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Transformations of Political Violence? A Research Program

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Abstract:

This paper outlines a research program on the development of political violence. Political violence in its many forms – from riotous protests to war between states – remains ever-present and has immense moral and political implications. However, the overall development of political violence remains poorly understood. Examining existing research, we identify three general positions: political violence has either declined, escalated, or taken different forms. However, due to diverging definitions and specifications as well as partially ambiguous evidence, no clear assessment has as yet been made. Hence, the paper provides a basic framework to better group existing approaches, examine available findings, and to enable the design of further research to better understand the development of political violence. Surveying the conceptual literature, we find narrower and broader definitions of political violence which, respectively, allow for more focused and for more wholistic investigations. We also distinguish three crucial aspects of political violence: its forms and patterns, the role of political institutions, and its social construction and justification. Surveying the literature on the state and transnational groups, we also propose a basic typology on the direction, basic entities, and forms of political violence. Jointly, these definitions, aspects and basic concepts form a general framework with which to break new ground on the development of political violence by affording connection and communication between various strands of research from diverse disciplinary perspectives.

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1. Introduction

Against the prominent thesis of its steady decline (Pinker 2012a), political violence seems omnipresent. In 2022, it occurred all around the globe. Russia outright invaded Ukraine. 30 years after the end of the Cold War, nuclear war is as likely – or maybe even more likely – as it was in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis (Daase 2022). However, political violence in 2022 was not limited to the international level. The civil war in Syria raged on. Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated by a man resenting Abe's presumed role in spreading Unification Church beliefs in Japan. In Iran and Sri Lanka, security forces violently cracked down on the swelling number of largely peaceful anti-government protesters. Activists sounded the alarms on a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Tygrayans by Ethiopian and Eritrean government forces (Human Rights Watch 2022). In the United States, a terrorist livestreamed the killing of ten and wounding of three, having just released a manifesto expressing his intention to target people of color in the United States due to his belief in the far-right "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory. In Colombia, the ELN guerrilla organization and the paramilitary Gulf Clan obstructed the electoral process by implementing "armed strikes" in territories they control (Crisis Group 2022, 25). Meanwhile, debates about the past and present impact of colonial violence and genocide continue all over the world (Mannitz and Reitz 2021; Mannitz and Drews 2022).

As these examples illustrate, violence and politics are deeply intertwined. Indeed, violence can increase political cohesion through state-building but beget new violence against other states (Tilly 1992; Krippendorff 1985). Political violence in one polity tends to spread to others (Ansorg 2014). Civil wars may both result from weak state capacity and further diminish it (Rotberg 2003). Political violence has consequential and multi-facetted effects on economic and demographic growth, culture, and science (Rotberg 2003; Solimano 2005, 5–6; Bodea and Elbadawi 2008).

Considering the heterogeneity, spread, persistence, and significance of political violence, the question presents itself as to how political violence has developed over time. Laying the groundwork for a research program to comprehensively engage this question, this paper proceeds in five steps. The first section advances the research program's working definitions for political violence. It lays out the vast array of phenomena often associated with "violence" and the "political". The section finds that narrow definitions of political violence, such as the intentional inflicting of harm aimed at impacting governance, allows for more analytical focus, while broader notions of violence and the political enable more wholistic investigations.

We then survey existing research on political violence and identify three positions on its overall development. These variously state that, over time, political violence has declined, escalated, and/or been transformed. We find that none of these positions is, as of yet, sufficiently corroborated, and argue that this necessitates a comprehensive research program. For such an endeavor, we find the focus on the transformations of political violence to be the most promising starting point.

To organize our research we lay out a conceptual typology that identifies distinct aspects, directions, and basic entities of political violence. We distinguish three foundational aspects of political violence: forms and patterns; role of institutions; and social meanings and justification. In terms of directionality, we analytically distinguish between perpetrators and targets (armed and unarmed) of political violence. Putting the complicated interrelations between political violence, state borders, and state capabilities front and center, the program identifies as basic entities of political violence the state, sub-state groups within state borders, and transnational groups that cross state borders.

