

INTRODUCTION

The Anthropology and Ethnography of Violence and Sociopolitical Conflict

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We wondered, while writing this introduction, in which state of mind this book would be read. Which wars will rumble through its words? Which images will provide a visual background to the chapters presented here? As we were editing the contributions, we could not help but think and talk about the war in the Balkans. The term “ethnic cleansing” made us remember other times and other wars and made us realize that the place may be different, and the suffering unique, but that everyday life under war is at any place and any time confusing and full of anguish. This realization is so obvious that it is almost banal, yet why is this perennial chaos of warfare and the incomprehensibility of violence for its victims so seldom addressed in scholarly writings? Why do we find so many intricate studies about war and so few about human suffering? Let us compare two quotations that were written half a century apart.

I'm writing from the shed. It is half past five in the afternoon, you can hear shots outside and the exploding of mortar shells. Father and Asim are asleep, grandma is playing cards. How idyllic, isn't it? We are already spending our fifth month in this way. Terrible. I do not know where to begin. . . . It is so difficult to write this. There is so much, and I am so confused. Now and then I have a crisis, just like everybody. I'm afraid, depressed. Everything is so hopeless. I don't know if you can understand this at all. Probably not. At the beginning we didn't understand anything either. When they bombed us, this turned out to be nothing compared to everything that happened thereafter.

Strange are the ways of life in the ghetto, abounding in surprises of every sort. Nothing is logically predictable, and people often wrack their brains over one or another turn of events that had seemed completely clear but underwent a change at the last minute. . . . What is the determining factor here? What influences this situation? Why do omens of improvement so

often end with things becoming worse and vice versa? These are questions that disturb the entire population and for which no answers can be found, answers that may not even be found before the war is over! It could be whim, and it could be necessity!

The first quotation is from a letter written on August 14, 1992, by a woman in Sarajevo and sent to her brother living in exile in the Netherlands (reprinted in *De Volkskrant*, 10 September 1992). The second quotation was written on August 30, 1942, and comes from the hand of an official chronicler of the Łódź ghetto (Dobroszycki 1984:245–246). We begin with these stories from Europe to emphasize that violence is not somewhere else—in a third world country, on a distant battlefield, or in a secret interrogation center—but that it is an inescapable fact of life for every country, nation, and person, whether or not they are personally touched by direct violence.

Such stories as these are all too common: we could as easily have drawn similar ones from Somalia, Guatemala, Sri Lanka, the United States, Mozambique, Ireland, Spain, and China. SIPRI, a Swedish conflict research and documentation center, has identified 32 major wars in 1992 (“major” being defined as producing over one thousand casualties a year). If we consider conflicts with under one thousand killed annually, then the figure rises to 150. And if we expand our definition according to greater anthropological sensibilities to include the pressing conflicts in many people’s lives—riots, gang warfare, tribal genocide, and forms of terror warfare such as rape and torture—then we find that the number of people directly affected by violence extends into the hundreds of millions.

The foregoing quotations have another significance that is of central importance to this volume: they evoke everyday experiences of violence in its myriad manifestations, ranging from war to popular protest, from rape to the contestations surrounding rumors of violence, from moral discourses concerning conflict to the tragedies of senseless brutality. We want to focus on the experiential dimension of conflict, on the ways in which people live their lives in contests marred by inescapable violence. We believe that violence is a dimension of people’s existence, not something external to society and culture that “happens” to people.

By way of explaining this, we return once again to the example of the Balkans. As one peace plan after another is being rejected, and as one truce after another is being violated, a mood has been growing among many people and politicians in Europe and the United States that there is simply no solution to the war because the combatants “have gone crazy,” “are acting like barbarians,” or “are drawing on their basest instincts.” The war no longer belongs to the realm of political conflict; it has regressed to a level of inhumanity that is outside normal social life, an unreal world where soldiers enjoy killing and rape is a military strategy.

While such sentiments are common, we think they represent a dangerous misconception. For too many people everywhere in the world, violence is an all too human reality. This includes the victims of violence but also the perpetrators who themselves are caught in spiraling conflicts that their actions have set in motion but that they can no longer control. To understand their plight and to try to begin to forge solutions, we must confront violence head on, place it squarely in the center of the lives and cultures of the people who suffer it, precisely where they themselves find it. Violence may not be functional, and it is certainly not tolerable, but it is not outside the realm of human society, or that which defines it as human. As this book shows, violence is not enjoyable, except perhaps for the pathological few. Nor is it a devolution into a seething “proto-” or “pre-cultural” set of behaviors. Like creativity and altruism, violence is culturally constructed. As with all cultural products, it is in essence only a potential—one that gives shape and content to specific people within the context of particular histories. Little can be said about the concrete form of violence or the content of human existence pursued outside the constraints of society and culture. Warfare is, as Margaret Mead (1964) says, “only an invention.”

