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Control of violence—A view on the concept of control

Kontrolle der Gewalt – Ein Blick auf das Konzept der Kontrolle

Zusammenfassung:

Künftig werden wir mit einem zunehmenden Verlust an Kontrolle über Gewalt konfrontiert werden

Dies ist die zentrale Hypothese, die derzeit durch die Arbeit der Forschungsgruppe ›Kontrolle der Gewalt‹ näher beleuchtet wird. Da jedoch die Auseinandersetzung mit einer derart weitgefassten und noch wenig spezifischen Annahme so gut wie unmöglich erscheint, bringt die Herausforderung, diese Hypothese zu untersuchen, zunächst einmal die Notwendigkeit mit sich, sie weiter einzuschränken. Aufgrund dessen wird der Gewaltbegriff durch eine Fokussierung auf drei exemplarische Phänomene begrenzt. Es handelt sich hierbei um die Phänomene Schulamoklauf, Terrorismus sowie Gewalt innerhalb ›fragiler‹ Staaten. Das bedeutet, die Forschungsgruppe untersucht individuelle und kollektive Formen der Gewalt in Gesellschaften innerhalb und außerhalb Europas. Im Zentrum unseres Gewaltverständnisses steht also die *direkte physische Gewalt*, die auf Schädigung, Verletzung oder Tötung abzielt, also manifest und meistens auch intendiert ausgeübt wird.

Sich mit der Frage nach einer Kontrolle von Gewalt zu beschäftigen, ist zunächst einmal ein noch eher unklares und unspezifisches Unterfangen, da der Begriff der Gewaltkontrolle sehr weit gefasst ist und in unterschiedlicher Weise verstanden werden kann.

Aus diesem Grund soll der vorliegende Aufsatz Aufschluss darüber geben, wie das Konzept der Kontrolle für die Untersuchung der hier betrachteten Gewaltphänomene genutzt werden kann. Hierzu erfolgt zu Beginn eine detaillierte Beschreibung des Konzeptes, indem eine Definition des Kontrollbegriffs angeboten, das Kontrollparadigma erläutert sowie mögliche Relationen zwischen Kontrolle und Gewalt und relevante Analyseeinheiten beschrieben werden. Abschließend wird die Hypothese, dass wir künftig mit einem zunehmenden Verlust an Kontrolle über Gewalt konfrontiert werden, weiter expliziert.

I The framework

In future we will face an increasing loss of control over violence.

This is the guiding hypothesis of the research group ‘Control of Violence’. As this is quite a broad and still unspecified assumption, the challenge of analysing this hypothesis consists in narrowing its content and thus, focussing on three exemplary phenomena of violence. These phenomena are school shootings, terrorist attacks and forms of violence in the context of ‘fragile’ states. Hence, the research group investigates individual and collective violence in the present-day Europe and outside Europe. Violence is thereby understood as a process of inflicting physical harm to others.

The starting point is a critical analysis of evolutions at the beginning of the 21st century. Given the growing importance of school shootings, the changing character of post 9/11 terrorism and the inner-state violence of societies in which the monopoly over the legitimate use of force is not assured, one can assume that those are especially phenomena that are caused and may cause certain losses of control. Firstly, in all fields we can observe *extreme variations* of individual, collective and state violence. Secondly, one may find hardly any warning signals, especially with regard to school shootings and terrorism. Moreover, there is a lack of knowledge about the trigger causes of these phenomena and the motivations of the perpetrators respectively. In the case of violence in fragile states, warlords and violent self-help groups, for instance, get into the position to establish their own norms and violent activities leaving little room to control them. Violence in such contexts, especially, seems to be rather at random and arbitrary. In all three fields the rules of social life are extremely weakened.

But the control paradigm is not an easy one as it is rather broad and unspecific. Following that, the article gives first insights into the way the concept of control can be used when analysing the phenomena of violence under investigation. The next section aims to give a more nuanced understanding of the concept of control by suggesting a definition of control, elucidating the paradigm, and discussing possible relationships between control and violence as well as certain units of analysis. Finally, the hypothesis that in future we will be facing an increasing loss of control over violence is explicated.

II. The concept of control

1. The notion and definition of control

The idea of a non-violent society has never been realistic, nor is it now. This also applies to so-called developing countries, and especially to societies in transition. A greater or lesser incidence of violence between individuals, collectives or states always exists. Nonetheless, people have not and will not abandon their hopes and efforts to at least *contain* the potential for violence. This is being tried by influencing socialization and distribution processes, by a state monopoly of violence to penalize breaches of norms, or by international law. Thus the concept of control has a thoroughly positive ring, at least when the point is to limit destructive power through violence by individuals, groups or state institutions. ‘Keeping under control’ has a soothing effect on those who are on the side of those being protected. On the other hand ‘out of control’ signals a threat in every respect.

