Editorial—Developments in the field

State of the World and Brutalisation: Observations and Updates on a Theory relevant to the Field of EthnoGeoPolitics

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Situation of our journal, our discipline and the world we are in

As we have discussed in preceding editorials and contributions of our journal, we face endemic health crises like outbreaks of (new variants of) the Covid-19 corona virus (Ten Dam & Rezvani 2020: 9; Ten Dam & Shi 2020: 174; Ten Dam 2021b: 9), low-intensity conflicts and full-scale wars (see e.g. Baghdasaryan 2019; Rezvani & Ten Dam 2020b; Dorsey 2020, 2021).

We face large-scale protests too, which may either aggravate into armed conflicts or eventually bring about peaceful transfers of power, regime change or even a revolutionary change of society—like the largely peaceful ones in Iran being violently repressed by its embattled regime, as our Editor-in-Chief Babak Rezvani describes in his contribution on 'Multiple Discrimination and Identity-based Violence' in the current volume of this journal.

Despite these health crises, armed conflicts, protests and tensions across the globe we at the Editorial Board have managed to partially overcome the structural backlog i.e. “delay in the production of issues of our
that has occurred over recent years. We hereby thank our contributors and fellow-editors for their efforts in creating this 2022 volume—including Babak Rezvani and Mahmoubeh-Sadat Ghaemi-Talab, whose ‘developments-in-the-field’ contributions in this volume should help, together with this Editorial, to further strengthen ethnogeopolitics as a discipline and field of studies.

One of the worst fears expressed in the Editorial of the preceding 2021 volume regarding the volatile situations in Ukraine, Bosnia and Taiwan (Ten Dam 2021b: 10-19) has come to pass however: on 24 February 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine for reasons that are highly questionable to put it mildly. An opinion piece by Caspar ten Dam and Ab de Buck in the current volume describes from a ‘partisan’ vantage point how the fierce Ukrainian resistance, helped by strong political, humanitarian, military and socio-economic support from the West (though more is still needed), has stymied and even reversed the Russian invasion in many places to date.

In other parts of the world popular protests—be these violent or peaceful—may fail due to speedy suppression by incumbent regimes, or succeed in overthrowing such regimes quite quickly—or stagnate into lengthy low-intensity conflicts or high-intensity civil wars. Thus the current potentially revolutionary protests in Iran against its theocratic regime may lead to any of these possible outcomes.

Are all these cases relevant to ethnogeopolitics as a discipline and field of studies? Certainly, given the state of our world today—indeed since the dawn of human history: “all too often ethnogeopolitics manifests itself in instability, pandemics and violence” (Ten Dam 2021b: 10).
Indeed, most violent conflicts have arguably been ethnic in nature to this day (see Ten Dam 2015c, 2017), and arguably most of those have had ethnogeopolitical aspects and ramifications to boot. To reiterate the larger observation made in the Editorial of the preceding 2021 volume:

All too often the study of ethnogeopolitics, as a field of studies and ‘mixed’ discipline, involves the study of ethnogeopolitical conflict—thus involving the insights and methodologies of the fields of conflict analysis and conflict resolution as well. Therefore the possible outbreak of violent conflict in countries like Ukraine, Bosnia and Taiwan would have far-reaching consequences for our current and any future research projects having directly or indirectly to do with ethnogeopolitics—beyond the (im)possibility of doing field research in such countries in the midst of conflict (Ten Dam 2021b: 25).

Indeed, brutality and brutalisation—i.e. increasing violation of local and/or international norms of violence—arguably characterise most if not all armed conflicts and other phenomena of violence in humankind, including ethnogeopolitical conflicts and any violence with ethnogeopolitical aspects.

Therefore, coming up with lucid and appliable definitions, theories, methodologies and empirical research on brutality and brutalisation i.e. increasing brutality is of paramount importance to conflict studies in general and the field of ethnogeopolitics in particular. This I have tried to achieve and show in many of my own publications, especially on brutalisation per se and Chechen and Kosovar(-Albanian) insurgencies in recent history (see esp. Ten Dam 2007, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).
The remainder of this Editorial presents the recent modifications of my theory, research findings and insights on brutalisation not published anywhere else yet, which should be relevant and helpful to ethnogeopolitical studies. These studies include our own research projects on ‘Kinship Groups in Present-day Societies’, ‘Ethnic and Kinship Bonds as Challenges of EU Enlargement in South-East Europe’ (Ten Dam 2019, 2020a, 2021a; Ten Dam & Shi 2020) and the triple ‘European, Asian and World Cultures’ projects (Ten Dam 2020a; Shi 2021a&b) if only because such groups and cultures may exhibit brutal violence at times.¹

Past and present modifications of the Brutalisation theory

My pessimistic yet falsifiable Brutalisation theory has grown into shape over decades of meticulous conceptualisation and research. At regular intervals I have modified, broadened and rephrased the theory and its variables. In order to determine more fully whether, how and why brutalities and brutalisations appears to commonly occur in human history, I have been falsifying i.e. stress-testing through qualitative and quantitative analyses this evolving Brutalisation theory as well.