Moreover, these quotations express the confusion of cultures and communities in crisis and how life has to be reinvented each time anew under ever-changing circumstances. Violence is confusing and inconclusive. Wars are emblematic for the extremes that people’s existential disorientation may reach. Such life-threatening violence demonstrates the paralysis as well as the creativity of people coping under duress, a duress for which few are prepared. Even soldiers, who have been trained to deal with the risks and uncertainties of action on the battlefield and have been prepared to carry out dangerous and complex tasks under enemy fire, cannot rely on the routines of exercise and command. The everydayness of war is a never-ending stream of worries about the next meal, the next move, and the next assault. This immediacy of action characterizes not only war but any form of violence. There are few social prescriptions on how to cope and survive in violent situations.

This emphasis on how people come to grips with life under siege, on the experience, practice, and everydayness of violence, makes attention to fieldwork conditions necessary. The emotional intensity of the events and people studied, the political stakes that surround research on violence, and the haphazard circumstances under which fieldwork is conducted entwine fieldwork and ethnography. These tensions weave their way through the whole of the anthropological endeavor—coloring the lives and perspectives of the researchers and those they study alike. This introduction therefore focuses on the three principal concerns of this book: the everyday experiences of people who are the victims and perpetrators of

violence; the relationship between field-workers and the people studied, including the distinct research problems and experiences of ethnographers who study situations of violence; and the theoretical issues that emerge from studying topics that involve personal danger. These introductory remarks elaborate on the notion implicit in all the chapters in this book, that the ontics of violence—the lived experience of violence—and the epistemology of violence—the ways of knowing and reflecting about violence—are not separate. Experience and interpretation are inseparable for perpetrators, victims, and ethnographers alike. Anthropology on this level involves a number of responsibilities above and beyond those associated with more traditional ethnography: responsibilities to the field-worker's safety, to the safety of his or her informants, and to the theories that help to forge attitudes toward the reality of violence, both expressed and experienced.

THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF VIOLENCE

Sociopolitical violence can be approached in many ways. At some level, however, to be able to discuss violence, one must go to where violence occurs, research it as it takes place. This volume seeks to address these understandings, placing ethnography and the ethnographer in the context of violence.

Firsthand ethnography of violence does not provide us with an uncontested set of explanations for what we have seen. As Michael Taussig (1987) has pointed out, violence is slippery; it escapes easy definitions and enters the most fundamental features of people's lives. Violence is formative; it shapes people's perceptions of who they are and what they are fighting for across space and time—a continual dynamic that forges as well as affects identities (Feldman 1991). The complexity of violence extends to the field-workers and their theories as well. Understandings of violence *should* undergo a process of change and reassessment in the course of fieldwork and writing because it is not only unrealistic but dangerous as well to go to the field with ready-made explanations of violence so as to "find truths" to support our theories. For this reason, we do not attempt to provide any overarching theory. A dynamic approach to violent conflict mitigates against essentialist and singular definitions and against the reification of violence. As Allen Feldman (1991) has noted, theory emerges from experience. The danger lies in making definitions of violence appear too polished and finished—for the reality never will be.

Most of the chapters in this book have not been constructed toward definitive conclusions, but their arguments are developed processually. Very much like the lives of the people they describe, they portray a growing understanding of violent conflict that proceeds as in a hermeneutic

circle where fragmentary and aggregate perspectives take turns. This understanding is constructed as much from the many stories ethnographers hear from victims and perpetrators as from their own experiences written down in their field notes.

Researching and writing about violence will never be a simple endeavor. The subject is fraught with assumptions, presuppositions, and contradictions. Like power, violence is essentially contested: everyone knows it exists, but no one agrees on what actually constitutes the phenomenon. Vested interests, personal history, ideological loyalties, propaganda, and a dearth of firsthand information ensure that many “definitions” of violence are powerful fictions and negotiated half-truths.

Violence is also an intricately layered phenomenon. Each participant, each witness to violence, brings his or her own perspective. These testimonies can vary dramatically. There is the political reality: the doctrines, deeds, and behind-the-scenes machinations of power brokers. There is the military reality: the strategies, tactics, and loyalties of commanders; the camaraderie, actions, and briefings of soldiers. There is the intellectual reality, forged in coffee shops and the halls of academia, as well as the journalist’s world of gossip and frontline vignettes. There is also the psychological reality: the fear, the anxiety, and the regression and repression among refugees and prisoners of war. And then there is the reality of life on the front lines: the stories and actions of people as disparate as perpetrators and casualties, advisers and arms merchants, mercenaries and doctors, criminals and relief workers.

Ethnography can be conducted at any of these levels of warfare. But for the authors in this book, the most pressing reality is that of sociopolitical violence enacted in the center of civilian populations, social process, and cultural life. It is the noncombatant as well as the combatant, the everyday, the mundane, and the not so mundane spheres of life that are the social field of violence expressed—the targets of terror, the templates on which power contests are carved, the fonts of resistance, and the architects of new social orders and disorders. In peeling back the layers of the many realities that impinge on this question of what violence is, we find that even the most horrific acts of aggression do not stand as isolated exemplars of a “thing” called violence but cast ripples that reconfigure lives in the most dramatic of ways, affecting constructs of identity in the present, the hopes and potentialities of the future, and even the renditions of the past.