2. Defining Political Violence

As the introductory examples show, "political violence" is an extremely broad and vague notion, encompassing a vast and heterogeneous field of phenomena. Rather than comprehensively surveying all available definitions of political violence (see for this e.g. Bonacker 2002; Darby 2016; Finlay 2017; Schnell 2014), we outline here two ideal type definitions, one very narrow and one very broad, to illustrate how wide the research program can cast its net and how it can also zero in on areas that some deem central to political violence.

Narrowly defined, political violence consists of actions that a) include the actual infliction of physical harm to people, and b) aim at impacting governance (see Kalyvas 2019, 13). Governance consists of processes of interaction and decision-making among the actors involved to jointly address collective problems in ways that create, reinforce,

or reproduce social norms and institutions (Hufty 2011, 405). Thus, instances of violence aimed at other values, such as mere personal enrichment, do not fall under this narrow definition.

The broad definition widens the scope of the concept's two constituent parts (violence and the political). Regarding violence, some include intentional psychological harm (Enzmann 2013, 9), others include damage done to objects (Murer 2018, 491–92) or the environment. Galtung has argued for an inclusion of "structural violence", which encompasses poverty and inequality (Galtung 1969). Galtung later also named "cultural violence" as an aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize direct or structural violence (Galtung 1990). Pierre Bourdieu's "symbolic violence" also includes social recognition and performance of social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1989; 2000).

There are also various broader definitions of the political. Indeed, the phrase "everything is political" is a pervasive one (Castillo 2022). If we took a classic definition of the core questions of politics – who gets what, when, how (Lasswell 1936) – it would seem appropriate to say that, at least, everything social is political. After all, social interactions among people are rarely, if ever, void of competitiveness, hierarchy, cooperation, solidarity, and conflict.

Of course, definitions are just that, and, apart from matters of consistency, the choice of a definition simply depends on its utility for the task at hand. Utility comes from, among other things, the coverage of a definition (extension), its conceptual precision (intension), as well as its moral and political utility.

Regarding coverage and precision, definitions capture more phenomena when they are broad and vague, but provide more analytic utility when they are distinct and narrow (Sartori 1970). Thus, narrow definitions of political violence allow for crisper theory, while broad definitions afford the investigation of more phenomena.

Proponents of broader notions often argue that including more phenomena under the label of "violence" renders them more visible for intellectual and moral examination (as, for example, violence by discrimination or deprivation). It can, however, also be argued that clear, narrow distinctions of phenomena more effectively enable the investigation of morally and politically salient interrelations (Sartori 1984). For example, German sociologist Heinrich Popitz contended that phenomena captured by broader notions of violence (psychological, structural, symbolic etc.) are better subsumed under different concepts, such as, for example, "coercion", "intimidation", "power", "neglect", "othering", and "discrimination" (Popitz 1992). Depending on the issue at hand, the research program profits from both narrow and broad definitions. As long as the definitions guiding specific analyses are explicated they can be brought into meaningful dialogues with other analyses that follow different definitions.

3. Existing Research

The vast and fragmented literature on the development of political violence cannot plausibly be discussed in the context of this programmatic working paper. Still, with a view to the wider trends that are discussed throughout the various strands of research on political violence, we can identify three positions which, in part, contradict each other (see figure 1) and should be highlighted here.

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the most prominent research positions on the development of political violence is optimistic. Popularized by Stephen Pinker, this position argues that violence in its various manifestations has seen a significant decline during the last few decades and even centuries (Pinker 2012a). This story of the gradual reduction of political violence is told in different variants: as a process of "civilization", which has brought people to moderate their affects (Elias et al. 2000); as a process of state-building that has pacified societies and lead to the monopolization of legitimate authority (Tilly 1992); as a process of democratization that has reduced the use of force both within and between states (Senghaas 1995; Hegre 2014); as a process of increasing international interdependence, which has driven the cost of conflict to an unacceptable level (Keohane and Nye 2011); and as a process of juridification that has lead states to renounce war and settle disputes peacefully (Kelsen 2008; Hathaway and Shapiro 2017). In this perspective, dramatic events involving mass violence such as the First and Second World Wars or the Holocaust are interpreted as exceptions to the long-term process of pacification (Pinker 2012b). This view is supported by studies that report the worldwide decline of armed conflicts (Goldstein 2012), the institutionalization of liberal values in international institutions (Ruggie 1982), the peaceful end of the Cold War (Fukuyama 2006) and the global spread of democracy (Huntington 1993).