However, control is an extremely *ambivalent category*. Control is based on superior power. This can assume various forms: the power of definition, physical power, legal power, or military power. Those who control hold sway over others and, as individuals, over themselves as well. And from a state perspective control is geared to enforcing a particular order as it is defined. It is a category whose effect or aim is to prevent any undesirable behaviour. It ranges from social control via state control to international control and employs various means, including collective mistrust, repression and the legal process.

In turn, forms of control *retroact on the controlling societies*. Control has different political functions. It is manifested in different ways, depending on whether it is restricted by the rule of law or is exercised in an authoritarian and dictatorial manner. It may lead to a massive increase in repressive organs or to an intensified logic of reprisal. It can be supported by majority opinion or be shaped by limited groups and their interests. In any case, control is not a neutral element in societies.

The understanding of control focuses on measures in processes and interactions by several actors, e.g. individual perpetrators, collectives or state institutions to **contain** (limit) violent activities.

Measures of control e.g. by law, punishment, security checks, etc. can succeed in containing (limiting) violence (as status quo) but will have unclear effects if there are other sources of violence. Thus, three categories have to be included in a common understanding of a concept for 'Control of Violence'. The core category is **containment** in the sense of **limitation** to be able to avoid increasing violence. This core category has to be put into relation to **reducing** or **increasing** violence.

One example: Under what conditions does punishment by incarceration, e.g. in the case of juvenile violence, contain the amount of violence—or represent a contribution to increasing the number of acts or perpetrators? In relation to the other elements of the 'Control of Violence' concept the assumption is that the measure will neither have effects to reduce violence nor can it remove it.

2. Paradigm of control

The main idea of the research group is that control may be used as a strategy to limit violence not universally but in specific constellations, by certain actors and against certain forms of violence. Projects that deal with present-day violence as well as historical studies should give emphasis to specific constellations in which control interventions are developed and implemented—and whether they succeeded or failed. The focus is not on a final stage of a controlled society as in GEORGE ORWELL's *1984* but on policies of control, their mechanisms and ambivalence.

In this field we could refer to two extreme positions. On the one hand, NORBERT ELIAS argues that with the process of civilization and the trickling down of the standards of civilization the mechanisms of self-control are enforced and established as a cultural norm. In his view this development of progressive self-control is in itself one of the consequences of a broader process of structural changes: the establishment of the state monopoly of financial and military power during the period of state building. Even in his more historical works ELIAS relies on these assumptions. He explains terrorism in West Germany in terms of opposition against the monopolising of social positions by the older generation which is blocking the social mobility of the younger generation and by the failure of the school system to teach non-violent behaviour and conflict resolution. This position stresses the success of the state in imposing norms of behaviour and ensuring successful self-control and identifies sectors in which this form of control could be established better—by schools for instance. MAX WEBER, on the other hand, formulated a much more pessimistic view. In his opinion the state is always too late, it can only repair and restore order, but is not capable of prevention. The position of the ZiF research group would be somewhere in-between. We are looking at fields where control is deficient—school shootings, terrorism, international organisations—but do not exclude the possibility that more control might be possible, even if it might have ambivalent effects.

Among the constellations in which control policy is developed we might distinguish those where the state is aiming for total control of individual life. Periods of war—especially total war—are relevant here, but also times when regimes with totalitarian goals are developing. Here the question of *what* can be controlled emerges. There are evident limits for control practices and mechanisms. One obvious actor of control are institutions which touch on every

individual like schools, media to a certain extent, military service, and religion to a certain extent, even public vocabulary and images. Groups and their structures and organisational patterns are also targets of control policies which function through infiltration, strict supervision, personal networking and creation of more hierarchical structures. Territories and spaces inside societies are also exposed to control policies: residential quarters and housing, public spaces and means of transport. Control is also exercised through terms that are used to describe reality. The debate whether terrorists are called criminals or freedom fighters, enemies or adversaries taking place in several countries is a telling example of the struggle over the control of language. Governments tend to criminalize the terrorists and those, in turn, try to develop a legitimizing terminology. On the other side, difficulties to catalogue, attribute to causes or other phenomena or to designate a violent phenomenon, can be viewed as forms of a loss of control. Societal institutions are not able to situate violence inside the established categories of self-description and public discourse.