Our assertion that violence is a dimension of living does not imply that we regard it as functional. Unlike René Girard (1977), whose understanding of violence as a contention about human existence we acknowledge as valuable, we do not argue that violence serves as a safety valve for intra-societal tensions. Violence is not functional. Particular forms of violence, such as that exerted by judicial and disciplinary institutions and even

certain revolutionary movements, can serve to redress violence, but other instances of violence may raise the levels of disruption.

We prefer to regard violence as a socially and culturally constructed manifestation of a deconstitutive dimension of human existence. Thus there is no fixed form of violence. Its manifestation is as flexible and transformative as the people and cultures who materialize it, employ it, suffer it, and defy it. Violence is not an action, an emotion, a process, a response, a state, or a drive. It may manifest itself as responses, drives, actions, and so on, but attempts to reduce violence to some essential core or concept are counterproductive because they essentialize a dimension of human existence and lead to presenting cultural manifestations of violence as if they were natural and universal. Violence is not reducible to some fundamental principle of human behavior, to a universal base structure of society, or to general cognitive or biological processes. We do not deny that people often construct such general explanations of violence themselves to provide a frame of reference for their troubled lives. These cultural frameworks of understanding are a legitimate object of ethnographic study—even though the research interest of this book lies elsewhere—but these local models should not be confused with theoretical or universal explanations of violence. We want to keep such misguided essentialist approaches in check by remaining closer to the experience of violence and focus on its empirical manifestations.

This focus on the empirical and experiential keeps us from a singular focus on the devastating consequences of violence and guides us to a more inclusive approach to conflict and survival. It is when we try to give empirical content to violence as an issue of human existence that we notice the limitations of a too-restricted preoccupation with death, suffering, power, force, and the infliction of pain and constraint. Most of the time, people are attending to the routine tasks of their lives, to eating, dressing, bathing, working, and conversing. Conceiving of violence as a dimension of living rather than as a domain of death obliges researchers to study violence within the immediacy of its manifestation. War, rebellion, resistance, rape, torture, and defiance, as well as peace, victory, humor, boredom, and ingenuity, will have to be understood together through their expression in the everyday if we are to take the issue of the human construction of existence in earnest. A too-narrow conceptualization of violence prevents us from realizing that what is at stake is not simply destruction but also reconstruction, not just death but also survival.

The political and economic consequences of warfare, the lasting impact on people's futures, and the widespread death, destruction, and suffering are so compelling that they push to the forefront of scholarly and popular attention. However, the lives of those who suffer under violence or are engaged in warfare are not defined exclusively in global political,

economic, social, or military terms but also in the small, often creative, acts of the everyday. This is why Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a sensitive portrayal of life in the trenches and its lasting emotional legacy to the survivors, is such an intriguing account of World War I.

We are at rest five miles behind the front. Yesterday we were relieved, and now our bellies are full of beef and haricot beans. We are satisfied and at peace. Each man has another mess-tin full for the evening; and, what is more, there is a double ration of sausage and bread. That puts a man in fine trim. (Remarque 1958:7)

These experiences are not restricted to trenches and battlefields. The fear of a woman who under the threat of quat-chewing teenagers armed by local warlords has to cross the streets of Mogadishu with her daily ration of water, the anguish of a peasant in Cambodia that he might step on a land mine on his way to the rice paddy, or the worry of a family in Guatemala that their son who is active in a labor union will disappear after a counterinsurgency raid on their home—all convey realities of war very different from the United Nations resolutions on Somalia and Cambodia or the annual report on human rights violations published by Amnesty International or Americas Watch.

In dealing with these issues, we must admit that what counts in one society as a tolerable level of violence may be condemned in another as excessive. Julia Kristeva (1993), Barbara Johnson (1993), and Wayne C. Booth (1993) have, as scholars, tackled a question that has plagued Amnesty International since its inception: How can anyone determine what are human rights and wrongs, and how can these be universalized, when in fact we have not even determined what such fundamentals as self, identity, existence, society, and culture are?