However, the pacification position has been criticized from various angles and by numerous scholars, for example in the area of war studies (e.g. Braumoller 2019; Cirillo and Taleb 2016; Gray 2015; Arquilla 2012). Long-term versions

Figure 1: Existing positions on the development of political violence

1. Pacification:	Over time, the frequency and severity of political violence has decreased.
2. Escalation:	Over time, the frequency and severity of political violence has grown.
3. Transformation:	Over time, the forms and areas in which political violence manifests itself have shifted.

of the pacification thesis do not fit well with catastrophic eruptions of violence like the First and Second World War. Arguments for pacification that rely on declining battle-related casualties neglect that this might simply reflect an improvement in medical care for the wounded and not a decline in combat-related political violence (Fazal 2014). Other critics argue that various studies supporting the pacification thesis were Eurocentric, stipulating a single course of possible modernization and pacification, thereby ignoring the diversity of cultural paths to, and forms of, modernity (Eisenstadt 2002; Schlichte 2009).

These critical voices paved the way for a second position: that political violence actually increased in recent decades. As our initial examples show, severe cases of political violence in its various forms exist right now all around the globe. In fact, trends in armed conflicts during the first two decades of the 21st century appear to stand in contradiction to the proclaimed advances made in relation to political violence: While the number of interstate wars has not changed significantly, the number of intrastate armed conflicts – in particular internationalized civil wars – as well as that of other forms of armed conflicts have significantly increased since 2010, as has the overall number of victims of organized violence (Pettersson and Öberg 2020).

Various explanations present themselves for this apparent trend of escalation. For example, modern innovations in ideology, organizational capacity, communication and weaponry seem to spur various forms of political violence, such as wars, revolutions, genocides, and terrorism (Malešević 2017a). Others argue that "modern" ideas of ethnic nationalism and the "rule of the people" spurs exterminatory ideas and actions, permitting new forms of political violence unrivaled in previous times (Mann 2004).

A third position contends that the most prominent feature of the development of political violence is transformation. Rather than observing linear trends of pacification or escalation in all forms of political violence, this view proposes that the forms and areas in which political violence plays out have been changing over time. For example, recent studies show that warfare is – again or recently – characterized by a ruthlessness that contradicts the idea of a progressive civilization process: laws of war are disregarded; banned weapons are used; genocide, enslavement and sexual violence become systemic features of military conflicts (Wood 2010; Bellamy 2014; Goertz and Streitparth 2019). In the past thirty years, asymmetric warfare undoubtedly has been the predominant form of war (Daase 1999; Mann 2018). Furthermore, military operations in various cases have been conceptualized by the political actors as interventions, missions or special operations to avoid the notion of war and its political and legal implications. However, some proponents of the "transformation thesis" – especially those who speak of "new wars" (Kaldor 1999; Münkler 2004) – tend to underestimate the significance of the fact that asymmetric warfare was also common in early modernity and in the 19th century. Under this perspective, "new wars" may perhaps be classified as the return of unilateral wars of enforcement and sanctions (Daase 2011).

Various research strands lend further credibility to the transformation thesis: new technologies and digitalization enable new forms of war and militarization of space and cyberspace (Friis and Ringsmose 2018; Mowthorpe 2004); non-state actors use terrorism and new forms of civil war to pursue radical political goals (Junk et al. 2020; Malešević 2017b); states combine conventional and unconventional forms of violence and develop what some have termed "hybrid" forms of warfare (Lanozka 2016; Driedger 2021). The number of terrorist attacks worldwide has more than tripled since the late-1990s (START 2018), and anti-terrorist activities of states have stretched or violated the rules of warfare, as demonstrated by the debate on targeted killing (Melzer 2010). The rising prominence of transnational groups enacting and suffering political violence, such as ideologically driven networks of fighters and terrorists as well as activist diasporas, further highlight transformations of political violence (Shirk 2022), as the does the blurring of the boundaries between civil war and organized crime (Kalyvas 2015), e.g. in the context of Latin America's „drug wars" (Lessing 2017). Additionally, scholars have noted partially new forms of political repression of civil society actors, including through violent means such as the targeted killing of social activists, human rights defenders or community leaders (Albarracín et al. 2022; Le Billon and Lujala 2020; Poppe and Wolff 2017).