Besides state intervention which aims at a total control, in liberal democratic societies respect for individual and collective rights and the separation of power place limits on state control activities. In schools the rights of scholars and parents conflict with state control of socialization. Within certain boundaries groups can develop their own infrastructure and develop programmes. Spaces are open for different activities. But there are always situations where these boundaries have been transgressed by state power: in the struggle against terrorist attacks where the vocabulary of 'war' has often been used; often also in situations where danger to society has been overdramatized—during 'moral panics'. The balance between prevention of danger and respect for constitutional rights is not fixed and is part of a controversial public debate and a subject of political confrontations. It seems that the more the liberal democratic state has difficulties to control, the more it takes recourse to undifferentiated responses which themselves can provoke new problems for public order and the security of the citizen.

Another field of intervention is that of informal control exercised by groups, organisations or families and the public. SPIERENBURG's general hypothesis is that over the twentieth century the mechanisms of informal control have lost importance in relation to the destruction of control communities like working class and popular culture, neighbourhoods, family cohesion. Here the means of control are of an economic nature or they may refer to common heritage or tradition, moral norms, processes of social inclusion and exclusion. This may be a European process—a control regime specifically European—but surely it is not a global one. The coexistence and contradiction between state control and informal control is especially sensitive in 'failed states' (and in other stages of development like rebellion, fights for power that means in phases of 'weak states'), and might even lead to new kinds of control regimes: in Columbia local and regional political leaders exercise forms of control of individual and public life below the level of the state monopoly of violence. It is also arguable that the informal control exercised by religious groups is, at least in some parts of the world, even more vigorous than in the past: Islamic groups might be cited here as well as evangelical religious groups in the United States. Here the aim is to control the whole life of the adherents and to motivate them even to sacrifice their life. The informal power of organisations such as the mafia or Opus Dei might be cited in this context and contradict a general thesis of a shifting of control towards state control.

What does control mean in this context? Control is an interactive process in which certain actors submit others to certain constraints of value or attitude or behaviour in order to be able to predict and channel their behaviour and assure the legitimacy and authority of the controlling actors. Loss of control would be the failure of certain actors to maintain their power in imposing a set of obligatory norms of behaviour on other actors. A loss of legitimacy of the controlling actors and unpredictability of the social behaviour of those previously under control might be the consequences.

It is possible to integrate different actors in this broad definition: the state power, controlling groups, organisations, warlords. The main aim of their actions is the symbolic or real imposition of a set of norms of behaviour and values to support this behaviour in order to maintain (or change) the existing structure of power. Control can have several faces: a strategy, an aim, an outcome, a process rather for those defending the status quo as well as for those aiming to change it. The aim may be to change the goals of control, the intensity of control, the legitimization of control or the actors of control. There are societies in which there are conflicting control entrepreneurs, in others there is one authorized and legitimized power, generally the state.

Control is becoming a main policy aim in times of power shifts, social unrest and broad anomic phenomena. Control policy is especially sensitive to shocks to the status quo perceived and propagated by the media. The perception of phenomena endangering society and its power relations is a key element in changing and legitimizing control over different sectors and fields. There are different dimensions of control. The time dimension is important. Not only are there certain circumstances where control is felt necessary—traditionally after bad harvests for instance—but also a time lag between a decision to act and the action itself makes it necessary to exercise control. If armed groups are moving very quickly to action, the controlling work of spies, informers, propagandists or police is worthless. There are traditional spaces of control and ‘contested areas’—ghettos, slums, *banlieues*—and there are particular control problems if these spaces are changing or if groups are acting at a territorially undefined level. The less predictable the time, place and aim of actions are, the less control may be exercised.

Controlling activity is not unlimited. What can be controlled are manifestations and forms of transmission of values, attitudes, structures of institutions and their supposed or experienced effects, certain circumstances and spaces, actor groups and their organisations. Control policy tries to react to constellations, but it is only in certain circumstances and political regimes a structural policy. The Nazis tried to create controlling institutions rather than to change the composition of particular working class territories. It is more difficult to change the time regime of a population than to supervise certain days or weeks. In trying to control violence, actors may fail. The control ambition is not assured of its success.

Inside control certain modes can be distinguished: direct state control and indirect control by civil society institutions; repressive and preventive control mechanisms. Control over people’s behaviour and living conditions can be of a different nature than control over language, labelling and representations. Local and regional, national and international control have to be analysed in their different mechanisms and effects. The value and establishment of self-control mechanisms can be considered together with control by institutions.

3. Relationships between causes, control and violence

The work concentrates on two issues: First, on the explanation of violence and second, on the question of the controllability of the investigated violent phenomena: school shootings, terrorism, and economies of violence in failing states.