The work of Michel Foucault, in particular *Discipline and Punish* (1977), broke new ground for social scientists in showing that violence could be embedded in social and material structures that were taken for granted by Western society as normal, natural, just, humane, reasonable, and even enlightened. The disciplinary education of criminals in an edifying prison regime was considered an advance of civilization over the barbaric torture and vengeance of earlier times. Foucault demonstrates the perfidity of the prison system and reveals the violence masked by an Enlightenment rhetoric. Antonio Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony has also had a major impact on our understanding of the violence embedded in complex societies. Violence, force, and power are sublimated in social institutions and cultural conceptions of hierarchy that reflect the ideology of the ruling class and have been taken for granted by the subordinate classes. Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) concept of *habitus* can serve a similar purpose of

explaining how structures of violence may be reproduced in society. A society may have internalized a habitus of violence—for example, systems of racial segregation and gender-based discrimination—that structures social interaction in coercive ways, which, in turn, reproduce the cultural divisions on which those very same forcible practices are based. We would like to add Elias Canetti (1966), whose “stings of command” demonstrate that social interaction in every society, irrespective of its complexity or size, involves practices of coercion that are experienced as natural but are nevertheless oppressive and therefore evoke resentment and resistance. Commands, orders, instructions, directions, and procedures suffuse much of our lives from childhood through adulthood. The irritation that these stings of command leave behind accumulate to intolerable levels, according to Canetti, until they are finally shed by means of a catharsis that evokes feelings of equality and temporarily neutralizes the subordination suffered.

When we look at sociopolitical violence and its relationships to power in their dynamic forms—in their manifestations and not in their institutional framing—then we realize that focal points multiply and that the center is a constantly changing nexus. Thus violence is not *simply* about power, as is tacitly assumed in many studies. We prefer instead to include power within an all-embracing concept of human existence. “Lived experience,” writes Michael Jackson (1989:2), “overflows the boundaries of any one concept, or any one society.” We cannot affix violence to any single domain or any one locus of power. This indeterminacy confounds traditional political and military theory that postulates political elites and institutions, military commanders and organizations, as the definitive loci of power and conflict. This allows perpetrators and victims of violence to emerge—wherever they find themselves, on a designated battlefield or on urban streets—as core actors in the drama of violence and its resolutions. Traditional studies often reduced the mass of civilian casualties to precisely a “mass” who were victims of something they might not understand and could not control, while portraying power holders as omnipotent instigators. We are concerned here not to pacify the populations exposed to violence as helpless, undifferentiated masses, or to stereotype the perpetrators as either resistance heroes or brutal power mongers. Neither do we want to become entrapped in a distorting dichotomy of victim versus victimizer as if one is, by definition, passive and the other active. In this book, we find the front lines much more volatile and inchoate, with violence being constructed, negotiated, reshaped, and resolved as perpetrators and victims try to define and control the world they find themselves in. For, through violence, people forge moral understandings about the implications of their actions, stand up in the face of brutality, and develop forms of resistance to what they perceive as insufferable oppression.

As the theoreticians cited above demonstrate, violence is not something alien to human existence—which does not mean that it is just—and does not only occur in the space of death. Violence is a dimension of living. Attempts to apply equations of rationality or irrationality or to adjudicate violent events as meaningful or meaningless are beside the point because they are based on the misguided assumption that violence should be understood in terms of its function or objective. Violence may be carried out with logical precision, which does not make it reasonable, and is imbued with meaning, even though often emotionally senseless. Our search is not for cause or function but for understanding and reflexivity. Let us once more invoke Remarque (1958:5) by quoting the almost apologetic preface to his novel.

This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war.

Remarque wanted his novel to tell about the practice of war in the trenches and the disillusion of their survivors. The novel was so successful because contemporary historians “failed to find explanations to the war that correspond to the horrendous realities, to the actual experience of the war” (Eksteins 1989:291).

We want to be careful, however, not to reduce considerations of violence to frontline, male, Western, European perspectives (Enloe 1983, 1989). We want to caution not only against the fallacy of reducing conflicts to wars, troops, and male aggression but also against theories that have taken this perspective as their basis. As important as Foucault’s contribution to studies of power and violence are, feminist critiques of power and Western epistemology by authors such as Nancy Hartsock (1990) provide a scholarly counterhegemonic. Helene Cixous (1993:35) said in her Oxford Amnesty Lecture about the question of human rights,

What can you not speak of? What is prohibited on pain of death? Publishing statistics of the fifty years of the Nobel Prize is allowed. You can say that there have been 510 men and 24 women among the winners. But thou shalt not use the word *misogyny* about this, nor anything else.

To raise the question of Nobel Laureates in a study of sociopolitical violence is not as tangential as it might seem. As both Foucault and Hartsock have shown, structures of power are reproduced throughout the sociopolitical enterprise, and it is in this way that power retains its hold. We want to divest people of the notion that violence is separate from the larger social and cultural dynamics that shape our lives. This is perhaps nowhere better demonstrated than in Cynthia Enloe’s (1993) discussion of the

relationships among war, unequal economic development that disenfranchises women's work, rape, assault, and prostitution, and political representation—all products of the militarization of people's lives in a global context. To sequester these into discrete arenas of analytic concern is to provoke conceptual violence. This is a point we have consciously addressed in collecting the essays for this volume: How can we in good conscience, on the experiential level, separate Cathy Winkler's rape in Georgia from those Maria Olujic documents in Croatia, dissociating them as individual tragedy versus collective war?