During all these years, most of my diagrams depicting simplified brutalisation models were predicated on the insurgency phenomenon (e.g. Ten Dam 2007, 2010, 2015c; Ten Dam & Polanski 2015). From the late 1990s until early 2007 I conceived a Degeneration theory as a cycle of violence proceeding from “intolerant societal and political values” (variable 1), leading to “grievances (variable 2) among … [the] disadvantaged, dispossessed, repressed or targeted for extinction” in turn leading to “armed conflict with chaos (variable 3) and all its
attendant pressures and temptations to commit cruelties” whose “violations constitute new grievances (variable 4) that may bring new atrocities” (Ten Dam 2007: 4).

Since then I formulated a Brutalisation theory as a cycle of violence involving “values on “good” and “bad” violence (variable 1); grievances leading to armed conflict (variable 2); combat stress leading to atrocities (variable 3); and new conflict grievances emanating from such atrocities (variable 4), spawning counter-atrocities” (Ten Dam 2010: 332). Thereafter I widened two of theory’s main variables so as to present other possible motivations than grievances, i.e. conflict-inducing and conflict-induced motivations which concern “in particular grievances, avarices, interests and ideologies” (Ten Dam & Polanski 2015: 199-200).

Since early 2021, I have broadened the theory and its variables to encapsulate all possible kinds of violence beyond armed conflict, by non-state and state actors, as follows and as shown in Diagram 1:

a cycle or sequence of violence involving four main variables, whereby the first variable is most intimately tied to the concept of brutality: 1) violence-values, normative notions of proper and improper violence according to local and/or international norms; 2) violence-inducing motivations: grievances, ‘greeds’ or avarices, interests and ideologies that bring about violence; 3) violence-stresses like fear, fatigue, rage and group pressures among both combatants and non-combatants, among both perpetrators and victims, resulting from or leading to traumas and hypothetically to brutalities as well; and 4) violence-induced motivations: grievances, avarices, interests and ideologies that happen by, through and during the violent episode in question.
On compulsion

Possibly I will add a fourth sub-variable to variables 2 and 4 in a future modification of the Brutalisation theory that may especially ‘motivate’ the lower-rank rather than higher-rank participants and their leaderships of a violent actor: compulsions in the sense of being forced to participate in fighting or other violence—most relevantly any brutal violence. These compulsions may for instance include compulsory or even press-ganged mobilisation, whereby even close relatives may be held hostage, with the threat that ‘something bad’ would happen to them if the draftee does not comply.

Such compulsions may either closely relate to—or rather contrast and contradict—the overarching sub-variable social pressure in (earlier version of) variable 3, which includes apart from e.g. indoctrination any kinds of group convictions, bondings and expectations (Ten Dam 2012: 229; Ten Dam 2015b: 583).³

Indeed, such compulsions may indicate that the state, semi-state or non-state actor in question has been unsuccessful in mobilising any salient or dormant “group identities and convictions of family, clan, tribe or nation that nurture notions of honour and destiny” (Ten Dam 2015b: 605) among its members; otherwise the latter would have gladly volunteered to become combatants for any such cause.⁴

One may wonder in how many cases such compulsions on an actor’s members to participate in a conflict and fight on its behalf are effective on the long, medium or even short term. Thus the ‘pro-Putin’ Chechens mainly marshalled by Chechnya’s president and de facto strongman
Ramzan Kadyrov to fight in Ukraine appear to be blatantly ill-led, rampantly brutal, thus frequently cowardly and fearful due to forced deployment and thus ineffective on the battlefield, whereby many of them are sent to their deaths as cannon fodder to the frontline. 5

On violence

At any rate, I define violence as such as “deliberate infliction of physical force perhaps accompanied with pain, other harm or coercion for whatever end, which may be lethal and violate basic human rights in the broad sense” (Ten Dam 2015a: 14; Ten Dam & Polanski 2015: 228; italics added). If the latter is true, I certainly speak of brutality or brutal violence.

I do not equate violence as such with brutality as such however. Moreover, violence may not necessarily be inflicted in order to impose one’s will on the victim or target, and/or compel the latter to utter or do something unwillingly; violence may also be done instinctively or out of anger without prior deliberation, and/or out of pure sadism without any further drive, motive or objective.

