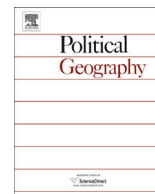




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## Violence and space: An introduction to the geographies of violence

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## ABSTRACT

Violence is a confounding concept. It frequently defies explanation and lacks an agreed upon definition. Yet geographers are well positioned to bring greater conceptual clarity to violence by thinking through its intersections with space. In setting the tone for this special issue on *Violence and Space* we highlight some of the key lines of flight that have shaped geographical thinking on violence. While there are a significant number of geographers interested in the question of violence, the field of 'geographies of violence' remains an emerging area of research that deserves greater attention and a more rigorous examination. By emphasizing the spatiality of violence, this special issue aims to contribute to a more sustained conversation on the violent geographies that shape our daily lives, our encounters with institutions, and the various structures that configure our social organization. This introduction is but an initial sketch of what we believe needs to be a much larger and unfolding research agenda dedicated to understanding violence from a geographical perspective.

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We can find the ignominious expression of violence in virtually every facet of our everyday existence. Sometimes it comes in the form of an overt appearance, where we can easily recognize its horrifying effects and deadly consequences. In other instances it is hardly recognizable at all, hidden beneath ideology, mundanity and the suspension of critical thought, where we have to look very closely through the lens of theory to appreciate how a particular set of social relations is imbued with violence. The contours of what shapes something we might call 'violence' are complex, mimetic and protean, demanding attention for the multiple lines of flight and differentiation that are accumulated through culture, politics, economics, and social practice. There is no one single definition of violence, and its usage has continued to evolve across space and time. Etymologically the word 'violence' is derived from the Latin *violentia* and *violentus* meaning *vehement*, which may in turn come from an unrecorded adjective meaning 'deprived of mind'. Yet the origin is not entirely clear, as the word 'violence' has also been linked to the French *vouloir*, which itself is related to the Greek work *Bia*, meaning 'force' or 'constraint'. Certainly violence can be said to involve a particular relation of power, but violence is not tantamount to power. One can easily envision power relations free from violence, yet one has difficulty imagining violence free from power. If we look to coercion and domination perhaps we come closer to an appreciation of violence, but not all violence is intended to coerce or dominate, and at times violence can be unintended. It is, in short, extremely

difficult to make sense of violence and the idea itself remains one of the most complex concepts that human beings have ever held.

Geographers have increasingly risen to the challenge that violence presents both in theory and in its material expression, recognizing that our views on violence are necessarily spatial (Gregory & Pred, 2006; Springer, 2011). This growing interest has responded to renewed violent forms of imperialism and continuing colonialism (Blomley, 2003; Gregory, 2004); the ongoing effects of war (Flint, 2004; Gregory, 2010; Pain, 2015); the dynamics of climate change and environmental triggers (Nordås & Gleditsch, 2007; Parenti, 2012); violent extractivism and political ecology (Le Billon, 2012; Peluso & Watts, 2001); migration and the violence of borders (Jones, 2016; Walia, 2013); the intersections between violence and capitalism (Springer, 2015; Tyner, 2016); gendered dimensions of violence (Fluri, 2009; Giles & Hyndman, 2004); racism and identity politics (Chatterjee, 2012; Inwood, 2012); and renewed methodological interest in spatial analysis (O'Loughlin, Witmer, Linke, & Thorwardson, 2010; Raleigh, Linke, Hegre, & Karlsen, 2010), to name but a few of the areas where geographers have approached the question of violence. Each of these endeavors reflects an increased sensitivity for the multiple forms of violence and their geographical dimensions. By addressing how violence shapes space, understood in its broad political and processual sense, and how space shapes violence beyond the instrumental way of analyzing spatial patterns to help 'explain' violence, geographers are bringing greater attention to the constitution of violence through space.