These horrendous, contradictory realities that characterize war in particular and violence in general—realities that are both prosaic and chaotic, unadventurous and incomprehensible; realities that befall women and men, young and old alike—are found in the contributions to this book. Our emphasis on the everydayness of violence is not intended to suggest that situations of violent conflict are ever routine or taken for granted. Unlike punishment, coercion, and even power, which may become predictable when embedded in structures of domination, violence adds to these an inordinate degree of uncertainty because it is played out at the experiential level. The uncertainty of violence is invariably related to a summoning of fear, terror, and confusion as well as resistance, survival, hope, and creativity.

These reasonless and orderless qualities of violence need more scholarly attention because they have fallen through the meshwork of the institutional analyses of war. What has remained of the chaos of warfare is a rational and coherent structure of death as manifested in such expressions as "a war machine," "do the job," "a surgical operation," and "an order is an order." An unintended and harmful effect is that these analyses tend to rationalize and domesticate, if not justify, the use of violence. The equation of war with the rationality of military strategy and an army of men with a "war machine" turn war into a teleological phenomenon.

Instead of rationalizing violence, this book gives voice to the puzzling contradictions of lives perturbed by violence—puzzling especially to the rationalist, functionalist, and pragmatist—namely, the contradictions of a simultaneous existence of laughter and suffering, fear and hope, indeterminacy and wont, creativity and discipline, and absurdity and commonplace.

NARRATION AND AUTHENTICITY

What legitimacy do anthropologists have to speak for others, in particular, for the victims of violence? Herein lies, arguably, the most important meaning of the expression, the "absurdity of war." *Absurd* literally means insufferable as well as deafened. The absurdity of war is that those whose fate is being decided are seldom heard because they have little voice in

the events that determine their lives. They are the muted injuries of war. Just as anthropologists have traditionally given many cultures an image and, in the last few decades, have even given them a history, so do the contributors to this book want to make the voice of victims and perpetrators audible.

"Writing violence," however, will never be a straightforward matter. Gayatri Spivak (1988) challenges Western anthropologists to question their motives in studying non-Western peoples, their (un)witting location in power relationships when they try to "speak" for those among whom they have worked, and the intended and unforeseen effects that accrue from their work. For Spivak, research and representation are irreducibly intertwined with politics and power. The anthropologist who proclaims to "give voice" to those less able to do so, warns Spivak, is often engaged in little better than postcolonial discourse refashioned for a postmodern world (see also Trinh 1989). For Spivak, Western anthropologists are suspect by the mere fact of being Western anthropologists, as is their ability to give voice to others. Unless they undertake serious self-critique—not only as anthropologists but as Westerners, as historical products, and as a nexus and network of privilege—and incorporate that analysis into their presentations and publications, Spivak admonishes, their sincerity and abilities must be doubted.

Spivak has a point. One need only read V. Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* (1988) to come to the embarrassing realization of the extent to which the colonial enterprise resonates within anthropological texts. Perhaps more unsettling is the recognition that this is not restricted to North Atlantic justifications of superiority. The sheer force of Western enculturation blinds even declared egalitarians to the destructive beliefs they carry and impart to those they study. We depart for the field bowing under the weight of our own culture, propped up and propelled by Western assumptions we seldom question, shielded from the blaze of complex cultural diversity by a carefully crafted lens of cultural belief that determines as much as clarifies what we see. When we purport to speak for others, we carry the Western enterprise into the mouths of other people. No matter our dedication, we cannot escape the legacy of our culture.

Yet Taussig (1987) and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) equally have a point when they challenge anthropologists to speak out against the injustices they encounter. To do anything less is tantamount to condoning them. If our position grants us privilege, it can be employed to help those with less. For scholars like Taussig and Scheper-Hughes, this is not an option but a duty.

We have reached a stage of theoretical development wherein we can no longer throw out uncomfortable contradictions. The world is not governed by the positivist's dream of rational coherency, and neither must

our theories or research practices be. We share Spivak's apprehension about the murky underbelly of academia, mottled with issues of power and authority that are too often obscured behind cultural habit and scholarly rhetoric. We also share Taussig's conviction that we not only can but must write against repression and injustice. We doubt that either can, or should, supplant the other. Just as unavoidable is the contradiction that privilege will be applied for its own benefit and reproduce itself even at the expense of others, while at the same time it will be applied to protest against the inequities and injuries caused by the scramble for gain. We make no attempt to resolve these contradictions. We do not attempt to quiet Spivak with a more liberal dose of Taussig, or vice versa. This dilemma is part and parcel of anthropology as a research tradition that straddles cultures and hierarchies.

Equally pertinent is the question of the ethnographic style of any account of violence, whether it is through eyewitness reports, photographs, or poems. One can count the dead and measure the destruction of property, but victims can never convey their pain and suffering to us, other than through the distortion of word, image, and sound. Any rendition of the contradictory realities of violence imposes order and reason on what has been experienced as chaotic. "Inasmuch as violence is 'resolved' in narrative, the violent event seems also to lose its particularity—i.e., its facthood—once it is written" (Young 1988:15). Together with its facthood, it loses its absurdity and incomprehensibility; paradoxically, the very qualities that we would like to convey.