Violence may be done for any conceivable reason, and thus forms a primary concept in my action-actor-motive conceptualisation triad. I do not presume that my violence definition—let alone my actor-actor-motive conceptualisation triad in general (see Ten Dam 2015a)—is widely shared, or represents any broad consensus on the violence phenomenon within the academic community.
Incidentally, the Brutalisation theory in its current form implicitly regards sadism as a horrific violence-value, as a psychotic norm of 'proper' violence by those who wish to gratify their lust to make and see others suffer. But perhaps one could better regard sadism as a motive from a psychological standpoint—and thus as a distinct violence-inducing or violence-induced motivation.  

\textit{Brutalisation model} 

Therefore the Diagram shown below depicts the latest and broadest model of the theory, including a formal description of it. Here the theory is formulated such that it encapsulates not just armed conflicts and their sub-types as done in the theory’s earlier models, but all conceivable kinds of generic public and private violence and their possible variants and derivatives. Still, my own research-focus remains on manifestations of public or ‘political’ violence. Correspondingly, I have distinguished between grievances, avarices, interests and ideologies with the express intention to cover as exhaustively as possible all possible kinds of human drives, motives and objectives—though some of these (like compulsions) may not fit into any of the four conceptual categories easily or at all.

In order to forestall any misunderstandings, I must stress that I do not support my own Brutalisation theory, be it reluctantly or—heavens forbid—enthusiastically. Nor do I apply it on any cases studied while assuming it to be generally valid. I do abhor it as an apparent reality, while hoping that is not as predominant as it may seem at first sight. Thus I seek to test i.e. falsify it on as many cases as possible (and urge others to do so as well), as I have done in past research, am doing in current research and intend to do in future research.
Diagram  Brutalisation: Generic Violence Model

Formal description of the theory

Fear, pain, desperation, humiliation, anger, disillusionment, trauma and other emotions and responses emanating from imagined, perceived or experienced
sufferings like deprivations, devastations and depredations lead to a brutalisation of means like ‘terrorisation’ and criminalisation and of ends like radicalisation and ‘extremisation’ in each successive bout of violence of one against the other, and the longer each violence-bout lasts (protraction). Traumas, grievances and other conditions may exist earlier, but in different forms and contexts. The cycle and sequence of violence runs as follows:

Intolerant, zero-sum, winner-takes-all violence-values (aggregate variable 1) that do not adhere to (once) recognised norms like honour, hospitality (including fair treatment of captured opponents), proportionality and non-combatant immunity lead to violence-inducing motivations (aggregate variable 2) like grievances, ‘greeds’ or avarices, interests and ideologies that may or may not be based on avarices, interests and grievances; the aggrieved, greedy, self-interested and/or ideologically driven take up arms, leading to violence stress (aggregate variable 3) through stress-responses like fear, fatigue and rage resulting from or leading to traumas, induced by innate aggression or eagerness to use violence as opposed to innate restraint or reluctance to use violence, and social pressures to carry out and condone atrocities; these violations engender violence-induced motivations (aggregate variable 4) like grievances about atrocities and other injustices suffered during the violence-cycle, typically leading to revenge attacks and tit-for-tat retributions, or opportunities to amass riches, power, status and privileges (avarices and interests) or realise sought-after end states (ideologies) out of the violent confrontation, leading to more deprivations and devastations.

In turn these violence-engendering and violence-engendered motivations together with consequent brutalisations negatively affect a group’s or society’s (violence) values after any temporary cessation or settlement of hostilities. This may lead to a new, even more brutal round of violence. The intervening or contextual variables concern the different phases of the status quo of any situation, ranging from a current political or social system to a current hierarchy in a family or any other kin group, being challenged, attacked,
undermined and either ultimately transformed or maintained at each successive stage of the cycle and sequence of violence, whereby usually one or more anti-status quo parties are pitted against one or more pro-status quo parties.

The countervailing variables are: A) *tolerance* and kindred values (pluralism, equality, democracy, etc.) respecting basic human and humanitarian rights and comparable local norms; B) *rectitude*, a morally virtuous approach involving professional codes and practices to uphold discipline, self-restraint and thereby basic norms like rules of proper and justified war; C) *intervention* by external actors, ranging from mediation to military occupation, to stop and halt excessive violence, while at the same time respecting human rights, humanitarian and local norms especially if the latter resemble, complement or even improve on international norms; and D) *Justice* through measures ranging from reconciliation by e.g. truth commissions and prosecutions by e.g. international tribunals that could ameliorate traumas, resolve grievances, promote equitable interests, and respect secular and religious ideologies—for so far these respect human rights, humanitarian norms and relevant local norms. Yet the theory holds that these positive variables are either non-existent or too weak to prevent, counter or impede overall brutalisation in any meaningful sense or significant degree.