As the title of the Research Center "Transformations of Political Violence" suggests, it is this third position that the research program at hand adopts as its primary perspective. Focusing on the transformations (and continuities), rather than the question of decline or increase, corresponds better to the complex and partially contradictory developments of political violence reported in the existing literature. It also allows for a broader, interdisciplinary research agenda that goes beyond the ultimately quantitative question of whether political violence is either declining or increasing. At the same time, within a research program on the transformations of political violence, we can address the decline-versus-increase question as well.

4. Aspects and Research Questions

The research program distinguishes three core aspects of political violence (see figure 3) that are foundational to the phenomenon. We engage these aspects with specific research questions.

The first aspect under investigation is the actual material manifestation of political violence over time. This allows one to enquire if forms and patterns of political violence change over time and what the drivers and consequences of these developments might be. In doing so, the program builds on various ongoing lines of research. Quantitative research on armed conflicts has identified a recent increa-

se in internationalized, intrastate violent conflicts and alternative forms of organized violence (vgl. Pettersson and Öberg 2020). With regard to civil war research, Barbara Walter emphasizes the historically high level of internationalization and the role of transnational ideologies and predicts a fundamental transformation of violence as a result of the change in information technology (Walter 2017). Similar observations can also be found in recent terrorism research (cf. Goertz and Streitparth 2019). A central role is attributed to the influence of new technologies (vgl. Gohdes 2018) and the increase in cross-border interdependencies (cf. Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016). Other features include global shifts in power and the effects of environmental change, including climate change, on violent dynamics (cf. Mach et al. 2019).

As we investigate violence that is political, the role of political institutions that enable, inhibit, or legitimize political violence forms the second key aspect under investigation. The global political system is based on a far-reaching institutionalization of violence. In the process of the domestic monopolization of the use of force through the establishment of territorial states, international norms and regimes emerged in early modernity (Asbach and Schröder 2010), particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. International institutions have increasingly regulated the use of military force between states as well as the treatment of combatants and civilians in military conflicts. Such institutions have also been crucial in regulating asymmetric political violence of the state against people in the form of human rights.

Existing research highlights how institutions can pacify, escalate, or transform political violence. Currently, new forms of political violence (e.g., mass casualty terrorism, "hybrid" warfare, or cyber war) are leading to the question of the extent to which classical institutions for preventing political violence continue to fulfil their function and whether a process of de-institutionalization may be observed (cf. Chinkin and Kaldor 2017; Krieger, Nolte, and Zimmermann 2019). De-institutionalization refers both to the non-application of international laws and norms, whether due to doubts about practicability or political expediency, as well as to new forms of political violence that evade existing institutions. Moreover, de-institutionalization can also occur by creating alternative, informal institutions that are flexible and effective, but whose legitimacy and legality are controversial.

The third aspect under investigation is how the social constructions and justifications of political violence develop. Like every social act, violence is subject to processes of interpretation (cf. Hoebel and Knöbl 2019). As attributions of meaning, interpretations of violence arise from individual and inter-subjective evaluations of right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, while co-constituting the basic entities of violence – the perpetrators and the targets. Interpretations of what counts as political violence and how it should be evaluated are closely linked to the rejection and recognition of legitimacy. Accordingly, these interpretations are constantly subject to contestation, re-evaluation and change (cf. Engle 2020; Das et al. 2007; Brock and Simon 2021).

Just war theory (bellum iustum) has its roots in European antiquity and remains influential to this day (Walzer 1979). Concurrently, it has significantly shaped modern international orders (Rengger 2013). This brings into focus the significance of war justifications for the debate on the decline/transformation of political violence: After 1990, new wars of enforcement have primarily been waged by states of the "Global West" referring to narratives such as "humanitarian intervention", "war on terror", or "collective police action" – not least in order to circumvent the term "war" and the norms of international law to which it refers (Geis, Müller, and Schörnig 2013; Müller et al. 2011; Mannitz 2012). Paradoxically, it was precisely the reference to the supposed "barbarity" of "new wars" in the Global South that served to justify the violence that accompanied the wars of enforcement of the Global North (Eberl 2021). Specific attention should also fall on the epistemically powerful actors, influential traditions, societal values as well as dominant discourses that shape societal routines through which political violence is interpreted, in particular when societies deal with past experiences of mass violence (cf. Trotha 1998; Six-Hohenbalken and Weiss 2016; Oettler 2009; Koloma Beck 2012; Mannitz and Kopp 2022). Another focus in this area are transnational systems of belief