The transformation of violent events into narrative accounts raises the issue of veracity and authenticity. Given that a distortive mediation of event and text is inevitable, there is still a difference between contemporary and posterior accounts. The difference lies in the moment and voice of the text. "If the diarists' and memoirists' literary testimony is evidence of anything else, it is of the writing act itself. That is, even if narrative cannot document events, or constitute perfect *factuality*, it can document the *actuality* of writer and text" (ibid., 37). A contemporary account is more authentic than a posterior account—simply because it was written at the time of the event and not with the hindsight of its outcome. However, it cannot make any claim to greater veracity or insight than posterior documentary, fictional, poetic, or cinematographic expressions. The degree of authenticity says little about the truth value of the discourse. Truths are always historical and cannot be frozen in time or pinned down in particular modes of discourse. The questions and issues raised by a narrator are constricted by the historical context in which they are made (see Gadamer 1985). Richard Rorty (1986:3), cited by Jackson (1989:182), observes, "Let us then accept that there is no ahistorical, absolute, nonfinite reality *either outside or within us* that we can reach by adopting a particular discus-

sive style. The *world* is out there, to be sure, and deep within us too, *but not the truth.*" Truth and understanding are therefore always conditional and situated, even though historical understanding may deepen with the progress of time and the study of new instances of violence.

Notwithstanding the historicity of understanding and the paradox that narration infuses a violent event with an order, meaning, and rationality that it does not have, there are ways to reduce the degree of distortion. The closer one remains to the flow of life, to its often erratic progression, the greater understanding one will evoke among the readership about the daily existence of people under siege. The gathering of local knowledge about events through direct experience—also called participant observation—or at least by talking to the protagonists themselves rather than working through secondhand accounts has been one of the hallmarks of anthropology (see, e.g., Barnett and Njama 1966; Edgerton 1990; Feldman 1991; Kapferer 1988; Lan 1985; Lavie 1990; Manz 1988; Nordstrom and Martin 1992; Ranger 1985; Sluka 1989; Tambiah 1986; Taussig 1987; Zulaika 1988). Here, anthropology can make an important contribution to the study of war and violence. However, before anthropologists will be able to engage in a serious dialogue with other disciplines on areas hitherto reserved to the historical and political sciences, it will be important to clarify how fieldwork, description, and understanding are uniquely interrelated in anthropological research.

FIELD EXPERIENCES

Many ethnographers who study violence have experienced bewilderment on first seeing it. There seems to be no higher ground from which to observe the world of violence with relative detachment. Most of the authors in this book have passed through this stage, a stage that might be misinterpreted as culture shock. The tensions experienced by most of us can be better qualified as existential shock. This shock can be felt as much in our own familiar social circle as in another culture. It is a disorientation about the boundaries between life and death, which appear erratic rather than discrete. It is the paradoxical awareness that human lives can be constituted as much around their destruction as around their reconstruction and that violence becomes a practice of negating the reason of existence of others and accentuating the survival of oneself. It is this confrontation of the ethnographer's own sense of being with lives constructed on haphazard grounds that provokes the bewilderment and sense of alienation experienced by most of us.

Existential shock is a highly personal and context-specific research phenomenon. Manifestations of violence to which many American ethnographers have become accustomed and that often do not even reach the

news media, so commonplace they have become, such as street assaults, rape, child abuse, and racketeering, may be shocking to ethnographers from other societies.

Existential shock does not occur only in facing the traumas of the field. It is an equally powerful experience to encounter the creative and the hopeful in conditions of violence. Several authors in this volume have looked at the importance of imagination and celebration in traumatic situations. The tragedies of violence can be counterbalanced by the often remarkable solutions people themselves create while facing violence.

The chapters in this volume have been arranged along a temporal continuum of features that speak most profoundly to the realities of studying dangerous topics in dangerous locales. Each author has selected one term or phrase that critically weaves together three concerns: the pressing realities faced by the people undergoing violence; the experiences of the anthropologist as she or he works with these people under difficult circumstances; and the implications this has for responsible theory. Taken as a whole, this collection of terms illustrates many of the core features of what one is likely to confront in experiencing and studying sociopolitical violence. We hope, as studies of this nature grow, that more terms and a greater understanding of existential shock and creative responses to violence will emerge.

We have organized the sequence of chapters to follow the trajectory of the actual field encounter, starting with the researcher's initial confrontation with violent events, moving through the complexities of actual fieldwork, and ending with his or her return from the field with finished notes in hand, or return to the field for second insights. We hope that this book may help ethnographers of violence and sociopolitical conflict to recognize these existential problems, to solve them, and to turn them to their advantage. A fieldwork crisis, as personal as it is political and theoretical, may deepen the understanding of ethnographers, of the people with whom they associate, and of the violence they study. We also hope that this book will take away some of the anxieties of doing fieldwork on violence and will encourage anthropologists to carry out more research projects on this topic.