The literature generally recognizes direct and structural violence as important analytical tools (Galtung, 1969), but as with all dichotomies there is room for critique. Geographers are increasingly looking to the relational connections between various

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expressions of violence as a way to move toward a more integrative understanding, acknowledging that even the most seemingly place-bound expressions of violence are mediated through and integrated within the wider assemblage of space (Springer, 2011). In this way violence is considered as a processual and unfolding moment, rather than as an ‘act’ or ‘outcome’ (Springer, 2012), which opens up a dialectic reading that moves beyond the narrow frame of thinking about violence exclusively through its location-based implications (Tyner & Inwood, 2014). Such a move is in tune with the rejection of a division between public and private forms of violence (Koskela & Pain, 2000), where a distinction between the spaces of the ‘killing fields’ and the ‘home’ cannot be sustained (Brickell, 2008). Elsewhere feminist geographers have alerted us to the gendered landscapes of fear that are (re)constructed through violence and often realized as spatial exclusions (Katz, 2007; Mehta, 1999). Such embodied implications for violence point at another geographical dimension, where the importance of the body is highlighted through a focus on the everyday. Here, the corporeal becomes a key site of analysis (Fluri, 2011), wherein violence hidden in plain sight through cultural values can be revealed (Tyner, Alvarez, & Colucci, 2012). A focus on the banal coincides with an increasing emphasis on the ‘symbolic violence’ arising from our collective discourses (Bourdieu, 2001), emphasizing the ongoing need for vigilance with respect to the ability of powerful actors to obscure their own violence (Springer, 2016). Rather than a reactive and detached view, when scholars advocate a proactive and engaged understanding we are better positioned to recognize violence, allowing us to open an aperture on a critical geographies of peace (Koopman, 2008; Williams & McConnell, 2011).

In this introduction we are tasked with setting the tone for this special issue on *Violence and Space*, and so we wanted to highlight some of the important works being done. But given the breadth of the potential research questions that could be asked about violence and its geographies, coupled with the ongoing lack of consensus on what violence even means, we recognize that our effort is only a cursory gesture. We set out on the journey of compiling this special issue with a desire to engage the broad literature by considering the theoretical implications and empirical groundings of violent geographies. We organized 7 sessions on violent geographies at the 2013 AAG meeting in Los Angeles, and a further 11 sessions in 2015 for The Worlds of Violence – 9th Pan European Conference on International Relations in Sicily in pursuit of this goal. Our aim all along has been to interrogate and demonstrate the ways in which violence is woven through everyday lives, institutions, and structures. In this regard we have sought to create a forum to address the interrelated questions of violence and space, knowing that we could never capture the full breadth of possibility, but nonetheless wanting to begin what we hope will be a long and evolving conversation. We have included both theoretically informed and empirically grounded papers that consider the spatial dimensions of violence, ranging from routinized performances and everyday geographies of violence serving conventional social, economic, and political norms that go largely unnoticed, through to the spectacular eruptions of violence that capture public attention. The implication of nonviolence is embedded throughout these considerations, and even as we recognize that there is a distinct need to draw out the importance of geographies of peace in their own accounting (Kobayashi, 2009; Loyd, 2012), we have attempted to include such considerations here to speak to the continuum between violence and peace (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004; Springer, 2014).

Deconstructing scientific interpretations of climate change, Shannon O’Lear (2016) explores some of the violent implications of their selective policy interpretations. By using Global Circulation Models and fungible carbon data, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) tends to reinforce national-level and market-driven policies, foregoing alternative options for climate

change mitigation and adaptation. Violence is thus seen not only as the end-product of climate change inducing activities, but also as a process involving scientific practices lending themselves to policy capture, in turn sustaining power disparities and associated forms of endangerment. Giving close attention to Indigenous embodied geographies of everyday life in British Columbia, Sarah de Leeuw (2016) demonstrates the continuing colonial violence exerted against children and women through spatio-legal modes of control over parenting and processes of child apprehension. By drawing attention to gradual and ongoing forms of violence operating largely outside the purview of formal politics, this feminist approach not only helps to recognize other spaces of suffering, but also of healing. In a contrapuntal intervention, Nicole Laliberté (2016) explains the focus on domestic violence by peacebuilding initiatives in Northern Uganda as the result of racialized narratives of violent masculinity narrowing the causes and implications of war to the realm of intimate relations. The geographical imaginations of ‘spaces of violence’ and determination of ‘sites of interventions’ are thus shown to be largely the result of Orientalist and self-legitimizing discourses by epistemic communities.