Discussion of the relationship between the constructs of ‘violence’ and ‘control’ is thus a central aspect of the research work analyzing these phenomena. Initial conceptual investigation of the relationship shows that the two constructs do not have one single clearly defined relationship to one another, but instead can stand in different relationships. One can examine and analyze:

- a) loss of control as the cause of the occurrence of violence or control as a means of containing violence,
- b) control of the trigger-mechanisms of violence, and
- c) violence as the cause of a loss of control.

It must be assumed that the type of analysis of the phenomenon under investigation will be decisively influenced depending on which of these potential relationships between the

constructs is taken as the basis for investigating the phenomenon. The possible relationships between the constructs are described in the following, and the implications of basing analyses of shooting sprees, terrorism, and economies of violence on the different relationships are briefly outlined.

3.1 Loss of control as cause of violence

One option for analyzing the relationship between control and violence is to reveal the conditions that precede violent actions and impede or encourage them, examining the variation of the controllability of violent actions and the impact of that variation on violent activity. The central questions that guide such an analysis are thus: What circumstances exist (independently of the phenomena of violence) whose uncontrollability leads to an increase in violence? In what ways has the controllability of these conditions changed over time (or is changing now) and what is the effect of such variation on the development of phenomena of violence? We must also look for indications of change in the controllability of the circumstances. Measures applied to control the potential for violence include influencing socialization and distribution processes, guaranteeing the state monopoly of violence, and establishing international alliances and treaties. To answer the question of whether a loss of control leads causally to an increase in violence requires first that indicators for ineffectiveness of these control mechanisms be identified—independently of the violence construct. The second step is then to explore whether an increase in violence can be attributed to a decrease in such control measures.

In relation to the phenomenon of shooting sprees analyzed at the microsocial level, control losses that represent a potential cause of these events are believed to exist both in the field of social structures and in individual dispositions (perpetrators), as well as in the interaction between the two. So at the sociostructural level we have to analyze whether an erosion of the state monopoly of violence and a loss of its civilizing force can be regarded as causal for shooting sprees. But in this connection we must not focus exclusively on the state monopoly of violence as the controlling instance. CYBELLE FOX and DAVID HARDING, for example, underline the control function of the institution of school when they examine the possibilities of preventing school shootings in their qualitative study. Using case studies of two schools where shootings had taken place, they show that structural deficits in the organization of these schools made it more difficult to collect information about social and emotional problems of students and consequently information that might have given clues to the shootings was overlooked. So the authors describe a loss of control caused by structural disorganization within school. MESSNER's research will consider the effects of institutional and normative controls on levels of criminal violence.

But it may also be possible to identify losses of control at the individual level of the perpetrator that could be the cause of shooting sprees. The research group will investigate whether the perpetrator's loss of control over his own life can be the trigger for a shooting spree, and whether experiencing a low level of social recognition and the loss of social ties leads a person to cease to consider the consequences his own actions will have on others, thus making self-control superfluous and lifting the inhibitions on violence.

In relation to explanations for macrosocial phenomena of violence we can also identify circumstances that could have a causal influence on variation in violence. Changes in the global system of states bring about economic shifts that destabilize social hierarchies and create circumstances where violence is more difficult to control. Furthermore, privatization of violence and the associated dissolution of the state monopoly of violence—i.e. a loss of control by state instances—can be regarded as causal for an increase in violent activity.

3.2 Control as the trigger for violence

One effect of the ambivalent character of control is that as well as *loss* of control representing a potential cause of violence, the control activity itself can be associated with an increase in violence or control can be created through violence (see control balance theory).

When analyzing control as a trigger of violence we can make a further differentiation between two different ways of looking at the question. On the one hand, the experience of being controlled by authorities that are perceived as illegitimate is a possible trigger for violent action on the part of those controlled. On the other, the use of violence by the controlling instances (agents, authorities) themselves is or might become a means of establishing control.

a. Eliminating control as the goal of violent action

Control is thus a potential trigger of violent action by the controlled where the legitimacy of the controlling instances is regarded as questionable for example in the case of heavy policing with respect to British race riots. Depending on whether control is democratically legitimized or exercised by an authoritarian dictatorship—in other words, based on the opinion of the majority in society or on particular interests—it can lead the controlled either to compliance or into opposition whose outcome can be violence. That also means that if control is exercised by rulers regarded as illegitimate, they run the risk of provoking violent action. In this case, control that is not felt to be legitimate is the cause that provokes violent activity.

b. Establishing control as the goal of violent action

As well as control regarded as illegitimate by the controlled provoking violent action, violence can also be used *in order to achieve or expand* control if the controllers regard the behavior of the controlled as deviating from desirable norms. This can be observed at the individual, collective, and state levels. In relation to the phenomena of violence investigated in this research project, the focus in this connection will be especially on the state level. Where statehood is threatened or has collapsed we find the use of violence whose goal is to establish or maintain control, for example in the case of counter-terrorism. In particular, the lack of a state monopoly of violence is associated with attempts to maintain order through violent action.