We begin with a chapter by Ted Swedenburg, who has a considerable autobiographical involvement with the people among whom he conducts fieldwork. When does empathy turn into identification? When do personal lives and professional interests merge in ethnographic fieldwork? Swedenburg's special relation with the Palestinian people provokes doubts about his own identity, which become inextricably intertwined with his research questions. His student years at the American University of Beirut during the 1970s gave him Palestinian friends with whom he shared moments of hardship that left deep emotional traces. His research on the intifada in

the West Bank leads him to a self-reflective exegesis, so well captured in the double entendre *prisoners of love*, of Jean Genet's musings on his years with the Palestinians in the early 1970s. Both Genet and Swedenburg felt a sense of exhilaration at witnessing a dangerous world of revolutionary zeal while tasting some of the bittersweet fruits of resistance and retaliation. Yet they also share an unbridgeable cultural detachment from this political movement with which they can never completely identify. Nevertheless, they empathize with the friends who were tortured and killed, abhor the squalid refugee camps, and share the humor and spirit of the people condemned to live in them. Swedenburg finds himself progressively wandering away from a violent, conflict-ridden Middle East and into the homes of dispossessed Palestinians with their laughter and generosity. This passage marks also a return to his childhood memories of the Palestinian people and the indelible impression they continue to leave on him.

One of the most common and also complicated problems of fieldwork on violence is how to deal with *rumors*. Every field-worker runs across a good deal of gossip, hearsay, slander, rumor, and even character assassination, but they acquire inordinate importance in violent situations in which access to such information can make the difference between life and death, safety and injury. Rumors are often the only source of ethnographic information available to the anthropologist under rapidly changing circumstances. The news media are unable to report satisfactorily on the swirl of events, and life-threatening danger prevents the ethnographer from collecting most field data personally. Anna Simons describes the ominous outburst of street violence in Mogadishu on July 14, 1989. Was this the first rumbling of what was to become one of the most devastating conflicts in Somali history? Can the runaway violence of the ensuing civil war be traced to this particular day? Hindsight tends to reduce the contradictory dynamics of violence to linear paths of historical development and to discard contemporary explanations as inconsistent and misinformed. However, Simons shows that misguidance and incongruity are the very stuff out of which history is written. She describes the conflicting rumors that buzzed around the capital and the social networks that were mobilized to gather and verify them. But how to sift fact from fiction, truth from disinformation? Which rumors have been invented, and which correspond to real events? These questions become compelling for ethnographers of violence who have to decide on the spot where to direct their limited time and research attention. Rumor, as Simons shows, provided people in Somalia with a perspective on an unstable situation. It infused the political confusion with an unending flow of seemingly credible but immediately discredited rationales. These rumors—supplanted, discarded, and forgotten almost at the moment of their appearance—turned out to be the meat of fieldwork, important for the coherent historical narrative constructed

in hindsight, and therefore deserve as much ethnographic attention as the events that have remained present in the collective memory.

We have touched repeatedly on the uncertainty of violent events. This uncertainty equally besets the anthropologist who becomes suddenly enveloped in a situation of violence for which he or she was not prepared. What research strategy should be chosen? Some try to carry on with their original project as if nothing has changed. Others prefer to leave to safer areas or even decide to abandon the field and return home. Still others would like to study the new situation but hesitate to do so because they feel they lack sufficient preparation on the topic of violence. The following case describes how one ethnographer solved this dilemma. Several Western scholars working in Beijing were irritated when the protests at Tian'anmen Square in May 1989 kept them from visiting the archives and going about their research projects. Frank Pieke, however, realized that the Chinese People's Movement was of historic importance and was begging to be studied. He decided to incorporate this accidental political development in his ongoing research on the economic reform policies of the 1970s. Pieke urges anthropologists neither to stick to the execution of a predetermined research plan nor to start all over again when they run into unexpected events. *Accidental anthropology* is not about emergencies but rather about understanding contingencies in a wider social and cultural context. In very much the same way as the Chinese people, Pieke tries to make sense of the events through a continued dialogue that reaches back to past events that acquire new meaning in the present. Roaming the streets of Tian'anmen Square, he observes the student demonstrations and asks his informants about the protests. He realizes that such involvement is not without risk when he is asked to act as a human shield to protect the students against the bullets from the forces of repression. Pieke's contribution demonstrates the versatility and creative potential of anthropological fieldwork and the unexpected ethical dilemmas that may arise when our informants turn to us for help and compassion.

