) violence – must now contend with an ever-widening array of contexts, methods, and ethical imperatives across disciplinary lines. For instance, considerations of gender-based violence or systemic harm

4 Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg, 'Introduction', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1–4 (p. 2).

5 Ibid., p. 3.

tied to social inequities invites explorations of the separation drawn between 'political' and 'interpersonal' violence, highlighting the intersections between these spheres; in turn, this prompts reflection on the conceptual and methodological coherence needed for analytical clarity across the field.

Notably, the conference spotlighted legal and criminological perspectives within the field at large. This disciplinary emphasis allowed for an engagement with interpersonal violence, organised crime, and other forms of harm that may be considered to operate on different scales and in different contexts from mass atrocity and political mass violence, hitherto understood as the main subject of enquiry in Perpetrator Studies. As such, this implies a risk of falling into a gradual substitution of perpetration with criminality in the engagement within the field. Such a dominant disciplinary focus may imply an overreliance on criminality as a primary lens for understanding perpetration that might inadvertently reshape the field's intellectual gravitational pull in ways that could marginalise other critical approaches - particularly those from the humanities, which have traditionally offered interpretive and culturally contextualised analyses essential for understanding the representational and symbolic dimensions of perpetration. Nevertheless, as Susanne Knittel emphasised during the conference's closing remarks, this multi-disciplinary, ever expanding, and adapting quality of Perpetrator studies constitutes its core strength. As the field navigates the study of emerging forms of perpetration, such as algorithmic and technological violence, it also continues to explore questions of everlasting importance: implication and complicity, the figure of the bystander, ecological violence, colonial perpetrators, and more.

The 2024 PSN conference thus drew attention to the interdisciplinary nature of Perpetrator Studies, which, while representing its very intellectual foundation, also presents itself as a challenge in defining the scope of the field. Although the expansion of theoretical and conceptual frameworks allows the field to examine varied forms of violence, the widening of 'perpetrator' as a category risks diminishing the term's gravity if it begins to encompass forms of harm traditionally analysed within distinctly different contexts. The study of domestic violence and organised crime, for instance, may undoubtedly benefit from the analytical insights of Perpetrator Studies, but their inclusion begs the question whether the same frameworks used to analyse genocidal perpetrators are appropriate for understanding perpetrators of interpersonal or localised forms of harm. The conference therefore re-

iterated the necessity of developing a nuanced typology within Perpetrator Studies as a growing field, one that acknowledges differences in scale, context, and intent, while preserving the ethical distinctiveness that has historically grounded the field. Even so, the panellists' contributions underscored the vital importance of scholarly collaboration in advancing the field. Such a collective effort thus accentuates the significance of continual, interdisciplinary dialogue in response to a rapidly evolving world to ensure the field maintains its ability to address and expose emerging forms of violence and perpetration.

Works Cited

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