It should be noted that in this case control is not the *cause* of violent activity. For where control is exerted through violence this is a process driven by its goal rather than the circumstances. In other words, the exercise of control is the intended purpose of violent action rather than an underlying cause of violence.

Controlling measures are thus associated with violent action to the extent that they either provoke violent reactions or violent action is used as a means to implement them.

3.3 Violence as the cause of loss of control

The unpredictability of ethnic or religiously based terrorism, in particular, brings up another relationship between the constructs of ‘control’ and ‘violence’ that can be analyzed in relation to this phenomenon of violence. Here the experience of violence e.g. exercised by suicide bombers is regarded as causal for perceived or real loss of control by potential victims, so we have to analyze whether the daily experience of violence brings with it a loss of control. When examining this relationship between the two constructs the focus is on the question of how the investigated phenomena of violence lead to a real or perceived loss of control by potential targets of the violent act.

This relationship between violence and loss of control needs to be investigated in particular in connection with the phenomenon of ethnic or religiously based terrorism, because precisely this type of violence appears to produce perceived and real losses of control. Terrorist attacks cause loss of control at the individual, collective, and state levels. At the individual level acts of terrorism give those affected a feeling of unpredictable threat and consequently the inability to plan their own lives. This may produce also a feeling of resignation at the collective level. So whereas at the individual and collective levels the *perception* of a loss of control is relevant, at the state level acts of terrorism lead to a real loss of control because the

state's power in relation to state security is restricted and the control mechanisms of the nation-state are to a certain extent put out of operation. With respect to the issue of how violence can reduce control, research indicates that high homicide rates undermine social trust, and decreases in social trust weaken informal social control.

4. Units of Analysis: Qualitative Structure of Violence and Quantitative Developments

It is necessary to discuss the relationship between the qualitative structure of particular cases and the transformation into quantitative development—embedded in individual reactions in the population and the reaction of the state.

- In the US the number of homicides that involve more victims than one is increasing since 1976. While in 1976 there were 529 such homicides, ten year later, in 1986, 654 were registered. Another ten years later, in 1996, 744 homicides involving multiple victims have been recorded. This number firstly decreased in the following years and than again increased until the year 2005 to 724. This is a real quantitative development, documented by statistics. But what is the qualitative structure behind this? Are there changes in the reasons—or is there simply more of the same?
- The number of acts of terrorism (before the Iraq War) does not increase, although the number of victims does. The statistics of the number of acts is only one category concerning increasing or decreasing violence. The other important one is the perception and subjective interpretation by the population. The act statistics says no increase, but the number of victims is increasing and so the perception of a loss of control becomes overriding in the population.
The conclusion: we have to differentiate between objective registration and subjective interpretation of loss of control.
- Concerning the violence in failing states there is another variation. Sometimes the question of loss of control is difficult, because in some states an effective state monopoly of violence never has existed. In this case the hypothesis of loss of control must be considered in relation to the qualitative standard of the state and its private counterparts

III. Main hypothesis: Increasing loss of control is related to increasing violence

Violence is a resource to which individuals, collectives and states can have recourse at any time and which they use, or refrain from using, in line with specific risk assessments. This gives rise to the question whether there are signs that individual, collective, state and international losses of control are arising or spreading. One must examine whether the diverse mechanisms that exist at each instance and level are, for various reasons, in danger of becoming ineffective for specific forms of violence. These are especially the mentioned forms like school shooters, terrorism and violence in 'failed states' with the specific characteristics. If so one might justifiably assume that the future of violence could consist of a combination of a change in quality and an increasing quantity of acts of violence.

This leads to unpredictable escalations and violence can no longer be contained adequately by the relevant control regimes, such as police, state surveillance institutions, national repression apparatuses and international law.

Moreover, the ambivalence of the control paradigm can also contribute towards an expansion of violence if control regimes themselves use violence. In extremis, societies may land in situations from which there is simply no way out. They face the economic and logistical dilemma of, for instance, only being able to limit the danger of terrorist attacks by markedly expanding state and police control mechanisms. This in turn prevents them from controlling other areas such as property offences, road traffic, etc. to the extent that meets the standards of Western democracies.