How is fieldwork affected when people not only ask ethnographers for compassion but also for collaboration and even complicity? What happens to the dialectic of empathy and detachment when victims and perpetrators of violence engage in a politics of truth and try to make ethnographers accept their accounts as the only correct version? Antonius Robben encountered these problems in his research into the contested historical reconstruction of Argentina's "dirty war" as told by its chief protagonists and survivors. Because of the high political and emotional stakes of this violent conflict, strategies of persuasion and concealment were played on him by generals, bishops, politicians, former guerrilla commanders, and human rights leaders. Robben uses the term "ethnographic seduction" to describe these strategies. He turns a frank and probing eye to the question

of how the sophisticated rhetoric of Argentine military officers affected his critical sensibility and how the anguished testimonies of their victims enwrapped him in silence and sorrow. Ethnographic seduction disabled his ethnographic gaze as his interlocutors tried to entice him away from a deeper understanding of the troubled 1970s to a surface of reason and emotion. Tossed between rational justifications of war and appeals to universal human rights, torn between compassion for the victims and a sincere attempt to understand their victimizers, Robben slowly begins to apprehend the analogies between the seduction brought down on him by the architects of repression and the dirty war practices of disappearance, deception, and terror wielded on the Argentine people. This awareness allows him to expose the transparency of dictatorial power, recognize the perfidiousness of its domination, and empathize more fully with the victims of repression.

If seduction manipulates ethnographers, then fear, anxiety, and intimidation may paralyze them. Most of the authors in this book have lived through frightening moments, but Linda Green has explicitly analyzed *fear* in a personal and political context. The culture of fear that has reigned in Guatemala since the 1960s has unraveled the social fabric by infusing distrust into friendships and family ties. Fear has entered the social memory and the social practices. Silence and secrecy are the concomitants ethnographers face when they want to carry out fieldwork in a country that is still under authoritarian control, where counterinsurgency units have a free hand and death squads intimidate and assassinate citizens and foreigners alike. Green sketches the eerie calm yet visceral disquiet of everyday life under repression. The culture of subterranean terror in the town of Chicaj fuses with the routines of fieldwork as Green herself is summoned to the military commander who controls the area. Climbing out of the valley and up the hill to the garrison that surveys the town from high above, she retraces the steps and relives some of the fears so many women before her have faced in the innocence that they, and their disappeared husbands and children, had "done nothing wrong." Sharing her experience with the widows of Guatemala, she learns of the importance of silence as a strategy of survival as well as an instrument of repression. Coming to grips with fear does not mean succumbing to the state of normalcy and routinization on which it thrives but to endure its ambiguity in memory and defiance.

Not only chaos but also creativity accompany war and violence. Many of us have felt unable to respond when asked about the reason and sense of violent situations. The rational explanations of the perpetrators contrast sharply with the painful realities of the victims. Carolyn Nordstrom describes how she has struggled and continues to struggle with the senselessness of the violence inflicted on the population of Mozambique by

Renamo's war. The excessive violence deliberately attacks people's sense of family and community, shattering the foundations of their cultural and human existence. Anthropologists themselves, like those among whom they work, cannot remain removed from the impact of witnessing tragedy but must struggle with the implications of working in a context where violence throws into dramatic relief core questions about human nature and culture. She makes clear that the scholarly reflex to explain violent events and portray these in a coherent narrative impose an order and reason that erase the chaos dirty war is intended to produce. Nordstrom eventually abandons this futile search for explanation because war plays "conceptual havoc" with analytical tools and categories developed in the peace and quiet of our comfortable offices. She rejects apologetic rationalizations of warfare in a radical move by striking out ~~Reason~~ as it applies to war. Instead, she becomes alert to meaning, creativity, and imagination as strategies of survival and reconstruction amid the people of Mozambique. Instead of reasoning away her bewilderment or surrendering to the inevitable distortions and constrictures of reasonable narration, she focuses on the poetics of the cultural discourse of the victims of war who create their worlds anew with the shards of their broken homes and lives.

Cathy Winkler is an ethnographer who had to pick up the shattered pieces of her own life. Anthropologists are not immune from the violence that seems endemic to human society. Anthropologists have been assassinated, at home and in the field. They have been mugged, robbed, and raped. Yet very few turn their personal tragedies into research, and even fewer consciously used their anthropological training during a rape. Winkler describes how she was abused repeatedly by a rapist and then became the victim, survivor, witness, plaintiff, investigator, and researcher of her own assault. Ethnographer and ethnography collapsed into one totalitarian whole in which objectivity and subjectivity were jumbled in ambiguity. The research object became subject, and the subject survived by behaving as an object. Winkler's contribution excels in conveying the confusion, irrationality, and bewilderment of the rape attack in particular and of violent conflict as well as research on violence in general. The incongruence of behavior and discourse, which Winkler observed and experienced in the rapist, can also be found in many other violent situations. The person under attack is placed in a disordered world of ambiguity and incongruency. The resulting existential shock—felt by many ethnographers of violence but in a heightened sense by the ethnographer who becomes a victim-survivor—is experienced as the deconstruction, destruction, transformation, traumatization, and, ultimately, assassination of identity and self.

This book ends with chapters by Maria Olujic and Joseba Zulaika, who return to their home countries as expatriate scholars living in the United States. They struggle with the conflict between the violence that tears their