Figure 2: Research Questions on, and Aspects of, the Development of Political Violence

1. Forms and patterns of political violence:	How have they changed over time? What are the causes and consequences thereof?
2. Political Institutions that enable or restrict political violence:	How have they changed over time? What are the causes and consequences thereof?
3. Social constructions and justifications of political violence:	How have they changed over time? What are the causes and consequences thereof?

that, by action or proliferation, affect the construction and occurrence of political violence (Owen 2010).

5. Entities, Directions, and Acts of Political Violence

Systematic research into extensive and heterogeneous populations, such as we find in the study of political violence, can profit from conceptual typologies to better guide concept formation, theory innovation and empirical testing (Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright 2012). As our guiding interest lies in the politically motivated infliction, prevention, and suffering of violence, we follow Kalyvas in distinguishing between perpetrators and targets of violence, as well between states and non-state groups (Kalyvas 2019).

The importance of directionality as well as the distinction of perpetrators and targets follow from two basic facts that require analytic attention in any investigation of political violence: for the perpetrator, carrying out violence requires suitable context, capabilities, and motives; and for the target, violence has by definition destructive consequences. Of course, violence is sometimes mutual, albeit rarely symmetric (Kalyvas 2019, 15).

Choosing the state / non-state axis as a second basic basic feature of our typology requires some more elaboration. Of course, non-state actors can be violent and not all governance relates to the state (Hufty 2011, 405). Indeed, Carl von Clausewitz, often considered a state-centric theorist of modern war, included non-state actors such as guerillas when declaring war to be the "continuation of politics by other means" (Clausewitz 1980; Daase 2007; Daase and Schindler 2009; Wille 2021).

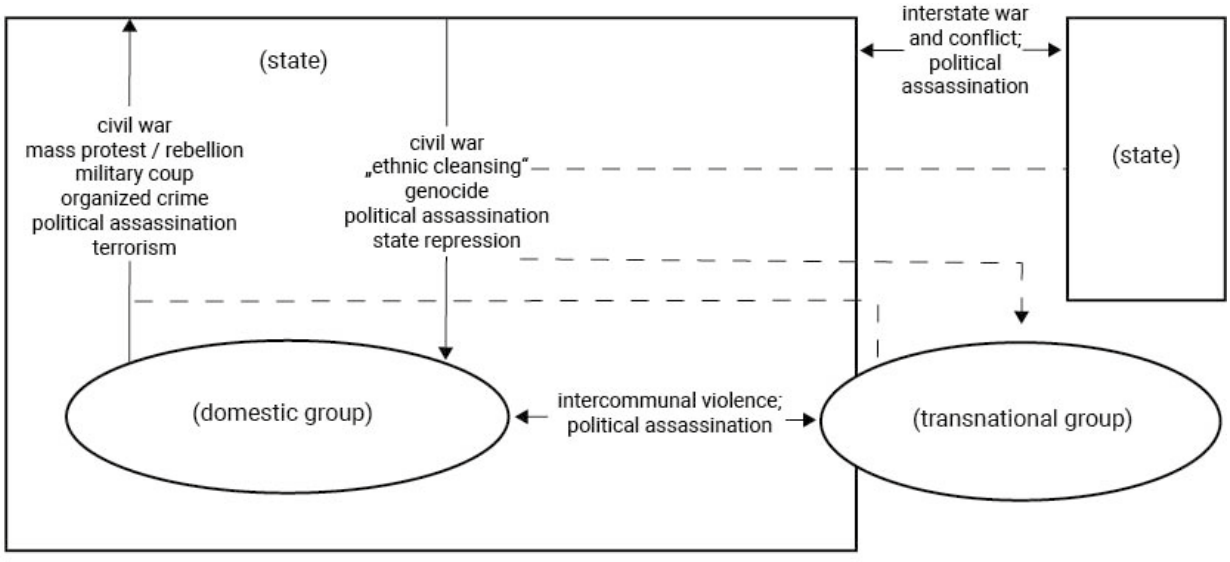
We nonetheless make an analytical distinction between non-state actors and the state, as the latter is a unique and distinct entity when it comes to political violence. The modern state is both the most consequential and sophisticated form of political organization (Kalyvas 2019, 16). It is also, relatedly, the polity that can, potentially, inflict the most violence on people and other polities, or protect them from it. State fragility strongly correlates with crime, public disorder, and economic decline as well as with certain forms of political violence, such as violent protests and civil war (Feindouno and Wagner 2020).