Generally the main variables and sub-variables, as shown in the Diagram, are continuous, which one cannot necessarily or exclusively distinguish and test in strict empiricist, quantifiable and statistic-analytical ways: in reality variable 1 would work through all successive phases i.e. variables, as variable 2 does so in the next phases, and so on. One can perceive these as interchanging exogenous causes (independent variables) and endogenous effects (dependent variables) of each other, especially in short-term causal feedback loops, but also in
longer-term cycle-of-violence loops from variables 1 to 4 consecutively. Thus violence-stress may engender violence-induced grievances, avarices and (radicalised) ideologies, which in a direct feedback loop may exacerbate violence-stress. The only direct feedback loop that Diagram I is unable to show in its present form, is those between violence-values and violence-stresses.

The same causal-feedback principle applies on the longer-term cycle-of-violence loop, but then consecutively from variable 1 to variable 4: thus any ‘violence-inducing motive’ can be a dependent variable of any ‘violence-value’, yet can at the same time function as the independent variable of any ‘violence-stress’—despite the classic war-is-hell proposition that no such variables bring about the latter, but rather the horrors of battle themselves.

Brutalisations like terrorisation, radicalisation, extremisation and criminalisation are processes that can occur in each phase, though the theory posits their increase through each successive one. Moreover, some violence or narrower conflict theories would emphasise the supposed dominance of some sub-variables affecting some processes—like avarices accounting for criminalisation and ideologies accounting for radicalisation and extremisation.

Concluding observations

One may regard brutality and brutalisation as defined here as primary, universal concepts according to my action-actor-motive trichotomy, for so far these are, and can be seen and detected as observable phenomena.
Still, for so far local and/or international norms are contested interpretations of not-easily-detectable-and-provable motives—just like grievances, avarices, interests and ideologies—then one should regard and use these as tertiary, empirical concepts. Violence-stresses however are usually behavioural responses and pathological symptoms that are observable on the ground. Thus one can normally classify these violences-stresses as primary concepts—unless stress-responses like rage are not immediately apparent or deliberately hidden from view (see for a slightly different formulation Ten Dam 2015a: 8 (e.g. “Combat-stresses” instead of now “Violence-stresses”) ).

Last but not least, one may operationalise and even (re)formulate the theory’s variables on different levels of analysis, from the individual to the group, organisation, state, society, region and the globe. Still, the individual forms the ultimate level of analysis, as conflict analysts, sociologists, psychologists and other theorists and practitioners have recognised for decades now. Thus Dennis J. D. Sandole once noted, when speaking in particular of John Burton’s work:

Much of what applies at the individual level has been or can be applied at the societal level and beyond. While there are clear differences of scale and appearance between, say, a divorcing couple and an international war, individuals are still involved across the spectrum of different levels of analysis, as decision-makers; by implication, so are individual-level causes and conditions. This is why .. the individual is the unit of explanation, the generic, cross-level independent variable (Sandole, apud Sandole & Van der Merwe 1993: 14-15).
Individuals ultimately compose the groups, organisations, communities and societies that may resort to any brutal violence. So one must ultimately analyse and grasp such violence on that individual level—even if humans are social animals tending towards groupthink psychologically and in-group conformity sociologically. Above all, analysis on the individual level means looking at discernible common characteristics among individuals, not necessarily at the possibly unique traits of each and every individual in large groups or populations—which would be an undoable task anyway.

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Endnotes

1. These projects initiated and/or facilitated by our Association for the Study of EthnoGeoPolitics still require “many more submissions .. in order to bring these projects to full fruition” (Ten Dam 2021b: 19).

2. The term ‘greed’ as a noun does not have a recognised equivalent in the plural tense, i.e. ‘greeds’ to contrast it with the singular term ‘grievance’ and its plural term ‘grievances’. The best alternative term for greed appears to be ‘avarice’—which has a recognised plural, ‘avarices’.
3. Compulsions such as forced recruitments may indicate a failure of 'normal' group pressures such as adhering to a patriotic duty to fights for one's group/community/nation/country.

4. Ibid.

5. This harsh assessment of the performance of the pro-Putin Chechen forces in the Russo-Ukrainian War to date—in stark contrast to that of the anti-Putin Chechens fighting on the Ukrainian side—will likely be one of the main conclusions (barring some nuances and other modifications) in my forthcoming paper ‘Chechen fighters on both sides of the Russo-Ukrainian War: motivations, operations, brutalities and (in)effectiveness’ which will come out in this journal or another peer-reviewed journal.

6. Some non-psychophatic sadists may recognise that their lust brings improper, 'bad', 'evil' violence—and do not consider their inflicting of pain on others as right, proper, to be proud of or justified in any sense. They may regard their sadism as a bad temptation they regularly succumb to—perhaps to their shame after or even during the act. In short, there may be different kinds of sadists involved in any kind of conflict and violence.

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