Like de Leeuw, Claudio Minca and Chin-Ee Ong (2016) engage with the violence of the biopolitics of custody and care, demonstrating the unintended violence, abuse and transgression associated with spatialities of a historic hotel in Amsterdam successively transformed as a migrant transit center, refugee camp, war-time prison, youth detention center, and cultural tourism destination. Using a “relational conceptualization of violence sensitive and attuned to the complex histories and geographical scales”, Minca and Ong not only demonstrate the power of space exercised over guests through institutions of custody and care, but also the entanglements of such micro-sites with “the broader networks of power and geography that make those institutions work”. Focusing on the food rationing policies of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, James Tyner and Stian Rice (2015) examine structures of violence that “make life through death”. Though widely considered a ‘genocide’, a large part of the nearly 2 million deaths in Cambodia resulted from a calculated attempt by the ruling elite to actively generate food surplus, exert its sovereign power, and build a (proto)state. Structural and direct forms of violence were mutually constitutive, with rationing policies enabling the rationalization of abuses – including executions – against those purportedly undermining them, and these direct abuses in turn enabling the enforcement of a deadly rationing policy. Finally, Joshua Inwood, Derek Alkerman, and Melanie Barron (2016) consider understandings of peace and practices of peacebuilding among historically marginalized and violence-affected communities through comparing truth and reconciliation commissions in two US cities. Such understandings and practices, they argue, need to be closely related to the contextual legacies and on-going experiences of violence, as well as the struggles of grassroots groups seeking to create an alternative world.

The field of ‘geographies of violence’ is still an emerging area of research, arguably based on growing sensitivity to the multifarious character of this phenomenon and on perceptions of its increasing prevalence in the world today. While there are a significant number of geographers with research interests in violence, there have been relatively few attempts to bring these concerns into a sustained conversation. By emphasizing the spatiality of violence in the form of this special issue, we aim to allow our readers and contributors to think more rigorously about the ways in which violence is woven through our daily lives, our encounters with institutions, and the various structures that shape our social organization. Our focus is accordingly not policy directed, but on actual understanding of the processes that inform the expression of violence. While negotiating notions of peace and conflict resolution invariably play a role in the discussion, our major emphasis here is on advancing understandings of violence with respect to its

epistemological and ontological intersections with space. We see this collection of papers on *Violence and Space* as an important opportunity, not only to build upon on the growing interest in both violence and the spatial turn among scholars, but to offer a forum where critical insights into violence are foregrounded from a broad range of perspectives that are attentive to interdisciplinary concerns, while maintaining a decidedly geographical outlook. Several cross-cutting themes emerge from these papers. The first is the violent spatial dimensions of biopower, as explored by de Leeuw as well as Minca and Ong in the accretions and transformations of spaces of biopolitical care and control. The second is the folding of scales of violence, as demonstrated by Tyner and Rice in the case of food rationing and state violence under the Khmer Rouge, or through the slow violence of climate change suggested by O'Lear. The third is about place-based understandings of violence and peace, as discussed by Laliberté through peacebuilding organizations' (mis-placed) onus on the home as the source of violence or peace, and by Inwood, Alderman and Barron on the transformative potentialities of healing processes such as truth and reconciliation commissions. Ultimately this introductory paper and what follows are but initial sketches to what we believe needs to be a much larger and unfolding research agenda, where geographers in particular can play a key role in shaping our collective understandings of violence and its relationship to space.

### Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest related to this paper.

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