We make two amendments to Kalyvas' basic typology. First, we distinguish between armed and non-armed groups. Weapons enhance the ability of actors to inflict violence. Consequently, violence carried out by armed groups against non-armed groups tends to be highly asymmetrical. This interrelation between asymmetry of weaponry and the kind of violence inflicted is particularly pronounced when violence is inflicted by a state against unarmed non-state actors, such as in violent state repression, genocide, or "ethnic cleansing".

Second, we extend Kalyvas' basic typology of states and non-state actors by introducing a distinction between intra-national groups (such as domestic protesters and secessionists) and transnational groups (such as internationally active drug cartels and terrorist groups that inflict violence, or activist networks that suffer violence). Violent dynamics between intra-national groups and the state in which they reside can be expected to be different than that between the state and transnational groups, as the latter by definition cross into boundaries of other states, providing them both with the potential protection and support of other states when they are targets as well as with potential challenges of entering the state in question when they are perpetrators.

The continued importance of the state, in line with both dynamics of globalization and de-globalization, has prompted us to place the state and transnationality front and center in our conceptual typology. Transnational groups and flows have become a more prominent feature

Figure 3: Basic Entities, Directions, and Acts of Political Violence



of global politics, even as states, in part because of their unique capabilities to inflict violence on people and other states, continue to play a foundational role (Waltz 1979, 93–94; Lake 2008). Moreover, transnational groups are defined by their cross-state-border nature, while transnational violence, as the title of Mark Shirk's recent work puts it, "reshapes global order" (Shirk 2022).

From these considerations follows our basic typology. We illustrate this typology in figure 3, populating it with macro-forms of political violence on which individual research programs exist already (as identified by Kalyvas 2019). Note that (as in Kalyvas 2019) this figure represents only certain ideal types for the purpose of conceptual mapping: actors are grouped as state or non-state actors according to who is the most immediate agent implementing violence. Furthermore, "rogue" state actors, like renegade state officials attempting a coup or joining an anti-regime protest, are considered non-state actors.

Broadening Kalyvas' typology somewhat, we also include the state as a potential perpetrator of violence in civil wars, allowing for cases of political assassinations that a state perpetrates against other states and non-state actors. Additionally, in line with the phenomenon of internationalized civil wars, we add the role of other states in intrastate violence.

6. Conclusion

Acknowledging unresolved questions regarding the development of political violence, this paper laid the groundwork for further research. It identified the vast array of phenomena often associated with "violence" and the "political", finding that narrow definitions of political violence, such as the intentional confliction of harm aimed at impacting governance, allows for more analytical focus, while broader notions of violence and the political enable more wholistic investigations. The paper then surveyed existing research on political violence, identifying three positions on its general development. They variously state that, over time, political violence has declined, escalated, and/or been transformed. Our research program aims to resolve continuing gaps and inconsistencies in and between these positions. To organize our research, we then laid out a conceptual typology identifying distinct aspects, directions, and basic entities of political violence. We distinguished three foundational aspects of political violence: forms and patterns; role of political institutions; and social meanings and justification. In terms of directionality, we analytically distinguish between perpetrators and targets (armed and unarmed) of political violence. Placing the complicated interrelations between political violence, state borders, and state capabilities front and center, the program identifies as the basic entities of political violence states, sub-state groups within state borders, and transnational groups that cross state borders. Overall, we made initial steps to preliminarily organize the various and complex aspects that the study of political violence brings with it. Of course, the realization of this research program requires extensive interdisciplinary work, inter-institutional cooperation, and diverse methodological and theoretical approaches.

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